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Press Conference to present the International Study Conference on “Enquiry into the history of the first centuries of the Church”, organised by the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences in collaboration with the Université Catholique de Lyon (Vatican City, 27-29 October 2021)

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the “International Study Conference” on the “Enquiry into the history of the first centuries of the Church”, organised by the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences in collaboration with the *Université de Lyon*, taking place in Vatican City in the *Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina* from 27 to 29 October 2021.

The speakers were Fr. Bernard Ardura, O. Praem., president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, and Professor Gaetano Lettieri, member of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences and director of the Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art and Entertainment of *La Sapienza* University of Rome.

The following is the intervention by Fr. Bernard Ardura, O. Praem.:

Intervention of Fr. Bernard Ardura, O. Praem.

The conference that will open on Wednesday 27 October was scheduled to take place exactly one year ago, and all the speakers contacted had confirmed their participation in the project. The healthcare conditions of our respective countries, the impossibility of organizing conferences and other events, as well as travel difficulties forced us to postpone the conference to this year.

By statute, the Pontifical Committee of Social Sciences has the role of promoting the study of the history of the Church and all the history of the Church, or rather of the twenty centuries that separate us from the earthly life of Jesus and his apostles.

Moreover, in recent years, Pope Francis has insisted on the need for the Committee to promote fruitful collaboration in the scientific field, not only with Catholic academic institutions, but also with all the historians and specialists in the sciences auxiliary to history, ready to work together in the search for truth, taking their scientific

expertise into account.

While the past is gone, people are no more, and their experiences are over, nevertheless, pieces of the past remain: literary works, administrative documents, objects, works of art, archaeological discoveries, which however do not represent the past in its entirety.

Now, we know that, over the centuries, at least two visions of this history have often opposed each other.

The first, illustrated by Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, which endeavours to present the history of the Church, from the time of the apostles up to his own times, especially with regard to the episcopal successions in the most important sees, the history of Christian theologians and heresies, as well as the stories of the martyrs.

The second is presented as an alternative to the Eusebian model, and adopts the conviction according to which there was a decay and constant corruption of Christianity from antiquity and until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The attitude of the reformers towards earlier Christian history is outlined by Calvin: the first ecumenical councils, up to that of Chalcedon in 451, are accepted as containing "only a pure and evident interpretation of Scripture". In the Lutheran context, inspired by early Christian apologetics, the authors describe the history of the Church as a decadence, but in each century there remained nuclei of Christians faithful to the word of God, forming a bridge to the Reformation of the 16th century. While Eusebius endeavoured to prove the apostolic succession of bishops, Protestant historiography produced a long series of works during the Reformation period to show that the material succession of bishops was countered by a succession of expressions of truth, which emerged in every age, even if persecuted by the official Church.

In more recent times, the Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), who reigned supreme over the history of Christian origins a century ago, gave wide currency to this second view of Church history in his lectures on "The Essence of Christianity", which he delivered before six hundred students at the University of Berlin in 1899-1900.

A century has now passed, but some of Harnack's convictions are still fashionable, in particular his assertion that nothing can be said with scientific certainty about the first two centuries of Church history.

A century has now passed, but some of Harnack's convictions are still in vogue, especially his affirmation that nothing can be said with scientific certainty about the first two centuries of the history of the Church.

Several visits to India, several meetings with scholars specialising in secular ancient history, the relentless search for truth, and the desire to take stock of the knowledge acquired so far through the most recent works were the decisive elements that inspired the preparation of this conference.

In conceiving and organising the programme of this conference, we wanted to respond to the urgent invitation of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to work with scholars from all scientific backgrounds, the most varied cultural sensibilities, and the most diverse historiographic approaches.

To this end, we have called upon the expertise of specialists in the geography and history of the early centuries, trade routes and economics in the Roman world and in Asia, with particular attention to the movements of the Jewish diaspora and the itineraries of the early missionaries. The study of pagan and Christian literary monuments and archaeological research in the East and West offer new knowledge and open up hitherto unsuspected perspectives, together with those permitted by the new technologies.

The open historiographical approach that we have chosen for this meeting explains the key term chosen for the title of the conference: 'Enquiry'. On such a wide-ranging subject and in the presence of incessant novelties, the

result of untiring research in the variety of fields of sciences related to history, this conference has absolutely no pretension of arriving at definitive results. In fact, our meeting is and is intended to be an "Enquiry", that is, an investigation into the first centuries of the Church's history, carried out with the aim of determining which elements can be considered as certain, or probable, or as surpassed by newly acquired knowledge.

Responding to the Holy Father's request, the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences thus offers the scholars who have accepted our invitation the opportunity to share their research.
