



Address to the Members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences



Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to extend my warm greetings to all those taking part in this important gathering. In a special way I wish to thank Professor Nicola Cabibbo, President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and Professor Mary Ann Glendon, President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, for their words of welcome. I am also happy to greet Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and Cardinal Georges Cottier, who has always been very dedicated to the work of the Pontifical Academies.

I am particularly pleased that the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences has chosen "the concept of the person in social sciences" as the subject to be examined this year. The human person is at the heart of the whole social order and consequently at the very centre of your field of study. In the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the human person 'signifies what is most perfect in nature' (S. Th., I, 29, 3). Human beings are part of nature and, yet, as free subjects who have moral and spiritual values, they transcend nature. This anthropological reality is an integral part of Christian thought, and responds directly to the attempts to abolish the boundary between human sciences and natural sciences, often proposed in contemporary society.

Understood correctly, this reality offers a profound answer to the questions posed today concerning the status of the human being. This is a theme which must continue to be part of the dialogue with science. The Church's teaching is based on the fact that God created man and woman in his own image and likeness and granted them a superior dignity and a shared mission towards the whole of creation (cf. Gen 1 and 2).

According to God's design, persons cannot be separated from the physical, psychological or spiritual dimensions of human nature. Even though cultures change over time, to suppress or ignore the nature that they claim to "cultivate" can have serious consequences. Likewise, individuals will only find authentic fulfilment when they accept the genuine elements of nature that constitute them as persons.

The concept of person continues to bring about a profound understanding of the unique character and social dimension of every human being. This is especially true in legal and social institutions, where the notion of "person" is fundamental. Sometimes, however, even when this is recognized in international declarations and legal statutes, certain cultures, especially when not deeply touched by the Gospel, remain strongly influenced by group-centred ideologies or by an individualistic and secularist view of society. The social doctrine of the Catholic Church, which places the human person at the heart and source of social order, can offer much to the contemporary consideration of social themes.

It is providential that we are discussing the subject of the person as we pay particular honour to my venerable predecessor, Pope John Paul II. In a way, his undisputed contribution to Christian thought can be understood as a profound meditation on the person. He enriched and expanded the concept in his Encyclicals and other writings. These texts represent a patrimony to be received, collected and assimilated with care, particularly by the Pontifical Academies.

It is, therefore, with gratitude that I avail myself of this occasion to unveil this sculpture of Pope John Paul II, flanked by two memorial inscriptions. They remind us of the Servant of God's special interest in the work of your Academies, especially the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, founded by him in 1994. They also point to his enlightened readiness to reach out in a dialogue of salvation to the world of science and culture, a desire which is entrusted in a particular way to the Pontifical Academies. It is my prayer that your activities will continue to produce a fruitful interchange between the Church's teaching on the human person and the sciences and social sciences which you represent. Upon all present on this significant occasion, I invoke abundant divine blessings.