



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO CARDINAL EDWARD IDRIS CASSIDY  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE  
ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS  
OF THE "MALINES CONVERSATIONS"**

*To My Venerable Brother  
Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy  
President of the Pontifical Council  
for Promoting Christian Unity*

It gives me great pleasure to send through you cordial greetings to Cardinal Danneels and the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussel who are hosting a special celebration to mark the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Malines Conversations. With affection in the Lord I greet His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Dr. George C. Carey, who is honouring this occasion with his presence. I also warmly greet the members of ARCIC II, the International Commission for dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, which is meeting in Mechelen at the same time. This significant ecumenical gathering affords me the opportunity to reaffirm the Catholic Church's irrevocable commitment to seek the full and visible unity for which the Lord prayed on the eve of his Passion (cf. Jn.17:20-21).

The Malines Conversations, which began in 1921 and lasted for five years, were the fruit of the joint initiative of three ecumenical pioneers: Cardinal Mercier, the then Archbishop of Mechelen, Lord Halifax and the Abbé Fernand Portal. Impelled by indomitable faith, these remarkable witnesses to the urgency of Christ's plea for unity hoped for the return to full communion within the Catholic Church of "the Anglican Church united not absorbed". Their informal conversations made an enduring contribution to a fundamental principle of ecumenism, one later sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council and reaffirmed by myself in my recent Encyclical Letter "[Ut Unum Sint](#)": "Legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendour and contributes greatly to the fulfilment of her mission" (John Paul II, [Ut Unum Sint](#), 50).

At Mechelen the dialogue was marked by a sincere desire for reconciliation and was conducted in a spirit of genuine humility, shared conversion to the Gospel, love for truth and fraternal charity. We owe a great debt of gratitude to those who 75 years ago walked the ecumenical path together, "straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13).

The results of the Malines Conversations matured with the passage of time. After many centuries of mutual misunderstanding, formal contacts between Catholics and Anglicans were happily resumed by my Predecessor Pope John XXIII and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher, and these bonds of friendship and esteem were strengthened during the course of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the Council's Decree on Ecumenism, "[Unitatis Redintegratio](#)", recognized that the Anglican Communion "occupies a special place" among the Christian communities of the West "in which some Catholic traditions and institutions continue to exist" ([Unitatis Redintegratio, 13](#)). Our common pilgrimage took yet another step forward 30 years ago, when Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey agreed to set up the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission as an instrument designed to help in restoring the unity in truth which Christ gave to his Church and to which he perennially calls his disciples. How can we fail to praise the mercy of God who is leading us to erase from memory the bitter polemics of the past? It is he who continues to guide our mutual quest for full communion in faith, sacramental life and ministry.

Despite the difficulties—some of them sadly of recent origin—which Anglicans and Catholics have yet to resolve, I am heartened by the providential growth in effective co-operation which has taken place in recent years. It is my fervent prayer that the International Commission will continue its mission of pursuing and expressing "the whole truth into which the Holy Spirit guides Christ's disciples" (John Paul II, [Ut Unum Sint, 36](#)) in ways which reflect the profound spiritual bonds linking the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

As the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 draws ever nearer, all Christ's disciples must be ever more docile to the Holy Spirit who enables them to acknowledge and reject the sins which have so painfully wounded the unity of God's People (cf. John Paul II, [Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 34](#)). A clear-sighted and courageous examination of conscience will, with the help of God, purify the hearts and minds of all Christians, leading them to the grace of conversion to the Gospel. As we look towards the Third Christian Millennium, we joyfully praise Almighty God for the "great things" (cf. Lk. 1:49) which he has already done to heal divisions between Christians. It is my hope that this 75th anniversary of Malines Conversation will give fresh impetus to the dialogue between Catholics and Anglicans. I join all those taking part in the anniversary celebration in fervent prayer that the Lord will indeed grant us that unity for which he himself prayed.

*From the Vatican, 15 August 1996.*

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