



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE 150th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION
FOR SACRED ARCHAEOLOGY**

*To my Venerable Brother Archbishop Francesco Marchisano
President of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology*

1. One hundred and fifty years have passed since my Predecessor, Bl. Pius IX, authorized the first plan of operation worked out by the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology that had been established a short time before to enlarge the collection of Christian antiquities, to gather them in suitable premises and to create a museum for them, subsequently called the (Pope) Pius Christian Museum (*Museo Cristiano-Pio*).

Bl. Pius IX entrusted to this commission the task to work with prudent discernment to ensure "that all the items which could ... edify the devout by reminding them of the simplicity of the catacombs and that are not in danger of being lost, as far as possible stay in place in the catacombs" (*in Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, 91 [1968], 259). When he published the venerated Pontiff's mandate on 6 January 1852, Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, then Secretary of State, announced the definite membership of the commission that included such distinguished and farsighted scholars as Fr Giuseppe Marchi S.J. and Giovanni Battista De Rossi.

On this happy anniversary, I asked Cardinal Angelo Sodano, my Secretary of State, to greet warmly and encourage strongly the distinguished members of today's Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology to continue conserving, studying and making known the precious heritage of the venerable memories of the Church, and particularly of the catacombs of Rome and Italy.

2. On this occasion, how can I fail to emphasize the great veneration with which the Roman Pontiffs have conserved the memories of the Christian community, disseminated throughout the city of Rome and throughout the Italian peninsula since its origins?

The decision of Pope Zephyrinus, for example, is worth mentioning. He was the first to create the catacombs on the Appian Way and he made the deacon Callistus responsible for them. This, the largest complex of catacombs, was later to take the name of Callistus who became Pope and succeeded Zephyrinus. Another Pope deeply committed to spreading appreciation for the catacombs was Pope Damasus, who during his Pontificate sought out the tombs of the martyrs and embellished them with splendid metric epigraphs in memory of the acts of these first witnesses to the faith.

In the last century, confirming and updating the provisions of his immediate Predecessors, Pope Pius XI, with his *Moto proprio "I primitivi cemeteri"*, enlarged and strengthened the Commission of Sacred Archaeology, "so that the ancient monuments of the Church [might] be conserved in the best possible way for the study of the learned and for the veneration and fervent devotion of the faithful from every nation" (AAS 17 [1925], 621). The providential initiative of that great Pontiff was in keeping with the special nature of the Holy Year of 1925, in which crowds of pilgrims came to pay homage at the memories of the Church of Rome. Thus as always, it was a pre-eminently pastoral and spiritual goal that induced the Successors of the Apostle Peter to give new life to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology.

3. The catacombs have represented a cornerstone of piety and unity for believers in every age. In them, eloquent testimonies to the holiness of the Church are lovingly safeguarded and revered. They recall the communion that unites the living and the dead, earth and heaven, time and eternity. In those sacred places waiting for the glorious coming of Christ are those who were marked with the seal of Baptism, and often, many who witnessed to the Gospel with the supreme trial of bloodshed.

I would like to quote in full, from among many, the admirable epigraph that Pope St Damasus composed in honour of St Saturninus the Martyr, whom the liturgy commemorates today. The words can be applied to the many who gave their life for Christ and now sleep in peace, awaiting the day without end when the Lord will come again in glory. It is a tribute we would like to pay to our brothers and sisters in the faith:

*Citizen now of Christ, formerly of Carthage,
The moment the sword pierced the Mother's holy breast,
through her blood he changed country, name and lineage,
the birth to the life of the saints made him a Roman citizen.
His faith was wonderful: as his heroic death would later show.*

*His enemy Gratianus trembled while he tore his holy members;
but though all his venomous rage exploded,
he could not induce you, O Saint, to deny Christ;
indeed through your prayers he even deserved to die a Christian.*

*This is the will of the suppliant Damasus: venerate this tomb!
 [Here it is given to fulfil vows and to pour out chaste prayers,
 because it is the tomb of the martyr St Saturninus]
 To you, O Martyr Saturninus, I pay my prayerful homage.
 (Epigrammata Damasiana, edited by A. Ferrua, Rome 1942, p. 188-189).*

In the light of these inspired verses, how can one deny that the catacombs are one of the historical symbols of Christ's victory over evil and sin? They are still standing to prove that the storms unleashed against the Church can never destroy her, because she is founded on the Lord's promise "the powers of death shall not prevail against her" (Mt 16,18).

4. I am also pleased to recall that the commission of which you are the President is not only concerned to conserve "these vestiges of the People of God" properly, but also seeks to gather and spread the religious and cultural message they evoke. In fact, the contribution of those who work with you encompasses technical, scientific, epigraphical, anthropological, theological and liturgical expertise. This enables the Church to become better acquainted with the heritage left by the generations of early Christians. Thanks to the constant message that this patrimony silently proclaims, the Christian people are encouraged to remain faithful to the *depositum fidei*, received as a precious treasure to be safeguarded with care.

The distinguished interventions of the experts of the commission, in the course of the past 150 years are, and remain, important for their scientific, and especially, for their religious and ecclesial character. On this happy Jubilee I desire to express my deep gratitude for the immense and generous dedication with which each member contributes to enriching this historical and pastoral patrimony.

I also hope that the work of the Pontifical Commission will be better known, so as to satisfy the desire of those who want to become familiar with the testimonies of the ones who preceded them in the sign of the faith. The young generations coming into contact in turn with the steadfastness of faith of the early Christians will feel deeply moved by these monuments and memories to live the Gospel coherently, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

With these sentiments I express to you, Venerable Brother, the Members of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, those who cooperate and all those who will take part in the scheduled programme, my wholehearted appreciation. I entrust each of you to Mary, Mother of the Church, and I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to every one as a pledge of abundant heavenly favours.

From the Vatican, 12 February 2002, Memorial of the Martyrs, Sts Saturninus and Companions.

JOHN PAUL II

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