



# The Holy See

---

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 20th PUBLIC SESSION OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMIES**

*To my Venerable Brother, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi,  
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and of the Council for Coordination of the Pontifical Academies*

With deep gratitude I extend my cordial greeting to you, Your Eminence, and to the distinguished members of the Pontifical Academies, on the occasion of the 20th Solemn Public Session. This event accomplishes a first significant goal, for which I congratulate you and the Presidents of the Academies, who together have partaken in the renewal of the institution, which was desired by my Predecessor, St John Paul II, with the creation in 1995 of the Council for Coordination of the seven Pontifical Academies that are part of it.

Outstanding certainly among the initiatives designed to enrich this common path is the annual prize allocated for young scholars, artists and institutions who have contributed in an important way, through their studies and work, to the various disciplinary spheres in which the Academies themselves work, to promote Christian humanism and the development of religious sciences.

The Annual Session, an event that has now become a tradition, is a propitious occasion both to bring together all the academics and announce the winner or winners of the Prize of the Pontifical Academies, as well as for a common thematic reflection.

Therefore, for all of you present at this ceremony, Cardinals, Bishops, Ambassadors, Academics and friends, I express the hope that such Sessions may always constitute moments of cultural and inner enrichment, of incitement to an ever more profound personal and community commitment, capable of creating in the Church the desire for a renewed humanism, capable of facing the challenges of our time.

As we are merely weeks from the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy, I rejoice with you, particularly

with the Presidents of the two Pontifical Academies — the Roman Academy of Archaeology and that of the *Cultorum Martyrum* — which organized the Session this year, for the topic chosen.

“*Ad Limina Petri. Monumental Traces of Pilgrimage in the First Centuries of Christianity*”, is the thought-provoking title of your meeting, which prepares us for the start of the Holy Year, opportunely recalling attention to pilgrimage as a constitutive element of the Jubilee. In the Bull of Indiction *Misericordiae Vultus*, I stressed its importance, affirming that “The practice of *pilgrimage* has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a *viator*, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination. Similarly, to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the world, everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage. This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God’s mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us” (n. 14).

Hence, your reflection will help to deepen the meaning of the Christian pilgrimage, as evidenced by the most ancient testimonies, by the footprints left by pilgrims of Christian antiquity in the Roman shrines, indeed beginning with those documented at the tomb of Peter or at the *Memoria Apostolorum*. From the first centuries of the Christian era the journeys of pilgrims, both ecclesiastical and lay, have been well documented by numerous sources, among which are the graffiti left in places visited, near the tombs of Martyrs. From these attestations emerge the genuine and generous faith of those who set out to journey, with great courage and also with many sacrifices, to find, or rather to touch by hand, the witnesses to the faith and their memories, so as to draw new enthusiasm and inner strength to live one’s faith ever more profoundly and coherently.

A pilgrimage — as testified to by those who have walked any segment of the ancient itineraries, opportunely rediscovered and proposed again in our days — is also an experience of mercy, of sharing and of solidarity with those who travel the same road, as well as of hospitality and generosity on the part of those who host and assist pilgrims. The welcoming of strangers truly stands out among the works of corporal mercy which I wished to propose again as one of the characteristic signs of the Holy Year. May a glance at Christian antiquity and at the footprints left by pilgrims remind us of the commitment to hospitality and sharing which, in the experience of pilgrimage, may become a conscious journey of conversion and joyful daily practices.

I earnestly hope that those who come to Rome on the occasion of the Holy Year, or live the experience of pilgrimage to the many destinations proposed by the local Churches, may — as the disciples of Emmaus — feel the Lord beside them as a travel companion. Thus may they experience the joy of the encounter with him, as well as with brothers and sisters in whom he continues to be present and to call upon us: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.... Truly, I

say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:35, 40).

Wishing now, to encourage and support all those committed to offering valid contributions to the historical and archaeological research and related to the cult of Martyrs, the subject of this edition of the prize, I am pleased to award the prize of the Pontifical Academies, *ex aequo*, to the Portuguese *Campo Arqueologico di Mertola* Association represented by Prof. Virgilio Lopes, for the archaeological campaigns conducted in recent years and for the extraordinary results obtained; and to Dr Matteo Braconi for his excellent doctoral thesis on “The Mosaic of the Apse of the Basilica of St Pudentiana in Rome. History, Restorations, Interpretations”, presented at the Roma Tre University.

As a sign of encouragement for historical research in the religious sphere, I assign the Pontifical Medal to Dr Almudena Alba López, of the University of Salamanca, for the publication *Political Theology and the Anti-Arian Controversy*.

Finally, wishing the Academics and all those present a successful commitment in their respective fields of research, I entrust each and every one of you to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, *Mater Misericordiae*, that she may always assist us in our daily pilgrimage. I wholeheartedly impart to you the Apostolic Blessing and I ask you to pray for me.

*From the Vatican, 10 November 2015*

**FRANCIS**