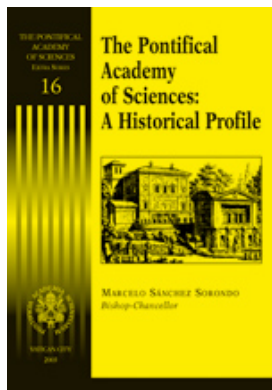




The Pontifical Academy of Sciences: A Historical Profile



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... In the relations which exist between Academies and the States in which they carry out their activities, the case of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences can be seen as a singular case, as indeed in basic terms the role of the small State which hosts it is also singular. During these long years this relationship has become very fertile. The Church has paid careful attention to the Academy. She has respected its work and fostered the autonomy of its scientific and organisational dynamics. Through the Academy, the Magisterium of the Church has sought to make the scientific world understand her teaching and her orientations in relation to subjects which concern the good of man and society, the complete human development of all the peoples of the world, and the scientific and cultural co-operation which should animate the relations between States. On the occasion of numerous addresses and messages directed towards the Academy by five pontiffs, the Church has been able to repropose the meaning of the relationship between faith and reason, between science and wisdom, and between love for truth and the search for God. But through the Academy the Church has also been able to understand from nearer to hand, with speed and in depth, the contents and the importance of numerous questions and issues which have been the object of the reflection of the scientific world, whose consequences for society, the environment and the lives of individuals could not but interest her directly, given that there is nothing which is genuinely human which does not find echo in her heart. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences has thus become one of the favoured forums for the dialogue between the Gospel and scientific culture, gathering together all the stimulating provocations but also the inspiring possibilities that such dialogue brings with it, almost thereby symbolising a shared growth – of both the scientific community and the Magisterium of the Church – of their respective responsibilities towards truth and good. The above survey, although general in character, dealing with the activity carried out over the sixty years since the foundation of the Pontifical Academy of Science, the subjects of the numerous meetings and study-weeks, and the publications which the Academy has produced, brings out all the contemporary relevance and the importance of the subjects which have been addressed. Scientists from all over the world, often co-operating closely with a group of philosophers and theologians, have examined questions and issues which have ranged from genetics to cosmology, from agriculture to the distribution of resources, from the surgery of transplants to the history of science, and from ecology to telecommunications. The speeches addressed by the Pontiffs to the Academicians, from Pius XI to John Paul II, have offered important elements of reflection not only in relation to the ethical and moral responsibility of their activities but also on the very meaning of scientific research, and on its striving for truth and an increasingly profound knowledge of reality. The subject of the relationship between science and faith, both at an epistemological and an anthropological level, has been the usual framework of almost all these papal addresses. The forms of language employed have been different as these decades have passed, and different emphases have been placed on the various questions and issues, but the attention paid to scientific work has been unchanging, as has been the case in relation to the philosophical and cultural dimensions which that work involves.