



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE**

*Saturday, 3 March 2001*

1. It is always a great pleasure for me to meet you, distinguished members of the Pontifical Academy for Life. The reason today for this opportunity is your annual general assembly, which has brought you to Rome from various countries. I extend my cordial greetings to each of you, worthy friends who make up the family of this Academy which is so dear to me. I extend a particular and respectful greeting to your President, Prof. Juan de Dios Vial Correa, whom I thank for his kind words expressing your sentiments. I also greet the Vice-President, Bishop Elio Sgreccia, the members of the Executive Council, the staff and benefactors.

2. You have chosen a topic of great interest as the theme for your assembly's reflection: "*The Culture of Life: Foundations and Dimensions*". Its very formulation already expresses your intention to focus on the positive and constructive aspect of the defence of human life. During these days you have been asking yourselves about the necessary foundations for promoting or revitalizing a culture of life, and with what elements to propose it to a society marked - as I recalled in my Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* - by an increasingly widespread and alarming culture of death (cf. nn. 7, 17).

The best way to overcome and defeat the dangerous culture of death is to give firm foundations and clear content to a culture of life that will vigorously oppose it. Although right and necessary, it is not enough merely to expose and denounce the lethal effects of the culture of death. Rather, the inner tissue of contemporary culture must be continually regenerated, culture being understood as a conscious mentality, as convictions and actions, as the social structures that support it.

This reflection seems all the more valuable, if we consider that culture influences not only the behaviour of individuals but also legislative and political decisions, which in turn facilitate cultural trends which, unfortunately, often impede the authentic renewal of society.

Culture, moreover, orients the strategies of scientific research, which today more than ever is able to offer powerful means that unfortunately are not always used for man's true good. On the contrary, at times research in many fields even seems to turn against man.

3. Therefore, it is appropriate that you wished to clarify the foundations and dimensions of the culture of life. With this in mind, you stressed the great themes of creation, showing clearly how human life must be seen as God's gift. Man, created in the image and likeness of God, is called to be his free co-worker and, at the same time, to be responsible for the "stewardship" of creation.

You have also wished to reaffirm the inalienable value of the personal dignity of every individual from conception to natural death; you revisited the theme of bodiliness and its personalistic meaning; you focused your attention on the family as a community of love and life. You dwelt on the importance of the communications media for a far-reaching dissemination of the culture of life, and the need to be involved in a personal witness to it. You have also recalled how, in this area, everything that encourages dialogue should be pursued, in the conviction that the full truth about man supports life. The believer is sustained in this by an enthusiasm rooted in the faith. Life will triumph: this is a sure hope for us. Yes, life will triumph because truth, goodness, joy and true progress are on the side of life. God, who loves life and gives it generously, is on the side of life.

4. As always happens in the relationship between philosophical reflection and theological meditation, in this case too the word and example of Jesus, who gave his life to conquer death and to give man a share in his resurrection, are also an indispensable help. Christ is the "resurrection and the life" (*Jn 11: 25*).

Reasoning from this perspective, I wrote in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*: "The *Gospel of life* is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The *Gospel of life* is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus. Jesus made himself known to the Apostle Thomas, and in him to every person, with the words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (*Jn 14: 6*)" (n. 29).

This is a fundamental truth that the community of believers is called, today more than ever, to defend and promote. The Christian message about life, "written in the heart of every man and woman, has echoed in every conscience *'from the beginning'*, from the time of creation itself, in such a way that, despite the negative consequences of sin, it can also be known in its essential traits by human reason" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 29).

The concept of creation is not only a splendid message of revelation, but also a sort of profound intuition of the human spirit. Likewise, the dignity of the person is not only an idea deducible from the biblical statement that man was created "in the image and likeness" of the Creator, but a

concept rooted in his spiritual being, by which he shows that he is a being who transcends the world around him. The body's claim to dignity as a "subject", and not simply a material "object", is the logical consequence of the biblical concept of the person. This is a unified concept of the human being, which has been taught by many currents of thought from medieval philosophy to our times.

5. The commitment to the dialogue between faith and reason can only strengthen the culture of life, combining the dignity and sacredness, freedom and responsibility of every person as indispensable components of his very existence. Along with the defence of personal life, the environment must also be protected: both have been created and ordered by God, as the natural structure of the visible world itself confirms.

The great issues concerning the right to life of every human being from conception to death, the efforts to promote the family according to God's original plan, and the urgent need, now felt by all, to protect the environment in which we live represent an area of common interest for ethics and law. Particularly in this field, which involves the fundamental rights of human society, what I wrote in the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* applies: "The Church remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason mutually support each other; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding" (n. 100).

The radical nature of the challenges posed to humanity today by the progress of science and technology, on the one hand, and by the progressive secularization of society, on the other, demands an impassioned effort to reflect more deeply on man and on his existence in the world and in history. It is necessary to show a great capacity for dialogue, for listening and for proposing, so that consciences may be formed. Only in this way will it be possible to create, in a just and united way, a culture based on hope and open to the integral progress of every individual in the various countries. Without a culture that safeguards the right to life and promotes the fundamental values of every person, it is impossible to have a healthy society, nor can peace and justice be guaranteed.

6. I pray that God will enlighten consciences and guide everyone involved at various levels in building the society of the future. May they always make the protection and defence of life their primary goal.

I express my heartfelt and grateful appreciation to you, distinguished members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, who spend your energies in serving such a noble and demanding goal. May the Lord support you in your work and help you to fulfil the mission entrusted to you. May the Blessed Virgin strengthen you with her motherly protection.

The Church is grateful to you for your lofty service to life. For my part, I would like to accompany you with my constant encouragement, confirmed by a special Blessing.

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