



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO EASTERN CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS**

Tuesday, 29 September 1998

1. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3), who has gathered us together today through his Holy Spirit, to experience "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Ps 132:1).

We are all deeply aware of the solemnity and importance of our meeting today. When my Predecessor Pope Leo XIII of venerable memory, who worked so hard for the Catholic East, met the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs on 24 October 1894, he addressed them in these words which today I make my own: "To give you a sure proof of our affection, we have called you to Rome, desirous of conferring with you and of increasing the prestige of the patriarchal authority".

We have come a long way since then. Perhaps the most fruitful moment in that process occurred at the Second Vatican Council, which some of you had the joy of attending, so that the voice of the Christian East could be heard there.

Following the lead of the Council, on 18 October 1990, I had the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* promulgated, in order to confirm the distinctiveness of the Eastern Churches which are already in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of the Apostle Peter.

Three years ago, I intended to show once again my reverence for the treasures of the Eastern Churches in the Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen*, so "that the full manifestation of the Church's catholicity [may] 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; and that we too may all be granted a full taste of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church" (n. 1).

The same esteem and love which dictated those words led me to have today's meeting with the Eastern Catholic Churches in the persons of you who are their Patriarchs and preside over them "as fathers and heads" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 9).

The Great Jubilee is approaching and urges us all to preach the Gospel of salvation “in season and out of season” (2 Tm 4:2): “We listen together to the cry of those who want to hear God’s entire Word. The words of the West need the Words of the East, so that God’s word may ever more clearly reveal its unfathomable riches” (*Oriente lumen*, n. 28).

2. The Eastern Catholic Churches, together with the other Churches of the East, are living witnesses of the traditions that date back through the Fathers to the Apostles (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 1); their tradition is “part of the divinely revealed heritage of the universal Church” (ibid.).

The Church, in the image of the Holy Trinity, is a mystery of life and communion, Bride of the incarnate Word, dwelling place of God. The Lord Jesus chose the Twelve to shepherd and govern his Church, and wanted their successors, the Bishops, to be shepherds of God’s People on its pilgrimage towards the kingdom, under the guidance of the successor to the Coryphaeus of the Apostles (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 18).

Within this communion, “it has come about through divine Providence that, in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the Apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, while safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony. Some of these, notably the ancient Patriarchal Churches, as mothers in the faith, gave birth to other daughter-Churches, as it were, and down to our own days they are linked with these by bonds of a more intimate charity in what pertains to the sacramental life and in a mutual respect for rights and obligations” (ibid., n. 23).

Although the Council was aware of the divisions which have occurred down the centuries, and despite the fact that communion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches has not been completely reestablished, it did not hesitate to declare that the Churches of the East “have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 16; cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 9)

Does this not apply now to your Churches, which are already in full communion with the Bishop of Rome? And should not the rights and duties of the Patriarchs, who are their fathers and heads, also be reaffirmed? Within the Catholic Church your Churches represent that Christian East to which we continue to extend our arms for the fraternal embrace of full communion. In their own territories and in the diaspora, the Eastern Catholic Churches offer their particular liturgical, spiritual, theological and canonical riches. You, who are their heads, have received from the Holy Spirit the vocation and mission to preserve and enhance this specific patrimony, so that the Gospel may be given in ever greater abundance to the Church and to the world. And it is the duty of the Successor of Peter to assist and help you in this mission.

3. “The Patriarchs with their Synods are the highest authority for all business of the Patriarchate” (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 9). Indeed, Episcopal collegiality is exercised in a particularly significant way in the canonical structure of your Churches. The Patriarchs in fact act in close union with their Synods. The aim of any authentic synodal action is harmony, so that the Trinity may be glorified in the Church.

You believe, my dear Brothers in Christ, that “among all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, the Catholic Church is

conscious that she has preserved the ministry of the Successor of the Apostle Peter, the Bishop of Rome, whom God established as her 'perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity' (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23) and whom the Spirit sustains in order that he may enable all the others to share in this essential good" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 88). It is a question of "an attitude that the Church of Rome has always felt was an integral part of the mandate entrusted by Jesus Christ to the Apostle Peter: to confirm his brothers in faith and unity (cf. Lk 22:23) This commitment is rooted in the conviction that Peter (cf. Mt 19:17-19) intends to place himself at the service of a Church united in charity" (*Oriente lumen*, n. 20).

Your presence here at our meeting today is the living witness to this communion founded on the Word of God and on the Church's obedience to it.

4. You are particularly aware of how this Petrine ministry of unity, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, constitutes "a difficulty for most other Christians, whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections" (n. 88). In the same Encyclical Letter, I invited the other Churches to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on the ways to exercise this ministry of unity (cf. nn. 96-97). With much more insistence and affection, I extend this invitation to you, venerable Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches. It is first up to you to seek, with us, the most suitable forms so that this ministry can carry out a service of charity recognized by all. I ask you to give the Pope your help in the name of that responsibility for re-establishing full communion with the Orthodox Churches (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 24) which belongs to you as Patriarchs of Churches that share so much of the theological, liturgical, spiritual and canonical patrimony with Orthodoxy. In this same spirit and for the same reason, I would like your Churches to be fully associated with the ecumenical dialogues of charity and of doctrine at both the local and universal levels.

5. In harmony with the tradition handed down from the earliest centuries, the Patriarchal Churches have a unique place in the Catholic communion. One need only think that in these Churches the highest authority for any action, including the right to elect Bishops within the borders of the patriarchal territory, is constituted by the Patriarchs with their Synods, without prejudice to the inalienable right of the Roman Pontif to intervene "in singulis casibus" (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 9).

The particular role of the Eastern Catholic Churches corresponds to the one left unfilled by the lack of full communion with the Orthodox Churches. Both the Second Vatican Council's Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and the Apostolic Constitution *Sacri canones* (pp. IX-X) which accompanied the publication of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* have pointed out how the present situation, and the rules governing it, look towards the full communion we desire between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Your collaboration with the Pope and with one another will show the Orthodox Churches that the tradition of "synergy" between Rome and the Patriarchates has been maintained — although limited and wounded — and perhaps also strengthened for the good of the one Church of God present throughout the world.

In the same spirit, it is equally important that the Churches of the East, presently subject to considerable migration, keep their rightful place of honour in their own countries and in "synergy" with the Church of Rome, as well as in the territories where their faithful now reside.

6. In re-establishing the rights and privileges of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs as desired by the Council, the Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* offers us valuable advice: "These rights and privileges are those which existed in the time of union between East and West, although they must be adapted somewhat to present-day conditions" (n. 9). And the Council of Florence, after affirming the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, went on to say: "We also renew the order of the other venerable Patriarchs which has been handed down in the canons, that the Patriarch of Constantinople should be the second after the Most Holy Pope of Rome, that of Alexandria the third, that of Antioch the fourth and that of Jerusalem the fifth, without prejudice to all their privileges and rights". I am certain that the plenary meeting of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which plans to include this matter among the subjects to be studied, will give me useful suggestions in this regard.

Venerable Brothers in Christ, on the threshold of the Great Jubilee the evangelizing power of your Patriarchal Churches represents an unparalleled challenge for a faithful and open proclamation of the Gospel, and for the renewal of the life and mission of the Church and of your Churches. The Spirit and the Church pray: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rv 22:20).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary obtain all this for us through her intercession. We would like to call upon her in the words of an ancient Coptic hymn, which later became part of the devotion of the Byzantine and Latin Churches:

"We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin".

As a pledge of my affection, I give you all my Blessing.

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