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To the Pontifical Academies: artists, communicate with your works a spark of hope and trust where people give in to indifference and ugliness

This afternoon, in Rome's Palazzo della Cancelleria, the Pontifical Academies held their 21st Public Session on the theme: "Sparks of beauty for a human face of cities". The works were introduced by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Coordination Council of the Pontifical Academies. During the session, before awarding this year's prize, Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin read the message sent by the Holy Father in which he expresses his hope that the prize represent "encouragement for research and the exploration of fundamental themes for the humanistic Christian vision and, for all participants, a moment of friendship and cultural and inner enrichment".

Francis congratulates the members of the Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the Virtuosi at the Pantheon, the most ancient academic institution, founded in 1542. He thanks Professor Vitaliano Tiberia for his long and illustrious service as president, and the new president, Professor Pio Baldi, for having organised this year's event, explaining that the theme called to mind two possible references.

The first is Benedict XVI's address to artists in the Sistine Chapel in November 2009, in which there is a significant passage: "Unfortunately, the present time is marked, not only by negative elements in the social and economic sphere, but also by a weakening of hope, by a certain lack of confidence in human relationships, which gives rise to increasing signs of resignation, aggression and despair. ... What is capable of restoring enthusiasm and confidence, what can encourage the human spirit to rediscover its path, to raise its eyes to the horizon, to dream of a life worthy of its vocation – if not beauty?". The Pope emeritus went on to invite artists to make efforts to render more human the places of social co-existence: "you know well that the experience of beauty, beauty that is authentic, not merely transient or artificial, is by no means a supplementary or secondary factor in our search for meaning and happiness; the experience of beauty does not remove us from reality, on the contrary, it leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful".

"The second reference leads us to the current moment, to projects for the requalification and rebirth of the outskirts of the metropolises, large cities, developed by many competent architects, who indeed propose 'sparks' of beauty, that is, small interventions in urban planning, architecture and art through which it is possible to recreate, even in the most degraded and disfigured contexts, a sense of beauty, dignity and human more than

urban decorum. Therefore, there is a growing firm belief that even in the peripheries there are traces of beauty, of true humanity, that we need to know how to grasp and to value as much as possible, that must be supported and encouraged, developed and disseminated”.

The Pope goes on to cite the Italian writer Italo Calvino, who in his work “Invisible Cities” wrote: “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fear”. “Perhaps many cities of our time, with their desolate suburbs, have left more space for fears than for the most beautiful desires and dreams of people, especially the youngest. In the Encyclical *Laudato Si*’ I underlined precisely ‘the relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment’, affirming that ‘by learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple”.

“For this reason, for example, it is necessary for sacred buildings, starting with new parish churches, especially those located in peripheral or degraded contexts, to offer themselves even in their simplicity and essentiality as oases of beauty, peace and welcome, truly favouring the encounter with God and communion between brothers and sisters, thus also becoming a point of reference for the holistic growth of all inhabitants, for the harmonious and united growth of the community”.

The Pope also emphasises that, to care for people, starting from the smallest and most helpless, and their everyday bonds, necessarily means “also taking care of the environment in which they live. Small gestures, simple acts, little sparks of beauty and charity can heal and mend the human, not merely the urban and environmental fabric, often torn and divided, representing a concrete alternative to indifference and cynicism”.

“Thus there emerges the important and necessary task of artists, especially those who are believers and who let themselves be enlightened by the beauty of Christ’s Gospel: to create works of art that bear through the language of beauty a sign, a spark of hope and trust where people seem to give in to indifference and ugliness. Architects and painters, sculptors and musicians, filmmakers and writers, photographers and poets, artists of every discipline, are called to make beauty shine, especially where darkness and greyness dominate everyday life; they are custodians of beauty, heralds and witnesses of hope for humanity, as my predecessors have repeated many times. I invite them, therefore, to care for beauty, and beauty will heal the many wounds that mark the heart and soul of the men and women of our times”.

The Pope went on to announce that, to give particular encouragement and support to the young who, in the field of the various arts are engaged in offering a serious and valid contribution to Christian humanism, the Prize of the Pontifical Academies, would be awarded *ex aequo* to Dr. Chiara Bertoglio, for her research in the musicological and literary field, as well as for her concert activity; and to Dr. Claudio Cianfaglioni for his poetic research and the study of various poetic and literary figures of our time, such as Fr. David Maria Turoldo, the centenary of whose birth we remember. Furthermore, as a sign of encouragement to artistic research in two different and complementary musical fields, he awarded the Medal of the Pontificate to Dr. Michele Vannelli, master of the Chapel of the Basilica of St. Petronius in Bologna, and to Francesco Lorenzi, composer and musician, founder of the musical group *The Sun*.

The Holy Father concluded by wishing to all participants in the session fruitful efforts in their respective fields of study and work, and entrusting them to the Virgin Mary, “the *Tota pulchra*, true spark of God’s beauty, that she may illuminate with her maternal protection our daily path”, and asked them to remember him in their prayers, before imparting his heartfelt apostolic blessing.
