



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
AT THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION  
"PAUL VI, A LIGHT FOR ART"**

*Friday, 23 April 1999*

*Your Eminence,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,*

*Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. With great joy I welcome all of you who are taking part in the inauguration of the exhibition "*Paul VI, a light for art*", which opened in the Cathedral Museum of Milan and is now being hosted by the Vatican Museums in this Charlemagne Wing. In particular, I thank Cardinal Edmund Casimir Szoka for his cordial words expressing the sentiments of everyone here.

This beautiful initiative, which begins today thanks to the generous efforts of many people, will make it possible for a few weeks to admire various works of art recalling my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Pope Paul VI, a little over 100 years since his birth and on the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the collection of modern religious art which he desired. These two events were recently commemorated with the exhibition *Papst Paul VI und die Sammlung religiöser Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, which opened in Würzburg in January 1998, continued in Paderborn and ended in Regensburg the following July.

This exhibition is meant to illustrate the unforgettable Pontiff's great love of art and the importance of art itself in his Petrine ministry. We need only think of the above-mentioned collection of modern religious art which opened on 23 June 1973. The arduous task of arranging over 700 works donated by artists and collectors in a few rooms of the Vatican Palace was resolved at the time by remodeling several areas which had previously served as storerooms or living quarters. The 55 rooms used for this purpose follow an itinerary laid out in the nucleus of the old residences of the Popes, from Nicholas III to Sixtus V. This itinerary extends from the Raphael Rooms in the Borgia Apartments, the residence of Alexander VI, decorated with frescoes by Pinturicchio and his school from 1492 to 1495, to the Sistine Chapel. As a result, historical splendour is combined with the

fascination of art.

2. It is helpful here to recall that the opening of such an interesting collection sealed an initiative which began on 7 May 1964 when Paul VI wanted to meet a group of artists. On that occasion the reasons and causes, as he liked to say, of a "turbulent friendship" between the Church and artists were carefully considered and summed up. He used very explicit words: "We must leave to your voices the free and powerful song of which you are capable" (Paul VI, *Address to the Artists of Rome*, 7 May 1964: AAS 56 [1964], 439-442).

Many artists, collectors, private and public organizations supported his request for a better understanding between the Church and art. Committees were set up in various countries, wisely coordinated by Mons. Pasquale Macchi, then his private secretary.

3. I thank the Lord for offering me the opportunity today to add my voice to my venerable Predecessor's testimony of respect, esteem and trust for the artists of the whole world. In fact, I have dedicated a special Letter to them, which is being published today. With it "I intend to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through 2,000 years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the third millennium, offers rich promise for the future" (*Letter to Artists*, n. 1). This is a dialogue which does not simply respond to historical circumstances or functional needs, but finds its roots in the very essence of religious experience and artistic creation.

To all who "are passionately dedicated to the search for new 'epiphanies' of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world", I would like to renew the invitation of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: "Do not close your spirit to the breath of the divine Spirit!". The invitation becomes even more timely in the liturgical season we are celebrating. In fact, the imminence of Pentecost spurs us to open our hearts to the life-giving action of the Creator Spirit.

While it is true that the artist's genius can create outstanding works even without faith, it is still a fact that, if natural talent is combined with an interior, deeply lived communion with God, the message springing from it will be richer and more profound. This was true for the wonderful flourishing of medieval cathedrals; it was true for the works of Giotto, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, for Dante's poetry and Manzoni's prose, for the musical compositions of Pierluigi da Palestrina and Johann Sebastian Bach, to mention a few.

4. In approaching artistic masterpieces from whatever era, the mind is prompted to open itself to the mysterious fascination of the Transcendent, because a mysterious and unexpected spark of the Divine is present in every genuine artistic expression.

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, every human being thirsts for the infinite, and art is one

of the ways that lead him to it. My firm hope is that "your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy" (*Letter to Artists*, n. 16).

May this exhibition achieve a twofold objective: to help people to understand better the value of art in the context of the new evangelization, and to highlight Pope Paul VI's important role in promoting artistic effort as a valuable contribution to spreading the Gospel.

With these sentiments, I cordially bless all of you here and everyone who helped organize such an interesting exhibition.