



28 January 2008



Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in an Interacademic Conference on "The Changing Identity of the Individual" Organized by the Académie des sciences of Paris and by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

Mr Chancellors,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Academician Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greet you with pleasure at the end of your Colloquium, which is concluding here in Rome after taking place at the Institut de France in Paris and has focused on the theme: "The changing identity of the individual". First of all, I thank Prince Gabriel de Broglie for the tribute with which he wished to introduce our meeting. I would also like to greet the members of all the institutions under whose aegis this Colloquium has been organized: the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, the Academy of Sciences and the Catholic Institute of Paris. I rejoice that it has been possible for the first time to establish an interacademic collaboration of this kind, paving the way to ever more rewarding and extensive multidisciplinary research.

Whereas the exact, natural and human sciences have progressed prodigiously in the knowledge of man and his universe, there is a strong temptation to seek to isolate the identity of the human being and to enclose this identity in the knowledge that can derive from it. In order to avoid moving in this direction it is important to support anthropological, philosophical and theological research which allows the appearance and preservation in man of his own mystery, for no science can say who man is, where he comes from or where he is going. Anthropology thus becomes the most vital science of all. This is what John Paul II said in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: "We face a great challenge... to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises" (n. 83). Man is always more than what is seen or perceived of him through experience. Failing to ask questions about man's being would lead inevitably to refusing to seek the objective truth about being as a whole, and hence, to no longer be able to recognize the basis on which human dignity, the dignity of every person, rests from the embryonic stage to natural death.

During your Colloquium you have recognized that the sciences, philosophy and theology can be mutually helpful for perceiving the human identity which is constantly developing. Starting with questions on the new being derived from cellular fusion and who bears a new and specific genetic patrimony, you have brought to the fore some essential elements of the mystery of man, marked by otherness: a being created by God, a being in the image of God, a being who is loved and is made to love. As a human person, man is never closed in on himself; he is always a bearer of otherness and from the very first moment of his existence interacts

with other human beings, as the human sciences increasingly bring to light. How is it possible not to recall here the marvellous meditation of the Psalmist on the human being, knit together in the secret of his mother's womb and at the same time known in his identity and mystery to God alone, who loves and protects him (cf. Ps 139[138]: 1-16)?

Man is neither the result of chance nor of a bundle of convergences nor of forms of determinism nor physio-chemical interaction; he is a being who enjoys freedom, which, while taking his nature into account, transcends it and symbolizes this mystery of otherness that dwells within him. It is in this perspective that the great thinker Pascal said: "Man is infinitely more than man". This freedom which is a distinctive feature of the being called man enables him to orient his life towards an end which he can direct with his actions toward the happiness to which he is called for eternity. This freedom reveals that human existence has meaning. In the exercise of his authentic freedom, the person fulfils his vocation; it is completed and gives shape to his profound identity. It is also by putting his freedom into practice that the person exercises his own responsibility for his actions. In this sense, the special dignity of the human being is both a gift of God and the promise of a future.

Man bears within himself a specific capacity for discerning what is good and right. Affixed in him as a seal by the Creator, *synderesis* urges him to do good. Impelled by it, the human being is required to develop his conscience by forming and using it in order to direct his life freely based on the essential laws which are natural law and moral law. In our day, when the development of the sciences attracts and seduces with the possibilities they offer, it is more important than ever to educate the consciences of our contemporaries in order to prevent science from becoming the criterion of good and to ensure that man is respected as the centre of creation and not made the object of ideological manipulation, arbitrary decisions or the abuse of the weaker by the stronger. These are some of the dangers we have experienced in human history, especially during the 20th century.

Every scientific approach must also be a loving approach, called to be at the service of the human being and of humanity and to make its contribution to forming the identity of individuals. Indeed, as I emphasized in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time.... Love is indeed "ecstasy", that is, "a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery" (n. 6). Love brings one out of oneself in order to discover and recognize the other; in opening himself to otherness it also affirms the identity of the subject, for the other reveals me to myself. This is the experience made by numerous believers throughout the Bible, beginning with Abraham. The model of love par excellence is Christ. It is in the act of giving his life for his brethren, in giving himself totally, that his profound identity is expressed and we have the key to interpreting the unfathomable mystery of his being and his mission.

As I entrust your research to the intercession of St Thomas Aquinas, whom the Church honours today and who remains "an authentic model for all who seek the truth" (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 78), I assure you of my prayers for you, your families and your collaborators, and I impart to you all with affection the Apostolic Blessing.