

**UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION**

**Address by
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United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(Unesco)**

**on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition of
reproductions of manuscripts in the Vatican Library**

Unesco House, 9 May 1983

Your Eminences,
Mr Minister,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to open with you this exhibition of Vatican Archives facsimiles and to welcome to Unesco on this occasion His Eminence Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, Secretary of State of the Holy See, and the many other personalities here present.

This exhibition is in keeping with the exemplary co-operation established more than three decades ago between the Holy See and Unesco. This co-operation, which began in 1948 under the aegis of Monsignor Roncalli, who was to become Pope John XXIII, was to culminate on 2 June 1980 with the visit to our Headquarters of His Holiness Pope John-Paul II.

We all remember the intense emotion we felt during those historic moments when, from the rostrum of Unesco House, His Holiness delivered his message of peace, freedom and brotherhood to the world community as a whole. We then realized, more than ever before, the extent of the convergence between the ideals of the Church and those of Unesco, a convergence summed up so strikingly that day by the Holy Father in these words of his speech: '... man is always the prime factor: he is the primordial and fundamental element of culture. And man is always such in his wholeness: in the entirety of his spiritual and material subjectivity'.

By relating culture, education, science and communication to a single comprehensive phenomenon, of which man is both the first principle and the ultimate objective, His Holiness, in this same speech, took us back to the very sources of the humanistic ethic, which should govern the life of the international community and which forms the basis of Unesco's Constitution.

It is in the light of this message that the ties between the Holy See and our Organization were subsequently to be further strengthened--particularly on the occasion of the visit last February of the Pontifical Commission for Culture, presided over by Monsignor Poupard--and that the deeper meaning of the exhibition we are opening today becomes clear.

This exhibition tells us why an essential part of the spiritual, cultural and intellectual heritage of mankind, a collection built up over half a millennium for man's edification and education, was nearly lost to him for ever and how, by the miracle of a process that places scientific progress in his service, this heritage is being restored to him on what is now a global scale.

It was in the middle of the fifteenth century, at the instance of Pope Nicholas V, and then of Pope Sixtus IV, that a large number of manuscripts, many of which came to western Europe after the fall of Byzantium, began to be collected, copied and translated.

In this way the Vatican Apostolic Library came into possession of unique items such as the Gutenberg Bible and the Urbino Bible; a copy of Dante's Divine Comedy handcopied in its entirety by Boccaccio, with the original leaves executed later by Botticelli for the same work; 430 illuminations on a gilt ground which once belonged to Emperor Basil II; and many other treasures.

The Library has been steadily enriched by the addition of prestigious collections, such as those of Queen Christina of Sweden in 1689, the manuscripts of the Ottoboni Collection in 1748, the Borghese and Neofiti Collections in 1891, and the Barberini and Borgia Collections in 1902.

Over the past five centuries 1,200,000 volumes have found their way to the shelves of the Apostolic Library, including 8,000 incunabula and nearly 100,000 manuscripts. Besides the Christian works and sacred works of other religions, it now holds exceptional collections of books covering all branches of secular knowledge in most of the languages with writing systems.

The Vatican Apostolic Library has thus become more than just the principal depository of the historic heritage of the Christian world; it possesses in fact a considerable portion of the collective memory of mankind.

The irreplaceable treasures it contains are, however, by their very nature fragile. Variations in temperature, lighting and degree of humidity, decomposition of some of the materials used in the making of books, and simple wear due to handling, are all damaging factors which, over the centuries, slowly increased the threat of destruction of these items. The guardians of this fabulous heritage then found themselves obliged to deny access to it--first to the general public and then even to scholars. Tens of thousands of the rarest volumes were thus gradually removed from view.

This was until the day when modern technology developed an extremely sophisticated reproduction process which, by combining the remarkable capabilities of the camera, the scanner and the computer, made it possible to obtain facsimiles that can be distinguished only with difficulty from the originals. All the hidden treasures of the Vatican Apostolic Library could then be seen and admired again by people all over the world.

If the first book ever printed and a symbol of exceptional significance, the famous Gutenberg Bible, can now be consulted, studied or thumbed through without fear, it is thanks to the contribution of electronics. After an interval of five centuries we are now witnessing the changeover from one technological epoch to another. And just as, formerly, the invention of printing broke through the narrow limits imposed on the circulation of texts by the manuscript page, so the invention of the computer now makes possible universal and permanent access to perfect copies of all the texts produced in the past, however rare or fragile the originals.

The exhibition which opens today constitutes an event. For the first time it affords the world public a glimpse of the work being done by means of the new facsimile process. And that glimpse suggests the great promise this process holds for enhancing the value of the marvels of the Vatican Apostolic Library, and those of so many other libraries throughout the world.

I now yield the floor to Abbé Stickler.