



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS, OFFICIALS AND STAFF
OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SACRED ARCHAEOLOGY**

Friday, 16 January 1998

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology. I cordially greet each one of you and, in particular, I thank Archbishop Francesco Marchisano for conveying your sentiments and presenting the important object of your work: *the Christian catacombs and the Holy Year*.

I wish first of all to express my appreciation and gratitude for the important service you are performing, which has become even more intense in view of the Jubilee. I am referring both to archaeological discoveries and restorations, as well as to the projects directly planned for the Holy Year. The catacombs, as has frequently been emphasized, assume great importance in connection with the Jubilee of the Year 2000.

2. You have been involved for many years in *restoring and preparing* many Christian catacombs scattered throughout Italy. Your work *specifically* involves *the Roman catacombs* which are open to the public, those of St Callistus, St Sebastian, Domitilla, Priscilla and St Agnes, where work has been or is about to be carried out in order to facilitate the flow of pilgrims. Furthermore, in order to increase the number of cemeteries open to visitors, steps are being taken to open a sixth catacomb, that of Sts Peter and Marcellinus on Via Casilina.

Your attention is appropriately focused on the *pastoral benefits* of these famous monuments of Christian antiquity. To this end, *pilgrims' guidebooks* are being suitably prepared. Indeed, when visits are accompanied by detailed and up-to-date explanations of an educational, scientific and spiritual nature, they become a very effective form of catechesis which can inspire deep reflection on the Gospel message. This return to our origins through the most ancient cemeteries conceived by the first Christians fits in perfectly with the project of the "new evangelization", which involves the whole Church in her journey towards the third millennium.

3. While the catacombs depict the eloquent features of Christian life in the first centuries, they are also a perennial *school of faith, hope and charity*.

Walking through their tunnels, we breathe an evocative and moving atmosphere. Our gaze pauses on the innumerable series of tombs and on the simplicity they have in common. On the tombs we read the baptismal names of the deceased. As we run through those names, we seem to hear as many voices answering an eschatological call, and we remember the words of Lactantius: "There are neither servants nor masters among us; there is no reason for us to call ourselves brothers, except that we consider ourselves all equals" (*Divinae Instit.*, 5: 15).

The catacombs express the solidarity that united brothers and sisters in the faith: the offerings of each one permitted the burial of all the deceased, even the poorest who could not afford the expense of purchasing and preparing a tomb. This collective charity was one of the strong points of the early Christian communities and shielded them from the temptation to return to the ancient forms of religion.

4. Therefore, the catacombs suggest to the pilgrim this feeling of solidarity, which is indissolubly linked to faith and hope. The very definition of *coemeteria*, 'dormitories', explains how the catacombs were regarded as proper places of rest for the community, where all Christian brethren, regardless of their rank or profession, reposed in a broad embrace of solidarity, awaiting the final resurrection. Consequently, these were not sad places, but were adorned with frescoes, mosaics and sculptures, as if to brighten the dark and winding passages and, with images of flowers, birds and trees, to anticipate the vision of paradise expected at the end of time. The significant formula "*in peace*", which recurs on Christian tombs, summarizes their *hope* as well.

The symbols on the slabs covering the tombs are as simple as they are rich in meaning. The anchor, the ship, the fish express the steadfastness of *faith* in Christ. The Christian's life is seen as a voyage across a stormy sea to the longed-for haven of eternity. The fish is identified with Christ and alludes to the sacrament of Baptism, according to Tertullian, who compares the faithful to *pisciculi*, who gain salvation by being born in water and remaining there (*De baptismo*, 1:3).

5. The catacombs also preserve the tombs of the first *martyrs*, witnesses of a clear and most steadfast faith, which led them as "athletes of God" to triumph over the supreme trial. Many tombs of the martyrs are still preserved within the catacombs and generations of the faithful have paused in prayer before them. Pilgrims coming for the Jubilee of the Year 2000 will also visit the tombs of the martyrs and, raising their prayers to these ancient champions of the faith, they will turn their thoughts to the "*new martyrs*", to the Christians who in the recent past and even in our time are subjected to violence, abuse and misunderstanding, because they wish to remain faithful to Christ and to his Gospel.

In the silence of the catacombs, the pilgrim of the Year 2000 can rediscover or revive his religious identity on a sort of spiritual journey that, by starting from the first testimonies of the faith, brings

him to the reasons for the new evangelization and to its demands.

Dear friends, may the awareness of these values which I have just mentioned, but which are well-known to you, sustain you in your particular ecclesial and cultural service. To this end, as I invoke on you the loving assistance of Mary most holy, I impart to all a special Apostolic Blessing, which I also extend to your loved ones.

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