



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINS**

Friday, 1 May 1998

Dear University Chaplains,

1. I am pleased to welcome you to this special audience that is taking place during the congress organized to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Chapel of La Sapienza University. You represent many famous universities in various European countries. I would like to express to you my appreciation of your generous willingness in responding to the invitation of the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Pontifical Councils for the Laity and for Culture, making it possible by your attendance to hold this meeting of notable pastoral importance.

I thank Cardinal Pio Laghi for the cordial address which expressed your sentiments. With him I also greet the other Cardinals who have honoured this meeting with their presence. The Council of European Episcopal Conferences, the Vicariate of Rome's Diocesan Commission for University Chaplaincies and the Rector of La Sapienza University also deserve a word of special praise for their prompt contribution to carrying out this initiative.

The theme chosen for your work provides an opportunity to study and examine the pastoral guidelines proposed in the document *The Church's Presence in the University and in University Culture*, and to contextualize it in the light of the new evangelization which has been under way in Europe since the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in 1991.

2. As I said to the European Bishops a few years ago: "The Europe to which we are sent has undergone such cultural, political, social and economic transformations as to formulate the problem of evangelization in totally new terms. We could even say that Europe, as it has appeared following the complex events of the last century, has presented Christianity and the Church with the most radical challenge history has witnessed, but at the same time has opened the way today to new and creative possibilities for the proclamation and incarnation of the Gospel" (*Address to Participants in the Sixth Symposium of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences*, 11 October 1985, n. 1; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 21 October 1985, p. 1). Our age, so rich in resources in the technologically advanced countries, is proving tragically poor in its goals.

Contemporary man, lacking objective reference points and values, is also influenced by widespread scepticism about the very foundations of knowledge and ethics, and frequently withdraws into limited horizons, contenting himself with precarious support.

In these times of relativism, a culture which exalts the individual in an absolute way and does not dispose him to solidarity runs the risk of seeing freedom transformed into the domination of the strongest over the weakest, in contradiction with itself. This jeopardizes personal relations, impoverishes and distorts social harmony and subjects knowledge to the power of a thinking that exploits it.

3. It is the duty of university ministry, whose pulsating heart is the chaplaincy, to establish with patient and confident energy the co-ordinates within which the Gospel can be applied, pointing directly to the absence of a sense of God as the reason for the current disorientation. In fact, as the Second Vatican Council teaches: "Once God is forgotten, the creature is lost sight of as well" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 36).

Without a shared standard of objective values, even the cultural convergence on the dignity of the person and the value of life - however widespread - runs the risk of remaining insignificant. Christian truth is attractive and persuasive precisely when it can offer firm guidelines for human life by convincingly proclaiming Christ, who takes the hesitant, vacillating traveler by the hand to show him the way and the goal. Jesus says: "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

The Christian faith, a free gift of God, is thus a motivated and reasonable option: it seriously answers the authentic needs of the human spirit; it esteems attentive reflection and is not afraid of the rigorous judgement of thorough, critical, examination.

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Chapel of La Sapienza University fits very well into this context. A gift which attests to the prophetic foresight of my venerable Predecessor, Pope Pius XII, for Rome's university community, as it represents a space with lofty pastoral and cultural horizons.

4. My thoughts now turn to all the chaplaincies present in the universities of Europe, with their long tradition of providing their university communities with moments of religious reflection and an impetus towards the renewal of Christian culture. Your presence, dear chaplains and pastoral workers, is a living witness of a scholarly tradition which is capable of offering concrete answers to present-day needs. I encourage you to continue your efforts and to intensify the apostolic commitment for which you are well-known. The university chapel is *a place of the spirit*, where believers in Christ, involved in different ways in academic study, can pause for prayer and find nourishment and direction. It is *a training-ground for the Christian virtues*, where the life received in Baptism grows and systematically develops. It is *a welcoming and open home* for all those who, heeding the voice of the Teacher within, become seekers of truth and serve mankind by their daily

commitment to a knowledge which goes beyond merely narrow and pragmatic goals. In the setting of a modernity in decline, the university chapel is called to be a *vital centre for promoting the Christian renewal of culture*, in respectful and frank dialogue, in a clear and well-grounded viewpoint (cf. 1 Pt 3:15), in a witness which is open to questioning and capable of convincing.

In this context, the work of university chaplaincies takes on great importance for helping the universities, and young people in particular, to become better informed and better prepared for the Great Jubilee. An international meeting of university teachers and the World Youth Day are both being planned for the Year 2000. These are two highly significant events, and they call for closer co-operation between university chaplaincies on the national level and throughout Europe, with a view to securing a specific preparation and a more effective participation on the part of the university sector.

5. The university chapel, then, represents *a suitable pastoral structure* for responding to the question of salvation that pulsates in the human heart and surfaces, though in sometimes contradictory ways, even in our time, particularly in the life of young people.

The new forms of university ministry are the specific way in which the Church wishes to have an increasingly effective, competent and respectful role wherever intellectual decisions are made on which the personal and social conduct of future generations will depend.

The evangelization carried out by university chaplaincies is intended to help contemporary man - especially the new generations - unmask the deceptive nature of many cultural surrogates, to overcome the recurring influence of the mute figures of idols, by recovering the interior freedom that opens people to the service of the living and true God (cf. 1 Thes 1:9).

Taking part in an intense dialogue with the various members of the university and an expert in personalized spiritual care, the chaplaincy thus answers the need for encouraging the commitment to seeking God and witnessing to the faith from both the academic standpoint and that of the Christian communities.

I am convinced that the contributions of distinguished speakers and the exchange of experiences between the various chaplaincies will give a strong impetus to university ministry and encourage a more effective work of evangelization in this important sector of European society.

With these wishes, I again offer my cordial greetings to you and I very gladly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you as a pledge of success, which I extend to your co-workers and to all those who work zealously in your chaplaincies.

At the end of his address, the Holy Father spoke extemporaneously in Polish:

I would also like to greet the university chaplains from Poland and the other countries of Central Europe. I too could belong to your group, since I am, as they say in sporting terms, an "old boy" or - in academic terms - a "senior".

I hope you will continue to enrich the good traditions of university ministry in Kraków and throughout Poland.

God bless you!

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