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Message of the Holy Father to the participants in the 23rd Public Session of the Pontifical Academies

This afternoon, at the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, the 23rd Public Session of the Pontifical Academies was held on the theme: Eternity, the other face of life.

The works were introduced by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture and of the Coordination Council of the Pontifical Academies.

During the Session, before awarding this year's Prize of the Pontifical Academies, Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin read the Message sent by the Holy Father.

The following is the full text of the Message:

Message of the Holy Father

To the Venerable Brother
Cardinal GIANFRANCO RAVASI
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture
and of the Coordination Council of the Pontifical Academies

I address you on the occasion of the 23rd Solemn Public Session of the Pontifical Academies, an event which began in 1995 following the reform of the Pontifical Academies at the behest of Saint John Paul II, and which constitutes an important and by now traditional phase in the journey of the seven Academies, gathered in the Coordination Council that you chair. Coinciding with the annual Session there is the award ceremony, organized in turn by one of the Academies, according to the sector of competence. A Prize that I present with pleasure to promote and support the efforts of those, especially the young or institutions that work with the young, who distinguish themselves in their respective sectors to contribute to the promotion of a new Christian humanism.

I address, therefore, my warm greetings to all those present: cardinals, bishops, ambassadors, academicians and friends who participate in the Solemn Public Session, and strongly hope that this by-now habitual moment of encounter may represent for all, starting with the Prize-winners, an encouragement for research and the exploration of fundamental themes for a humanistic Christian vision.

The 23rd edition was organized by the *Pontifical Academy of Theology* and by the *Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas*. I offer a special greeting to the presidents of these two Academies, the Rev. Fr. Réal Tremblay and the Rev. Fr. Serge-Thomas Bonino, and to the respective academicians, thanking them for their effort, expressed above all in the journal *Path*, published by the Academy of Theology, with which it proposes to its readers, as is suggested by the title, an itinerary, a journey of research and theological study.

I congratulate you for the choice of theme for this Public Session: "Eternity, the other face of life", which stimulates us to reflect once again and further on an area, not only theological, which although essential and central to Christian experience, is somewhat neglected, both in theological research of recent years and, above all, in proclamation and in the formation of believers.

"We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come", we affirm every Sunday, reciting the final article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. And the Symbol of the Apostles ends with these words: "I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting". It is, therefore, the essential core of Christian faith, of a reality closely connected to the profession of faith in Christ Who died and rose again. And yet the eschatological reflection on eternal life and resurrection, in catechesis and in celebration, does not find the space and attention it deserves. At times one has the impression that this theme is willingly forgotten and neglected as it is seemingly distant from and extraneous to daily life and contemporary sensibility.

This is not surprising: one of the phenomena that marks current culture is indeed closure to transcendent horizons, the closing in on oneself, almost exclusive attachment to the present, forgetting or censuring the dimensions of the past and, above all, the future, perceived especially by the young as obscure and loaded with uncertainty. The future beyond death appears, in this context, inevitably even farther away, indecipherable or entirely nonexistent.

But the limited attention to the theme of eternity, to the Christian hope that announces the resurrection and eternal life in God and with God, may also depend on other factors: for example, the traditional language used in preaching or in catechesis to announce this truth of faith may today seem almost incomprehensible and transmit at times an image of eternal life that is not very positive or "attractive". The other face of life may thus be perceived as monotonous and repetitive, boring, even sad or entirely insignificant and irrelevant for the present.

This was not the thought of the great Father of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa, who in a *Homily on the Canticle of Canticles* (VIII) – which will be opportunely reproposed during the session – offered a very different vision of eternity. Indeed, eternal life is conceived by him as an existential condition that is not static but dynamic and lively. The human desire for life and happiness, closely connected to that of seeing and knowing God, continually grows and renews itself, passing from one stage to another without ever finding purpose and fulfilment. In fact, the experience of the encounter with God transcends all human conquests and constitutes the infinite and ever new goal.

Saint Thomas Aquinas also underlines this aspect, affirming that in eternal life the union of man with God, which is "the reward and the end of all our labours", is accomplished, and this union consists in "perfect vision" of Him. In this state, continues Saint Thomas, "every blessed will have more than he desired and hoped for ... and only God can satisfy him, even going far beyond, to infinity". Furthermore, he continues, "eternal life consists in the joyful fraternity of all the saints". Citing Saint Augustine, Thomas affirms: "All joy will not enter the blessed, but all the blessed will enter into joy. ... We will contemplate His face, we will be satisfied with His presence in an eternally renewed youth" (*Conferences on the Creed*, Article 12).

The reflection of the Fathers of the Church and the great theologians should therefore help us and encourage us to repropose, effectively and with passion, both with a language suitable to our daily life and with the appropriate

depth, the heart of our faith, the hope that inspires us and which gives strength to Christian witness in the world: the beauty of Eternity.

I hope that, both at theological level and at the level of proclamation, catechesis and Christian formation, there may be a renewal of interest in and study of eternity, without which the dimension of the present is divested of ultimate meaning, of the capacity for renewal, of hope for the future.

Wishing, therefore, to promote and encourage theological research, and particularly that which is addressed to the exploration of eschatological themes, I am pleased to award the Prize of the Pontifical Academies, *ex aequo*, to two young scholars: Dr. Stefano Abbate, for his doctoral thesis entitled *La secularización de la esperanza cristiana a través de la gnosis y el ebionismo. Estudio sobre el mesianismo moderno*, and Dr. Francisco Javier Pueyo Velasco, for his work *La plenitud terrena del Reino de Dios en la historia de la teología*.

In addition, I am pleased to award the Medal of the Papacy to Dr. Guillermo Contín Aylón, for his thesis “*Vado ad Patrem. La Ascension de Cristo en el Comentario a Juan de santo Tomás de Aquino*”.

Finally, I wish to all the academicians and all the participants in the meeting ever fruitful efforts in their respective fields of research, and I entrust each and every one of you to the Virgin Mary, who already enjoys the joyful vision of God in eternal life and intercedes for us, pilgrims in history, on our journey towards eternity.

I heartily impart to all of you and your families a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 4 December 2018

Francis
