



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II ON THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF POPE LEO XIII

Venerable Brothers,

*Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*1. The Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences has most appropriately wished to commemorate the centenary of the death of Pope Leo XIII, of venerable memory. In fact, my illustrious Predecessor did not limit himself to founding the Cardinals' Commission for the promotion of historical studies, which gave birth to today's Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, but he also gave an effective impetus to the historical sciences by opening the Vatican Secret Archives and the Vatican Apostolic Library. I am therefore delighted at this initiative and I am pleased to greet each of you who in these days have come to honour the memory of such an enlightened Pontiff, emphasizing in particular his merits in the field of the historical sciences.2. As is well known, Leo XIII's influence effectively extended to the various contexts of the Church's pastoral action and commitment to culture. I have had various opportunities to reflect on some of these on previous occasions. I am thinking, for example, of Pope Pecci's particular concern for the social problems arising in the second half of the 19th century, which he expressly addressed in the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*. I also dedicated an Encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, to this theme of the Church's social doctrine, with ample references to that fundamental Document (cf. nn. 4-11). Moreover, I recall the strong encouragement that Leo XIII gave to the renewal of philosophical and theological studies, in particular with the publication of the Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris*, through which he also contributed significantly to the development of Neothomism. It is to this particular aspect of his Magisterium that I referred in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (cf. nn. 57-58). Finally, his profound Marian devotion and his pastoral sensibility concerning the traditional forms of popular piety centred on the Blessed Virgin, and for the Rosary in particular, should not be forgotten. I highlighted this in my recent Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, in which I remembered his Encyclical *Supremi Apostolatus Officio* and his other numerous interventions on this prayer, which he recommended "as an effective spiritual tool in the face of the evils of society" (n. 2).3. Keeping in mind this broad theological, cultural and pastoral context in which Pope Leo XIII's actions took place, the present Congress affords me the welcome opportunity of pondering on the influence of the great Pontiff in the context of historical studies. Like Leo XIII, I too am personally convinced that it benefits the Church to bring to light, to the extent that this is possible through the instruments of the sciences, the full truth about the 2,000 years of her history. Historians, of course, are asked not only to apply scrupulously all the tools of historical methodology, but also to pay careful attention to the scientific ethic that must always distinguish their research. In his well-known Document *Saepenumero Considerantes*, Leo XIII addressed to scholars of history Cicero's famous warning: "*Primam esse historiae legem ne quid falsi dicere audeat, deinde ne quid veri non audeat; ne qua suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo, ne qua simultatis*" (*Leonis XIII Acta*, III,

268). These very wise words compel the historian neither to accuse nor to judge the past, but to strive patiently to understand everything with the maximum penetration and breadth in order to draw a historical picture as close as possible to the true facts.⁴ On various occasions in the course of these years, I have stressed the need for the "healing of memories", the indispensable premise for an international order of peace (cf., for example, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1997*, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 18/25 December 1996, p. 3). Those who investigate the roots of the current conflicts in various parts of the globe discover that the negative consequences of events in past centuries continue to be felt also in the present. All too often - and this makes the situation more complex - these "contaminating" memories have become integral elements of the national identity and, in some cases, even of the religious identity. This is why we must avoid any manipulation of the truth. The historians' love for their own peoples, for their own communities, even religious communities, must not interfere with the strict elaboration of scientific truth. The process of healing the memory begins here.⁵ The invitation to honour historical truth obviously does not mean that the scholar should abdicate his own approach or deny his identity: all that is expected of him is a readiness to understand and to forego ever making a hasty or factitious judgment. In fact, in the study of history it is impossible to apply automatically to the past criteria and values acquired only in the course of the centuries. Rather, it is important first of all to make the effort to return to the social-cultural context of the period, to understand what occurred on the basis of the motivations, circumstances and implications of the period under examination. Historical events are the result of a complex interaction between human freedom and personal and structural conditioning. All this should be borne in mind when a seeking "to heal the memory" is intended.⁶ Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, it is clear from these reflections that before any process of reconciliation can start with other people or communities, it is necessary first of all to be reconciled with the past. For both individuals and peoples, this effort to purify memory entails that actual errors be recognized, for which it is right to ask forgiveness: "One cannot remain a prisoner of the past", I cautioned, in the Message quoted above (*ibid.*). This sometimes demands great courage and self-denial. However, it is the only way that social groups and nations, freed from the dead weight of former resentment, can join forces with reciprocal brotherly loyalty to create a better future for all.

May this always happen! This is the wish that I reinforce with special remembrance in prayer. As I renew to each one of you my deep gratitude for your service to the Church, I offer you my best wishes in the Lord and cordially bless you all. *From the Vatican, 28 October 2003* JOHN PAUL II