



WELCOME ADDRESS OF ARCHBISHOP GIANFRANCO RAVASI

Sistine Chapel, Saturday, November 21, 2009



Your Holiness,

It is difficult for me to give voice now to this crowd of artists who have come from around the world representing so many more of their colleagues. The emotions of all run deep as we stand before this great and glorious backdrop by Michelangelo, the supreme symbol of the meeting between art and faith, and in front of the successor of Peter, who embodies the centuries-old history of the Church.

Forty-five years ago, on May 7, 1964, in this same extraordinary setting, Pope Paul VI in a passionate speech addressed artists reminding them that the ultimate challenge of aesthetic creation is to “grasp from the heaven of spirit its treasures and clothe them anew with word, colour, shape, and accessibility”. In the restricted space of the word, of shape, image, and sound, the artist tries to make the infinite and the eternal shine. As one of the artists, Joan Miró, commented, art is not the visible but makes visible the Invisible, overlooking the abyss of being and existence, crossing the boundaries of the immediately evident to penetrate regions of the absolute and the transcendent.

Ten years ago, Your Holiness, on Easter Sunday 1999, your venerated predecessor, John Paul II, wrote his *Letter to Artists* “to assure his esteem and to help consolidate a more constructive partnership between art and the Church”, to revive “the fruitful colloquium that two thousand years of history has not interrupted”. Our past is filled with an immense and wonderful heritage that brought Goethe to exclaim: “The mother tongue of Europe is Christianity”. Marc Chagall was convinced that for centuries artists dipped their paintbrushes in the colourful alphabet of the biblical pages. But already in the eighth century, the cantor of sacred images, St. John of Damascus, did not hesitate to suggest: “If a heathen comes and says, ‘Show me your faith!’, then take him to church and show him the decoration which adorns it and explain it to him with a series of sacred paintings” (PG 95, 325).

This bond, once so tight, became undone over the last century. On one hand, spiritual reflection did not always follow the path of ‘theological aesthetics’ and the ecclesial art has often merely copied the styles of earlier eras and genres; and often it has adapted the ugliness that besets modern cities. On the other hand, art has trodden the paths of the secular city, archiving religious themes, symbols, narratives, and the figures of that cultural code which the Bible was for centuries. Artists have often been dedicated to increasingly more provocative or self-referential ephemeral and stylistic exercises, often slaves to fashion and the logic of the market.

Yet there is still a desire to recompose that “fruitful dialogue”. And the artists, Your Holiness, are now waiting for you to pronounce with your words the first beat of this new dialogue. As you have already affirmed, it is possible for “aesthetics and ethics, beauty, truth and goodness” to converge once again. Once the rubble of misunderstanding and distance has been removed, the *via pulchritudinis* is still open before the believer and the artist. The goal to be reached was outlined by the writer Hermann Hesse when he offered this surprising definition: “Art means to show God in everything”, that is the Eternal and the Infinite.

This is what John Paul II hoped for in his *Letter*: “May your art help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal.” And now, Your Holiness, as we thank you for the gift you have wanted me, in your name, to give to each artist at the end of this meeting, we all ask you to enlighten us on this path of beauty and light, with your words which we shall hear with sincere openness and heartfelt participation.

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THE HOLY FATHERS ADDRESS**