



27 October 2014

Pope Francis

Plenary Session on *Evolving Concepts of Nature*

24-28 October 2014

Casina Pio IV, Vatican City

*Your Eminences,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

*Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen!*

A joyful emotion arose in my soul as the bust, which the Academics wished to have in the headquarters of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences as a sign of acknowledgment and gratitude, was unveiled. This bust of Benedict XVI brings dear Pope Ratzinger's person and face back to the eyes of all. It also evokes his spirit: that of his teaching, of his example, of his opus, of his devotion to the Church, of his current "monastic" life. This spirit, far from crumbling over time, will appear from generation to generation ever greater and more powerful. Benedict XVI: a great Pope. Great in strength and intellectual insight, great in his significant contribution to theology, great in his love for the Church and for human beings, great in his virtue and his religiosity. As you well know, his love for the truth is not limited to theology and philosophy, but extends to science. His love for science spills over into regard for scientists, without distinction among race, nationality, culture or religion; care for the Academy, from the time St John Paul II appointed him a member. He knew how to honour the Academy with his presence and his words, and he appointed many of its members, including the current President, Werner Arber. Benedict XVI, for the first time, invited a president of this Academy, to participate in the Synod on the New Evangelization, cognizant of the importance of science in modern culture. It could certainly never be said of him that study and science withered his person and his love for God and neighbour; on the contrary, science, wisdom and prayer only expanded his heart and his spirit. Let us give thanks to God for the gift He gave to the Church and the world with the life and Pontificate of Pope Benedict. I thank everyone who so generously made this work of art and this event possible, especially the author of the bust, the sculptor Fernando Delia, your family, and all the Academics. I would like to thank all of you who are present here to honour this great Pope.

At the conclusion of your Plenary Session, dear Academics, I am glad to express my profound appreciation and my warm encouragement to move forward with scientific progress and the betterment of the standard of living of people, especially of those in the greatest poverty.

You are addressing the highly complex subject of the evolution of the concept of nature. I will not go into the scientific complexity, which you well understand, of this important and crucial question. I only want to underline that God and Christ are walking with us and are also present in nature, as the Apostle Paul stated in his discourse at the Areopagus: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). When we read the account of Creation in Genesis we risk imagining that God was a magician, complete with an all powerful magic wand. But that was not so. He created beings and he let them develop according to the internal laws with which He endowed each one, that they might develop, and reach their fullness. He gave autonomy to the beings of the universe at the same time in which He assured them of his continual presence, giving life to every reality. And thus Creation has been progressing for centuries and centuries, millennia and millennia, until becoming as we know it today, precisely because God is not a demiurge or a magician, but the Creator who gives life to all beings. The beginning of the world was not a work of chaos that owes its origin to another, but derives directly from a supreme Principle who creates out of love. The Big Bang theory, which is proposed today as the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of a divine creator but depends on it. Evolution in nature does not conflict with the notion of Creation, because evolution presupposes the creation of beings who evolve.

As for man, however, there is a change and a novelty. When, on the sixth day in the account of Genesis, comes the moment of the creation of man, God gives the human being another autonomy, an autonomy different from that of nature, which is freedom. And he tells man to give a name to all things and to go forth through history. He makes him the steward of Creation, even that he rule over Creation, that he develop it until the end of time. Therefore the scientist, and especially the approach of the Christian scientist is that of investigating the future of humanity and the earth, and, as a free and responsible being, to contribute to preparing it, to preserve it, and

to eliminate any risks to the environment, both natural and manmade. But, at the same time, the scientist must be moved by the conviction that nature, in its evolutionary mechanisms, hides its potential which it leaves for intelligence and freedom to discover and actualize, in order to reach the development that is in the Creator's design. So then, no matter how limited, the action of man partakes in the power of God and is capable of building a world adapted to his two-fold physical and spiritual life; to build a humane world for all human beings and not only for one group or one privileged class. This hope and trust in God, the Creator of Nature, and in the capacity of the human spirit, are able to give the researcher a new impetus and profound peace. But it is also true that the action of man, when his freedom becomes autonomy — which is not freedom, but autonomy — destroys Creation and man takes the place of the Creator. And this is a grave sin against God the Creator.

I encourage you to continue your work and to carry out these happy theoretical and practical initiatives for the benefit of human beings, which do you honour. It is with joy that I now consign the insignia, which Bishop Sánchez Sorondo will present to the new members. Thank you.