



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON JOHN HUS**

*17 December 1999*

*Distinguished Members of the Government,*

*Dear Cardinal and Brother Bishops,*

*Distinguished Scholars,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. It gives me great pleasure to greet you on the occasion of your Symposium on John Hus, which has been another important step towards a deeper understanding of the life and work of the renowned Bohemian preacher, one of the most famous of the many great scholars to come from the University of Prague. Hus is a memorable figure for many reasons. But it is particularly his moral courage in the face of adversity and death that has made him a figure of special significance to the Czech people, who have themselves suffered much through the centuries. I am particularly grateful to all of you who have contributed to the work of the ecumenical Commission "Husovská", established some years ago by Cardinal Miloslav Vlk in order to identify more precisely the place that Jan Hus occupies among those who sought a reform of the Church.

2. It is significant that scholars not only from the Czech Republic but also from neighbouring countries have taken part in this Symposium. No less significant is the fact that, despite the tensions that have marred relations between Czech Christians in the past, scholars from different Confessions have come together to share their knowledge. Now that you have brought together the best and latest scholarly work on Jan Hus and the events in which he was involved, the next step will be to publish the results of the Symposium, so that as many people as possible will have an insight not only into a remarkable man but also into an important and complex period of Christian and European history.

Today, on the eve of the Great Jubilee, I feel the need to express deep regret for the cruel death inflicted on John Hus, and for the consequent wound of conflict and division which was thus imposed on the minds and hearts of the Bohemian people. It was during my first visit to Prague that I declared my hope that precisely in your land decisive steps could be taken on the path of reconciliation and true unity in Christ. The wounds of past centuries must be healed through a new attitude and completely renewed relationships. May our Lord Jesus Christ, "who is our peace... and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14), guide the path of your people's history towards the rediscovered unity of all Christians, which we ardently hope for in the millennium that is about to begin.

3. Scholarly endeavours to reach a more profound and complete grasp of historical truth are crucial to this cause. Faith has nothing to fear from the work of historical research, for, in the final analysis, research too is directed towards the truth which has in God its source. Therefore, I give thanks to our Father in Heaven for your work as it reaches its end, just as I was keen to encourage you as you began.

The writing of history is sometimes beset by ideological, political or economic pressures, so that the truth is obscured and history itself becomes a prisoner of the powerful. Genuinely scientific study is our best defence against such pressures and the distortions they can bring. It is true that it is very difficult to attain an absolutely objective account of history, since personal convictions, values and experiences inevitably impinge upon historical study. Yet this does not mean that we cannot offer an account of history which is in a very real sense impartial and therefore true and liberating. Your own work is a proof that this is possible.

4. The truth can also prove uncomfortable when it asks us to abandon long-held prejudices and stereotypes. This is as true of Churches, ecclesial communities and religions as it is of nations and individuals. Yet the truth which sets us free from error is also the truth which sets us free for love; and it is Christian love which has been the horizon of what your Commission has sought to do. Your work means that a figure like Jan Hus, who has been such a point of contention in the past, has now become a subject of dialogue, of comparison and shared investigation.

At a time when many are working to create a new kind of unity in Europe, studies such as yours can help to inspire people to go beyond narrow ethnic and national confines to genuine openness and solidarity. It can help Europeans to understand that the continent will advance more assuredly to a new and enduring unity if it draws in fresh and creative ways upon its shared Christian roots and upon the specific identity which derived from them.

5. It is clear, then, that your work is an important service not only to the historical figure of Jan Hus but also to Christians and European society more generally. This is because, in the end, it is a service to the truth about man; and it is this truth above all which the human family needs to recover at the dawn of the Third Millennium of the Christian era.

In contemplating the truth about man, we turn inevitably to the figure of the Risen Christ. He alone teaches and embodies completely the truth of man created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen 1:26*). I pray most fervently that he who is "the same... for ever" (*Heb 13:8*) will send his light into your hearts. As a pledge of grace and peace in him, I invoke upon you, your loved ones, and upon the whole Czech nation the abundant blessings of Almighty God, to whom be "glory and wisdom and thanksgiving for ever and ever! Amen" (*Rev 7:12*).

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