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Message of the Holy Father on the occasion of the Centenary of the Permanent Commission for the Protection of the Historical and Artistic Monuments of the Holy See

The following is the Message sent by the Holy Father to the president of the Permanent Commission for the Protection of the Historical and Artistic Monuments of the Holy See, Professor Francesco Buranelli, and the participants in the conference “The Commission for the protection of monuments and safeguarding the architectural heritage of the Holy See: 100 years of activity (1923-2023)”, taking place today in Rome at Palazzo Cesi:

Message of the Holy Father

To the Distinguished Professor Francesco Buranelli

President of the Permanent Commission for the Protection
of the Historical and Artistic Monuments of the Holy See

Distinguished Professor,

The centenary of the founding of this exalted institution is for me a happy circumstance to address a cordial thought to you, to your co-workers and to those who will speak at this significant commemorative event.

“In deference to the wishes expressed by the Holy Father, in order to obtain not only greater unity and continuity of direction in the work of conservation and restoration of monuments of art and history dependent on the Holy See, but also a more rational distribution of the relative competencies and responsibilities, considering the universal renown of the monuments belonging to the Holy See [...], *a permanent Artistic Commission for the protection of the historical and artistic monuments belonging to the Holy See is hereby established*”.

Wishing to correspond to the constant concern for the care and conservation of cultural property, with the above-

mentioned words, the Commission of Cardinals for the Administration of the Assets of the Holy See, in the meetings of 14 and 27 June 1923, instituted, on behalf of Pope Pius XI, this body, whose one hundredth anniversary today's study day intends to celebrate.

The idea of conservation and protection, now universally shared and the consequence of a process of gaining awareness of the humanistic value of cultural heritage, historically finds its origins in the ancient States of the Italic Peninsular and, among these, in particular the Papal State, before being affirmed in the legislations of the European nations and the entire world.

The Supreme Pontiffs, ever since the fifteenth century, issued proclamations and edicts, especially in order to prevent the growing flow of antiquities from the archaeological excavations in Rome from making their way to the European capitals to enrich the antiquarian collections of sovereigns, nobles and scholars. But above all, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular as a reaction to the sale of huge numbers of works of art and as a reparation for the traumatic spoliations of the Napoleonic age, thanks to some Papal Chirographs and the edicts of the Cardinals Camerlengo, special legal principles were formulated and subsequently adopted by modern legislations. Among these, most prominent is the public utility of cultural patrimony – from *publica utilitas*, a concept derived from the Roman Law –according to which not only public but also private property is subject to the requirements of the common good.

From public utility also derives the State's right to regulate and prevent the alienation and exportation of this heritage, as well as the right and duty to implement legal protection, scientific preservation, the first and indispensable act of which is cataloguing, and utilization or valorisation. With this in mind, in 2001 the Vatican City State adopted a Law on the protection of its own cultural assets and those of the Holy See¹, which now needs to be updated in order to respond effectively to the changed historical and social conditions, as well as to the evolution of both domestic legislation and that of international organizations.

Furthermore, without underestimating the importance of the attraction to tourists of the cultural heritage of which one is the custodian, its valorization is grounded in the fact that it is a tangible sign of the “*transitus Domini*” in the world, according to the incisive affirmation of Saint Paul VI,² that is, a visible expression of the life of the Church in her liturgical action and in the proclamation of the faith, in the various spiritual manifestations and in the exercise of charity. Therefore, as my predecessor Benedict XVI recalled with regard to the Vatican Museums, “The Church has always supported and upheld the world of art, in the conviction that art is an eloquent expression of human and spiritual progress... In short, one might say that the Vatican Museums can be an extraordinary opportunity for evangelization because, through the various works displayed, they offer visitors an eloquent testimony of the continuous interweaving of the divine and the human in the life and history of peoples”.³ These far-sighted words can also be applied well to all the cultural assets of Vatican City and of the Holy See.

As I reiterate my sentiments of heartfelt gratitude to all those who have worked so far with competence and dedication to the specific mission of the Commission, I offer my best wishes so that we may continue with responsibility and professionalism to show the beauty of art that is a reflection of the harmonious communion between man and God. To you, Mr. President, to the Co-workers, to the Speakers who will address the Assembly and to each of those present, I gladly send my Blessing, trusting in your prayerful remembrance for me.

FRANCIS

From the Vatican, 22 November 2023

Memorial of Saint Cecilia, virgin and martyr

[1]Vatican City State, Law no. CCCLV, Law on the protection of cultural heritage, 25 July 2001 and related Regulation.

[2]Paul VI, Address to ecclesiastical archivists, 26 September 1963.

[3] Benedict XVI, Address to participants in the International Congress organized on the occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Vatican Museums, 16 December 2006.
