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BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسى الرسولي BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ

N. 190112d

Saturday 12.01.2019

Audience with the participants in the 18th Convention of the Italian Association of Church History Professors

At 12.30 today, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 18th Convention of the Italian Association of Church History Professors (*Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa*, AIPSC), which took place in Rome on 10 and 11 January, at the *Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta* (LUMSA), on the theme: *Activity – Research – Teaching: post-Conciliar Church History*.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I welcome you and I thank you for your visit, which is much appreciated. I thank the president for his introduction, in particular for having reminded us all of the ancient "*historia magistra vitae*", a maxim that is very meaningful and linked to your important and generous teaching.

A friend of your "founding fathers" and of your association, the Jesuit father Giacomo Martina, acute historian of the Church, long-serving lecturer at the Gregorian and teacher of many of you, they tell me, used to remind his students that history is certainly the teacher of life, but also has very few students!

Instead, you have many "students" in a broad sense – as you, Father, said: you have them in the seminaries, in the pontifical universities, in conferences, in study conventions, and also in the journal that you gave to me. You are therefore giving a valid help to the study of history and its teaching: thank you for this service and for this impassioned witness.

In fact, history, studied with passion, can and must teach much about today, so disrupted and thirsting for truth. It would be enough if, through this, we were to learn to reflect with wisdom and courage on the dramatic effects and evils of war, of the many wars that have troubled the journey of humanity on this earth. Yet we do not learn!

Italy – and in particular the Italian Church – is so rich in testimony of the past! This wealth must not be a treasure only to conserve jealously, but must help us to walk in the present towards the future. The history of the Church, of the Italian Church indeed represents an essential point of reference for all those who want to understand, explore and also enjoy the past, without transforming it into a museum or, worse, into a cemetery of nostalgia, but rather to make it alive and fully present to our eyes.

But - as you teach me - at the centre of history there is a Word that was not born written, that does not come from man's research, but is given to us by God and is witnessed first of all with life and within life. A Word that acts in history and transforms it from within. This Word is Jesus Christ, Who marked and redeemed so deeply the history of man that the passage of time is marked in terms of *before Him* and *after Him*.

And the fullest reception of his saving and merciful action should make the historian and believer a scholar who is even more respectful of facts and of the truth, delicate and attentive in research, and a coherent witness in teaching. It should keep him away from all the worldliness related to the presumption of knowledge, such as the greed to further one's career or obtain academic recognition, or the conviction of being able to judge facts and people by himself. In fact, the ability to glimpse the presence of Christ and the path of the Church in history make us humble, and they take away from us the temptation to take refuge in the past to avoid the present. And this was the experience of many, many scholars, who started out not I would say as atheists, but a little agnostic, and then found Christ. Because history cannot be understood without this strength.

So this, dear brothers and sisters, is my hope: that your not easy teaching and your witness contribute to the contemplation of Christ, the cornerstone, Who works in history and in the memory of humanity and of all cultures. And may He always grant you to savour His saving presence in facts, in documents, and in events, great or small as they may be. Above all, I would say, the deeds of the humble, the last, as they too are actors in history. And this will be truly the high road for having beside you perhaps few students, but truly good, generous and prepared ones.

I would not like to finish without remembering Fr. Giacomo Martina, whom I mentioned, and to tell you about the experience I had with him. He was presented to me by a Jesuit priest, not Italian, Fr. Ugo Vanni: they were friends. Then I used to go and see Fr. Martina, and he always advised concrete things: "Read this, read the other..." And in this way I became enthusiastic about reading about history, and I also had the patience to read all of von Pastor's histories of the Popes, thanks to that advice. Thirty-seven volumes! And it did me good.

I thank you again for this meeting, and I heartily bless you and your work. Please, do not forget to pray for me.