



3 October 1964



Address to the Plenary Session and to the Study Week on the Subject 'Brain and Conscious Experience'

After observing that consciousness is a reality connected to the spiritual activity of the soul, the Supreme Pontiff asserts that the 'Church does not fear the progress of science'. Indeed, every true scientist is her friend. He goes on to assert that whereas in the past the scientific world had generated opposition to religion, today the scientist is more open to religious values because he is aware that uncontrolled science can be a threat to man. The Pope concludes by saying that the Church is ready to offer scientists advice when questions are encountered which 'transcend the domain of science', namely those concerning the 'origin and ... destiny of man and of the world'.

Gentlemen,

Now that the study week organised by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on the subject 'Brain and Conscious Experience' is about to conclude, we have desired to bring you personally our greetings and our thanks and to express anew the interest with which we follow the development and the progress of your scientific activities.

1. First of all we greet with pleasure the President and the members of the Academy here present, and we also welcome most cordially the scientists of various nations who have accepted the invitation to attend this session. Their very presence in this place calls for lively gratitude on our part, all the more when we consider the erudite communications which they have presented at this scientific meeting. Their many learned papers serve as an inspiration to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, reflecting credit not only on the Holy See, but, we humbly dare to assert, for it is our conviction, on the world of science itself.

We have had before our eyes the series of researches already published in the official collection of the 'Commentarii' of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, as well as the three volumes of 'Miscellanea Galileiana' which have been presented to us in your name. These many signs of the vitality of your Academy are a source of deep joy to us. The merit is yours, and with all our heart we congratulate you and thank you.

2. Our intention, as you will surmise, is not to comment on the subject which you have been discussing during these days with such competence and scientific rigour. May we be permitted simply to underline in a word its importance, and to bring out its relationship – if one may use the term – with those domains in which the essential part of our own activity is exercised: we refer to the moral and religious sciences.

'Brain and Conscious Experience': seeing these words associated, it suffices to make clear that there you touch on that which is most specifically human in man, on that which approaches most nearly the mechanisms of his psychology, the problems of his soul. To be sure, when you speak of 'consciousness', you do not refer to the moral conscience: the very rigour of your methods ensures that you do not leave that strictly scientific domain which belongs to you. What you have in mind exclusively is the faculty of perceiving and of reacting to perception, that is to say the psycho-physiological concept which constitutes one of the accepted meanings of the word conscience.

But who does not see the close connection between the cerebral mechanisms, as they appear from the results of experimentation, and the higher processes which concern the strictly spiritual activity of the soul?

3. Your labours are valued by us, as you see, because of the domain in which they are pursued, because of their close affinities with that which is of supreme interest to a spiritual power such as ours – the domain of the moral and religious activities of man.

But, widening our field of view, we would like to profit by the occasion thus presented to us to reaffirm before you the Church's attitude of esteem and confidence with regard to scientific thought in general.

The Church does not fear the progress of science. She undertakes willingly a dialogue with the created world and applauds the wonderful discoveries that scientists are making in that world. Every true scientist is for her a friend, and no branch of learning is shunned by her. The very variety of the subjects treated during the study weeks of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is in itself a proof of this cultural 'ecumenism' of the Church, of her readiness to welcome every true and real progress in the domain of the sciences, of every science.

The Church follows this progress with close attention, as she does also the spiritual expressions which accompany the scientific effort. These expressions have varied according to time and place, and their evolution is for the Church an object of great interest.

The scientific world, which adopted in the past a position of autonomy and of self-confidence, from which flowed an attitude of distrust, if not of contempt, for spiritual and religious values, is today, on the contrary, impressed by the complexity of the problems of the world and of mankind, and feels a sort of insecurity and fear when faced with the possible evolution of a science left, without any control, to follow its own driving force. Thus the fine self-confidence of early days has for many given place to a salutary unease, so that the soul of the scientist today is more easily open to religious values, and glimpses, beyond the prodigious achievements of science in the material domain, the mysteries of the spiritual world and the gleams of the divine transcendence.

How can the Church not rejoice at this happy evolution? She is beside you in your labours, Gentlemen, you may be sure, and always ready to offer you the help of the lights of which she is the trustee, whenever your learned researches bring you to the threshold of those grave questions which transcend the domain of science and which from all time have presented themselves to the consciences of men: questions of the origin and of the destiny of man and of the world.

Receive from us, Gentlemen, these too brief thoughts, which are meant simply as a cordial affirmation of our esteem for your persons and your work, and of the profound interest with which the Church follows the evolution of scientific progress in the modern world. We wish complete success for the present session, and we invoke for you, and for the happy continuation of your learned activities, the most abundant divine favours.