

opusdei.org

# **The Pope receives doctorate "honoris causa" in jurisprudence**

Roman university says "the work carried out by the Pontiff throughout his entire pontificate is universally recognized through his affirmation of the law and his defense of human rights."

05/20/2003

During a solemn academic ceremony which took place this morning in the

Paul VI Hall on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the founding of Rome's La Sapienza University, Giuseppe D'Ascenzo, rector of the university, conferred a doctorate "honoris causa" in Jurisprudence upon the Pope. Among those in attendance were Silvio Berlusconi, president of the Council of Ministries, various ministers, academic authorities and thousands of students. The inter-university chorus of Rome, joined by 21 other choruses from different Italian cities, performed several pieces.

The Council of the Faculty of Law agreed to confer the doctorate "honoris causa" on John Paul II because "the work carried out by the Pontiff throughout his entire pontificate is universally recognized through his affirmation of the law and his defense of human rights in all of their historical forms regarding the person and his individual rights

as well as relations among peoples and international law."

At the beginning of today's ceremony, the rector spoke briefly, followed by Carlo Angelici, dean of the Faculty of Law, and Pietro Rescigno, professor of Civil Law.

The Pope then recited the 'lectio magistralis' which focused on the defense and the "broad space" that he has dedicated since the beginning of his pastoral ministry "to the affirmation of human rights, due to the close connection that they have with two fundamental points of Christian morality: the dignity of the person and peace." ... In this regard, the Pope said: "Being conscious of this, I have tried to serve these values with all my strength. But I could not carry out this mission with turning to the law."

"The principle that has guided me is that the human person, exactly as he

was created by God, is the foundation and purpose of social life which the law must serve. ...

Departing from this conviction, the Church has developed its doctrine on 'human rights' that derive neither from the State nor from any other human authority, but from the person. Therefore, public powers must 'recognize, respect, compose, protect and promote' them; they are 'universal, inviolable and inalienable' rights."

The Pope emphasized that the Catholic Church "proclaims that in the transcendental dimension of the person there lies the font of one's dignity and one's inviolable rights. ... The Church is convinced that recognizing this anthropological and ethical foundation of human rights is the most valid protection against their violation or abuse."

"During my service as Successor of Peter," he continued, "I have felt the duty to insist with force on some of these rights that, theoretically affirmed, are often misunderstood in the law and in specific behavior. For this reason, I have returned many times to the first and most basic human right which is the right to life. ... In particular, I have insisted that the embryo is a human individual and as such, is entitled to the inviolable rights of the human being. The juridic norm, therefore, is called to define the juridic statute of the embryo."

John Paul II then made reference to another fundamental right, that of religious freedom, which he said "is not simply one among many human rights, but the most fundamental, because the dignity of the human person has its first source in its essential relationship with God."

"Asking that they are expressed in obligatory juridical norms," he continued, "I have also tried to bring light to many other rights such as the right to not be discriminated against," the right to private property, freedom of association, expression and information, the right to housing, "which is closely related to the right to have a family and to have an adequately paid job"; minority rights "to exist, preserve and develop one's own culture; the right to work and workers' rights."

"Finally, I have taken particular care in proclaiming and defending 'openly and strongly the rights of the family from intolerable usurpations of society and the State.'" Through the family, "the future of the world and the Church is passed on."

As he was concluding, the Holy Father urged that "in this new century which opened a new

millennium there may be an ever-more conscious respect for human rights, the rights of every man, and of the entire human person."

Today's doctorate is the tenth doctorate "honoris causa" that the Holy Father has received. He received the first one a year before being elected Pope from the Johannes Gutemberg University in Maguncia, Germany and the last one in 2001 from Cardinal Wyszynski University in Warsaw, Poland.

Vatican Information Service  
(Vatican City)

---

pdf | document generated  
automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-us/article/the-pope-receives-doctorate-honoris-causa-in-jurisprudence/> (04/01/2026)