



27 October 1998

**Address to the Plenary Session on the Subject
'Changing Concepts of Nature'**

The Supreme Pontiff warns against the dangers of reducing man 'to a thing and in seeing him in the same way as the other natural elements'. Man must be perceived in his corporeal and spiritual unity. The concept of nature evokes the reality of God in his own essence and evokes the creation. It thus also expresses the meaning of history. The concept of nature when applied to man takes on a special meaning because man has a 'specific dignity' and to 'speak about human nature reminds us also that there exists a unity and a solidarity of the whole of mankind'.

Mr. President,

Members of the Academy,

1. I am happy to welcome you this morning and to extend to you my cordial greetings on the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on 'changing concepts of nature'. I thank His Excellency Professor Nicola Cabibbo for the courteous words which he has just addressed to me. I cordially greet Msgr. Giuseppe Pittau, former Chancellor of your Academy, and Msgr. Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, who has accepted to succeed him.

The reflections that you have engaged in are particularly opportune. In ancient times, Aristotle coined certain phrases which were taken up and deepened during the Middle Ages and which St. Thomas Aquinas used to draw up his theological doctrine. It is to be hoped and wished for that scientists and philosophers continue to make their contribution to theological research and to the different forms of human knowledge, in order to understand increasingly deeply the mystery of God, of man, and of the creation. The interaction between disciplines, in a fraternal dialogue,¹ can be very fertile because it broadens our vision of what we are and what we become.

2. Down the centuries, the concept of nature has been the subject of various disputes, above all else in the theological and philosophical field. The conception elaborated by Ulpian reduced nature to the biological and instinctive aspect of man.² In a certain number of contemporary theories, we find again this temptation to reduce the human being to purely material or physical reality, making man a being who behaves only like the other living species. The broadening of the scientific field has led to a multiplication of the meanings of this term. In some sciences, it refers to the idea of law or model; in others it is linked to the notion of regularity or universality; in yet others it evokes the creation understood in a general way or according to some aspects of the living being; in others, lastly, it represents the human person in his singular unity, in his human aspirations. It is also linked to the concept of culture to express the idea of the progressive formation of the personality of man, in which are associated elements which have been given to him – his nature – and elements which are acquired through contact with society: the cultural dimension by which man is fulfilled.³ Recent scientific and technological discoveries regarding the creation and man, in the infinitely small and the infinitely large, have modified in a considerable way the meaning of the concept of nature, applied to the created, visible, and intelligible order.

3. Faced with these conceptual differences in the field of scientific and technological research, it is wise to ask ourselves about the meanings of this concept because the repercussions for man and for the way in which scientists look at him are far from being negligible. The principal danger lies in reducing an individual to a thing and in seeing him in the same way as the other natural elements, thereby relativising man, whom God has placed at the centre of the creation. To the extent to which interest is paid first of all to the elements, one is tempted to no longer grasp the nature of a living being or of the created, taken in its entirety, and to reduce them to sets of elements which have multiple interactions. As a result, man is no longer perceived in his spiritual and corporeal unity, in relation to his soul, the spiritual principle in man that is like the form of his body.⁴

4. In Catholic philosophy and theology and in the Magisterium, the concept of nature has an importance which it is fitting to emphasise. It evokes first and foremost the reality of God in His own essence, representing in this way the divine unity of the 'holy and ineffable Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, [which] is one God by nature, of one substance, of one nature, and of one majesty and power'.⁵ The same term also evokes the

creation, the visible world which owes its existence to God and which is rooted in the creative act by which 'the world began when God's word drew it out of nothingness'.⁶ According to the divine plan, the creation finds its own purpose in the glorification of its author.⁷ We thus perceive that this concept also expresses the meaning of history, which comes from God and which goes towards its end, the return of all created things to God. History cannot, therefore, be understood as cyclical history, because the Creator is also the God of the history of salvation. 'It is one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁸

By means of his reason and his various intellectual operations, which are specific to the nature of man seen as such, man 'by his nature can discover the Creator'⁹ by contemplating the work of the creation, because the Creator makes Himself known through the greatness of His work. The beauty of this work and the interdependence of created realities encourage the wise to admire and to respect the principles specific to the creation. 'Nature, philosophy's proper concern, could contribute to the understanding of divine Revelation'.¹⁰ This rational knowledge does not, however, exclude another form of knowledge, based upon revealed truth and on the fact that the Lord communicates with men.

5. When it is applied to man, the summit of the creation, the concept of nature takes on a special meaning. Man is the only being on earth on whom God has bestowed a specific dignity which is derived from his spiritual nature, in which is found the impress of the Creator, because he was created in His image and likeness¹¹ and endowed with the highest faculties that a creature can possess: reason and will. These allow him to determine himself freely and to enter into communication with God, to respond to His appeal and to fulfill himself according to his specific nature. Indeed, being of a spiritual nature, man is able to grasp supernatural realities and reach eternal happiness, freely offered by God. This communication is made possible by the fact that God and man are two essences of a spiritual nature. This is what St. Gregory of Nazianzus expressed when he spoke about the Lord who had assumed our human nature: 'Christ heals fellow man through fellow man'.¹² In the point of view of this Father of Cappadocia, the metaphysical and ontological approach enables us to understand the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption, by which Jesus, real God and real man, took on human nature.¹³ To speak about human nature reminds us also that there exists a unity and a solidarity of the whole of mankind. Indeed, man should be seen 'in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being'.¹⁴

6. At the end of this meeting of ours I encourage you to continue with your scientific work in a spirit of service rendered to the Creator, to man, and to the whole of the creation. In this way, human beings will praise God because everything comes from Him;¹⁵ will respect the dignity of every man and will find an answer to the fundamental questions about their origins and their ultimate end.¹⁶ They will take care of the creation 'for God willed creation as a gift addressed to man, an inheritance destined for and entrusted to him'¹⁷ and which is good by nature.¹⁸

Wishing you fertile work in a rich dialogue between the different disciplines that you represent, I most willingly bestow upon you my Apostolic Blessing.

1 Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, n. 33.

2 Cf. *Inst.* I, 2.

3 Cf. Aristotle, *Politica*, I, 2.

4 Cf. Council of Vienna, *Fidei Catholicae*, DzS, 902.

5 XI Council of Toledo, DzS, 525.

6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 338.

7 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 36.

8 *Fides et Ratio*, n. 34.

9 Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I-II, 71, 2.

10 *Ibid.*, n. 43.

11 Cf. *Gn* 1:26.

12 *Oratio*, 28, 13.

13 Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

14 *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 14.

15 Cf. *1 Co* 29:14.

16 Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, n. 1.

17 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 299.

18 Cf. Council of Florence, *Cantate Domino*, DzS, 1333