



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE DELEGATES OF THE NATIONAL ECUMENICAL COMMISSIONS

Friday, 23 November 1979

IT IS A PARTICULAR joy for me to welcome so many bishops and priests who are directly promoting the great work of Christian unity in many different parts of the world. You have come to Rome at the invitation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and your coming gives vivid expression to the close collaboration that must exist between the local Churches and the Holy See in this, as in so many other matters.

Some years ago the Secretariat, in its document on ecumenical collaboration emphasized, on the one hand, the proper initiative of the local Church in ecumenical work at the local level, and, on the other hand, the need to take care that such initiatives are undertaken within the limits of the doctrine and discipline of the whole Catholic Church. These principles are clearly reflected in the character and composition of your present meeting.

You who have come from so many lands, and also the staff of the Secretariat, will, I am sure, have gained immense benefit from the days of discussion and prayer. Yours is a difficult and sometimes a lonely task, and so it is good to be among brethren. I am grateful also for the presence of three guests from the Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation. I gladly welcome them as brothers in Christ.

As you know, in a few days time I shall be paying a visit to His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I. "The restoration of unity among all Christians was indeed one of the principal aims of the Second Vatican Council [1] and since the moment of my election I have formally committed myself to promote the carrying out of its norms and guidelines, seeing this as one of my first duties"[2]. My first ecumenical journey will give solid expression to this commitment, and it will be paid to the First See of the Orthodox Church. I hope that I shall continue to have opportunities of meeting other pastors and Christian leaders with a view to cooperation with them and to intensifying our common efforts for unity.

The positive and hopeful aspect of ecumenical activity seems implicit in every word of the theme chosen for your meeting, "Ecumenism as a Pastoral Priority in the Church's Work". For a few minutes I would like to share with you some

of the thoughts which this theme suggests to me in this week in which we keep the fifteenth anniversary of three great documents of the Second Vatican Council: *Lumen Gentium*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

You are here to discuss *ecumenism*. This word should not evoke that false fear of the adjustments necessary to any genuine renewal of the Church^[3]. But still less is ecumenism a passport to indifferentism or to neglect of all that is essential to our sacred tradition. Rather it is a challenge, a vocation to work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the visible and perfect oneness in faith and love, in life and work, of all who profess faith in our one Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the rapid progress of recent years, much remains to be done.

In this regard the task of furthering theological dialogue and cooperation with other Churches and Communities must go on. Moreover, there is hardly a country in which the Catholic Church is not cooperating with other Christians in work for social justice, human rights, development and the relief of need: such work already bears a common witness to Christ, for "cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the bond that already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant"^[4].

Your work has another, and equally vital, aspect. "Concern for restoring unity involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike"^[5]. One of the principal tasks of ecumenical commissions at every level is to promote unity by placing before the Catholic people the aims of ecumenism, aiding them to respond to this urgent vocation which they should see as integral to their baptismal calling. This vocation is a call to renewal, to conversion, to that prayer which can alone bring us nearer to Christ and to each other, which the Council so rightly calls "spiritual ecumenism" and "the soul of the ecumenical movement"^[6].

Every Christian is called to serve the unity of the Church. Two tasks are particularly urgent today. One is that of aiding priests and students for the priesthood to appreciate this ecumenical dimension of their mission and to convey it to the people entrusted to their care.

The other, as I said last month in my Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, concerns the ecumenical dimension of catechesis: "Catechesis will have an ecumenical dimension... if it creates and fosters a true desire for unity. This will be true all the more if it inspires serious efforts – including the effort of self-purification in the humility and the fervour of the Spirit in order to clear the ways – with a view not to facile irenics... but to perfect unity when and by what means the Lord will wish"^[7].

For these very reason the task of promoting unity must be seen as an essentially *pastoral task*. It is pastoral in that the bishops are the principal ministers of unity within the local Churches and therefore "have a special responsibility for promoting the ecumenical movement"^[8]. It is pastoral also in that all who are entrusted with this work must see it as primarily ordered to the building up of the Body of Christ and the salvation of the world. As long as Christians are divided, so long will the work of preaching the Gospel be hampered: divisions among Christians impair the credibility of the Gospel, the credibility of Christ himself^[9]. This service of unity is a service of Christ, of the Gospel, and of all humanity. It is, then, a truly pastoral service.

A high *priority* attaches to this truly pastoral work. The Vatican Council clearly stated the urgency of the ecumenical task.

Disunity is a scandal, a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel; it is our duty to strive by God's grace to overcome it as soon as we can. The inner renewal of the Catholic Church is an indispensable contribution to the work of Christian unity.

We must therefore present this call to holiness and renewal as central to the Church's life. Let no one delude himself that work for perfect unity in faith is somehow secondary, optional, peripheral, something that can be indefinitely postponed. Our fidelity to Jesus Christ urges us to do more, to pray more, to love more. The way may be long and demands patience, and we have to pray that this "genuine need for patience to await God's hour will never occasion complacency in the status quo of division in faith"^[10]. You, then, who are charged with particular responsibility for the Catholic Church's ecumenical work in your own lands must always look upon this as one of the main priorities in the Church's mission today.

For it is the work of the *Church*. The Vatican Council's commitment of the Catholic Church to work for ecumenism has been frequently reaffirmed by both Paul VI and myself. To work for unity is not simply to follow one's own fancy, one's personal preference; it means being faithful to and truly representative of the position of the Catholic Church. The Council reminded us that "this ecumenical activity cannot be other than truly Catholic, that is, loyal to the truth we have received from the Apostles and the Fathers, and at the same time tending towards that fullness in which our Lord wants his Body to grow in the course of time"^[11]. This places on you a heavy responsibility: but always remember that it also assures you of a great grace.

You know well that your vocation calls for work, and I hope that during this week you have been encouraged to learn how much work is being done in so many parts of the world, and how much is being done each day by the Secretariat here in Rome. But in the end this work is God's work. He looks for our cooperation, and we must put our whole trust in him, for he alone can bring us to the unity he wills, a unity that is the created reflection of the oneness between the Divine Persons. For is not the Church of Christ "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"^[12]?

It is in the light of this deep and prayerful confidence in the power of God that I urge you to face with courage, faith and perseverance the difficulties and obstacles inevitable in your work. No difficulty should ever deter us from the work of God. The way of truth and fidelity will always bear the mark of the Cross: as the Apostle said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God"^[13].

Finally, I thank you all again for coming to this meeting at the Secretariat and for having contributed to it. As you return to your different lands to resume your work with renewed vision and zeal, I entrust you all, and all who collaborate with you, to the intercession of Mary Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and Mother of his Church. I ask her to sustain you in the great cause of Christian unity for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[1] Cfr. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

[2] *Allocutio ad Secretariatum ad Unitatem Christianorum fovendam*, die 18 nov. 1978.

[3] Cf. Ecumenical Directory I, 2.

[4] *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 12.

[5] *Ibid.*, 5.

[6] *Ibid.*, 8.

[7] *Catechesi Tradendae*, 32.

[8] Ecumenical Directory II, 65.

[9] Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 77.

[10] Ecumenical Address given in the United States, 7 October 1979.

[11] *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24.

[12] Cf. St. Cyprian, *De oratione dominica*, 23, *PL* 4, 553, quoted in *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

[13] *Acts* 14:22.

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