



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE  
CONGREGATION OF THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES**

*Thursday, 1 October 1998*

*Your Beatitudes,  
Your Eminences,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,*

1. It is a great joy for me to meet you during your Congregation's plenary assembly, while you are reflecting on several lines of action for the dicastery over the next few years to serve the Eastern Catholic Churches.

In particular, I thank Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, for his courteous greeting on behalf of you all.

I would also like to express my gratitude for the service of the Congregation, which assists the Bishop of Rome "in the exercise of his supreme pastoral office for the welfare and service of the universal Church and the particular Churches. This strengthens the unity of faith and the communion of the People of God and promotes the Church's mission in the world" (Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, Art. 1).

2. Among the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia, the Congregation for the Oriental Churches has a particularly delicate task because of its institutional competence and the present moment in history.

Your Congregation "deals with matters, whether regarding persons or things, concerning the Eastern Catholic Churches" (*Pastor Bonus*, Art. 56). Its competence "extends to all matters which

are proper to the Eastern Churches and which are to be referred to the Apostolic See, whether concerning the structure and organization of the Churches, the exercise of the functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing, or persons and their status, rights and duties” (Art. 58, §1). Moreover, “in regions where Eastern rites have been preponderant from ancient times, apostolic and missionary activity depends solely on this Congregation, even if it is carried out by missionaries of the Latin Church” (Art. 60).

The Congregation’s work, made particularly laborious by the difficult situations in which the Eastern Churches currently find themselves, requires a multitude of skills. This is expressed in particular through the work of the Special Commissions, such as those for the liturgy, for studies on the Christian East and for the formation of clergy and religious, which have been set up by the supreme Pontiffs.

3. The Second Vatican Council underscored the riches that the Eastern Churches bring to the universal Church, displaying their plurality in unity. In fact, the Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* begins with the solemn affirmation that “the Catholic Church values highly the institutions of the Eastern Churches, their liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and their ordering of Christian life. For in those Churches, which are distinguished by their venerable antiquity, there is clearly evident the tradition which has come from the Apostles through the Fathers and which is part of the divinely revealed, undivided heritage of the universal Church” (n. 1). It is because of this vocation that the Council Fathers expressed the desire that the Eastern Churches were to “flourish and to fulfil with new apostolic strength the task entrusted to them” (n. 1).

The Congregation therefore has the task of expressing the universal Church's concern for these Churches so that everyone can “be fully acquainted with this treasure and thus feel, with the Pope, a passionate longing that the full manifestation of the Church’s catholicity be restored to the Church and to the world, expressed not by a single tradition, and still less by one community in opposition to the other” (Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen*, n. 1).

4. Historical circumstances put these Churches in the position of having to rely on the support, affection and particular care of the Holy See, as do the particular Churches of the Latin rite. In fact, some of these Eastern-rite Churches have emerged from the persecution of communist regimes and are experiencing the labour of rebirth. Others instead operate in politically unstable areas, where interreligious coexistence is not always inspired by brotherhood and mutual respect. Lastly, the growing phenomenon of migration requires the Apostolic See to support and promote the pastoral care of Eastern Catholics in the diaspora.

5. I can still vividly feel the joy and excitement of the important meeting I had two days ago with the Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches. On that occasion I had the opportunity to stress that this event was an act of homage by the Apostolic See to their own dignity.

Two aspects, already recalled at the meeting I had with the Patriarchs, seem particularly significant to me: the synodal authority that the Churches over which they preside exercise in a special way and the ever greater contribution they are called to make to the restoration of full communion with their Orthodox Sister Churches.

The synodal authority of the Bishops around their Patriarch, which distinguishes the Eastern Churches, is a very ancient way of living Episcopal collegiality, recommended and described by the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (cf. n. 22).

In their ecumenical commitment, by virtue of their theological and cultural closeness to the Orthodox Churches, they are called to proceed with courage and determination, even if there is still a memory of past wounds and it is at times difficult to fulfil this mandate in the present circumstances.

6. The agenda for your plenary meeting is a sign of the effort you are called to make in mapping out the dicastery's future activity. I would be grateful if you would pay special attention to the pastoral care of the Eastern faithful in the diaspora. In this regard, it is necessary for everyone, both Latin and Oriental, to grasp the sensitive implications of the situation, which is a real challenge for the survival of the Christian East and for a general reconsideration of its pastoral programmes.

Indeed, the Pastors of the Latin Church are first of all invited to deepen their own knowledge of the existence and heritage of the Eastern Catholic Churches and to encourage the faithful entrusted to their care to do the same. Secondly, they are called to promote and defend the right of the Eastern faithful to live and pray according to the tradition received from the Fathers of their own Church. "Regarding the pastoral care of the faithful of the Eastern rites who are living in Latin-rite Dioceses, in accordance with the spirit and letter of the Conciliar Decrees *Christus Dominus*, n. 23, 3 and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 4, the Latin Ordinaries of such Dioceses are to provide as soon as possible for an adequate pastoral care of the faithful of these Eastern rites, through the ministry of priests, or through parishes of the rite, where this would be indicated, or through an Episcopal Vicar endowed with the necessary faculties, where circumstances would so indicate" (*Letter to the Bishops of India*, 28 May 1987, n. 5c).

Moreover, the Pastors of the Eastern Churches must continue to care for their own faithful who have left their country of origin by diligently discerning the forms in which to express their tradition, in a way that responds to the contemporary expectations of those faithful, in the particular circumstances of the society where they live.

7. I believe it is important at this point to offer some guidelines for the tasks that the Congregation for the Oriental Churches must carry out in the years to come.

The Congregation is called to help and to support Eastern Catholic communities, thus expressing the “anxiety for all the Churches” (cf. 2 Cor 11:28) which is proper to every local Church, but in a particular way is the specific vocation of the Church of Rome, which “presides in charity”, according to the happy expression of Ignatius of Antioch.

There are two practical ways to fulfil this task. First, the Congregation is called to formulate general guidelines, the fruit of its richly varied experience, which the individual Churches will then develop and adapt to their own specific situation. This is what the Congregation did, for example, with the *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*. In this regard, I am sure that the Pastors of every Eastern Church will soon proceed to draft the liturgical directories requested by this Instruction, since they are an indispensable means for fully expressing their own liturgical heritage.

Guidelines such as those already offered on the liturgy must now be developed as well in the areas of formation, catechesis and religious life.

The Congregation will prepare some general directives, which will then help the individual Churches to formulate their own *Ratio studiorum* (cf. *CCEO*, can. 330).

It would likewise be helpful to prepare a Catechetical Directory that would “take into account the special character of the Eastern Churches, so that the biblical and liturgical emphasis as well as the traditions of each Church *sui iuris* in patrology, hagiography and even iconography are highlighted in conveying the catechesis” (*CCEO*, can. 621, §2). In this regard, the catechetical method of the Fathers of the Church, which was expressed in “catechesis” for catechumens and in “mystagogy” or “mystagogical catechesis” for those already initiated into the divine mysteries, is enlightening.

In the Eastern Churches, special attention should be paid to encouraging the revival of the traditional forms of religious life, especially monasticism, which “has always been the very soul of the Eastern Churches” (*Oriente lumen*, n. 9).

8. Along with preparing general guidelines, it is the Congregation’s duty to help the Eastern Catholic Churches in the process of implementing these guidelines. It will therefore be concerned to create opportunities for meeting and working together at various levels, such as the meeting of the Eastern Catholic Bishops and Major Superiors of Europe with the Congregation, held in July 1997 in the Eparchy of Hajdúdorog, Hungary. I hope that the meeting of the Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East planned for next year will have an equally positive result, and that a similar initiative can be considered and organized for the so-called “new world”.

9. Lastly, in the spirit of the Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen*, the Congregation must be involved in bringing to the attention of the entire Church the existence and specific character of the Eastern

Catholic Churches. To this end, particularly significant historical and theological studies must be encouraged and supported. This attention must also extend to the pastoral dimension, so that the Latin Bishops will know in a practical way how to make the most of the presence of Eastern Catholics in their own Dioceses; it will be the dicastery's duty to give them appropriate guidance in this regard.

10. We are on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. The contemporary world needs courageous evangelization. "The cry of men and women today seeking meaning for their lives reaches all the Churches of the East and the West. In this cry, we perceive the invocation of those who seek the Father whom they have forgotten and lost (cf. Lk 15:18-20; Jn 14:8). The women and men of today are asking us to show them Christ, who knows the Father and who has revealed him (cf. Jn 8:55; 14:8- 11)" (*Oriente lumen*, n. 4). The Eastern Churches have had an extraordinary evangelizing impact, knowing how to adapt themselves often to the cultural needs of the new peoples they have encountered. It is indispensable that they value this spirit and these methods and revive this experience in the present circumstances.

The children of the Eastern Churches, who did not hesitate to shed their blood to remain faithful to Christ and the Church, will also know how to bring about in their Churches that change of hearts and structures which will make their Christian witness shine in its fullness.

The Church looks with deep gratitude and admiration at the missionary efforts of the Eastern Churches in India. She hopes that they can be extended to other Churches and that everyone will be able to accept gratefully this wonderful collaboration for the growth of the kingdom, according to the various forms and traditions. As the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches indicates, all the Churches under the pastoral governance of the Roman Pontiff "have the same rights and obligations, even with regard to the preaching of the Gospel in the whole world, 'under the direction of the Roman Pontiff' (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 3)" (*Letter to the Bishops of India*, 28 May 1987, n. 5b).

11. This commitment to evangelization also spurs us vigorously to seek full communion with other Christian confessions. Today's world awaits this unity. And we have deprived it of "a joint witness that could, perhaps, have avoided so many tragedies and even changed the course of history... The echo of the Gospel — the words that do not disappoint — continues to resound with force, weakened only by our separation: Christ cries out, but man finds it hard to hear his voice, because we fail to speak with one accord" (*Oriente lumen*, n. 28).

In again expressing the hope that your work will be fruitful, I invoke upon you and your efforts an abundance of heavenly favours, as a pledge of which I affectionately impart my Apostolic Blessing to all.

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