



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF GREECE

Friday, 4 May 2001

Dear Catholic Bishops of Greece!

1. This meeting is particularly important and significant to me, and so I have looked forward to it with lively anticipation. It is to you that I am linked by the closest bonds of communion. In the strictest sense of the word, you are my family in Greece, and it is because of this closeness that I would now like to speak to you from the depths of my heart.

First, I wish to express my paternal and fraternal affection, together with my sincere admiration for you who shepherd the flock of the Catholic Church, frequently in very difficult conditions. Often you care for communities which are small and scattered, and you are their Pastors in the truest sense of the word. By your person and your ministry you strengthen the bond of visible unity, you give voice to the preaching of the Word, and you are the primary ministers of sacramental life for the Catholic communities of this country. Precisely because of the efforts required to maintain these contacts, you are particularly loved by your faithful and your visits are a source of great spiritual joy. This itinerant episcopal ministry of yours in some way takes us back to the earliest days of Christianity, a period to which this land of Greece is a living witness.

2. To our brothers and sisters of the Orthodox Church dwelling in this land we are united by a powerful bond of faith in our common Lord. How we wish that all hearts were open and all arms outspread to welcome our fraternal greeting of peace! How we dream that the Pastors of this noble country, whether members of the Orthodox or the Catholic Church, could overcome the difficulties of the past and with courage and a spirit of charity face the challenges of the present, with a sense of common responsibility for the one Church of Christ and its credibility in the eyes of the world!

If historical events in the past, events linked to ways of thinking and acting typical of their times, have been a source of conflict and division, Christians must consider memory above all the sanctuary where the living witness of the Risen Lord is preserved. It is memory which gives rise to Tradition, to which our Churches owe so much. To memory is also entrusted the Sacrament which is the guarantee of efficacious grace: "Do this in memory of me", the Lord exhorts us at the Last Supper.

For Christians, memory is too lofty and noble a sanctuary to be defiled by human sin. Certainly, sin can painfully damage the fabric of memory, but it cannot tear it asunder: that fabric is like the seamless garment of the Lord Jesus, which no one dared to divide.

Dear Brothers, let us spare no effort in making it possible for memory once again to illuminate the great things which God has done for us. Let us lift our gaze from human pettiness and sin, and let us contemplate in heaven the throne of the Lamb, where the eternal liturgy of praise is chanted by men and women of every people and race, clothed in white robes. There they contemplate the face of God, no longer "*per speculum et in aenigmate*", but as it is in reality. There, on high, memory gives way to fullness, and there are no more tears, nor death, because the former things have passed away.

3. You are "frontier" Bishops: because of the particular conditions in which you are living, you greatly desire the obstacles which stand in the way of full union, and which cause such suffering for you and your faithful, to be quickly overcome. And so, as you assert your just rights, you urge the Catholic Church, at times impatiently, to take steps capable of revealing with ever greater clarity the common foundations which unite the ancient Churches of Christ.

I am grateful for this passionate concern, which is a sign of great generosity. I assure you that I share the same fervent desire that the unity of the Church may be seen, as quickly as possible, in all its fullness. I likewise agree with you that there must be a continuation of the efforts, forcefully stated and encouraged by the Second Vatican Council, by which the Catholic Church herself strives, in her own daily life, to be ever more concerned to lay the foundations for better understanding with her brothers and sisters of the other Churches. These other Churches, in the meantime, must not fail to do their part in the quest for communion.

Nonetheless, you know well that much time is required for situations to mature, for prudent rapprochement to take place, and honest and continued dialogue to develop. This calls for the patience born of charity, so that clergy and faithful can appropriate and gradually accept the changes that are necessary, to understand the reasons behind them, and to promote them personally. Nor must it be forgotten that, after the painful divisions of the past, the Catholic Church has had experiences of her own and clarified certain aspects of the faith in a specific way.

The Holy Spirit asks that we revisit all of this and that new forms – or perhaps ancient forms

rediscovered – may be adopted, but in the certainty that nothing of the deposit of faith will be lost or even obscured. This twofold effort of openness and fidelity has been the inspiration of my papal ministry. I am certain that it is also at the basis of your desires and aspirations.

4. During your *ad Limina* Visit in 1999, I offered certain specific proposals, including some of a pastoral nature, which I do not think need to be repeated here: these proposals still appear valid to me, and they can serve as a point of reference in your service of the faithful entrusted to your care. What I wish to emphasize today is that the Pope is here, with you, in this very land, in order to demonstrate a solidarity which is also physical, a genuine and affectionate esteem, and an unflinching remembrance in his thoughts and prayers.

I would like to be able to meet individually the beloved sons and daughters of the Catholic Church. My pilgrimage in the footsteps of Saint Paul has enabled me to meet living communities. I rejoice to be able to pray with them and to celebrate our communion in the Risen One and with one another. With you I wish to embrace in particular the priests and deacons who preserve, nourish and strengthen in faith and charity the communities entrusted to their care, together with the men and women Religious, whose presence is essential for the Catholic Church in Greece. May we never forget that these lands of ancient witness are sanctuaries of faith, and that we are called to draw from the treasures of the past the spiritual strength to carry out our ministry in the world today.

It is my hope that young people will face with confidence the journey of the new Greece, ever more fully integrated into Europe, ever more cosmopolitan, and therefore necessarily open to dialogue and to the recognition of the rights of all, yet at the same time exposed to the dangers of an unbridled secularization, which tends to drain the lifeblood that gives refreshment to the soul and hope to the human person. I wish the elderly and the sick, who are particularly close to the Lord's Cross, to feel the fraternal concern of the whole Church.

5. Dearly beloved Brothers, in the variety of your pastoral and liturgical ministry, you make present the diversity in unity typical of the Catholic Church. And the whole Catholic Church expresses to you today, in my person, her solidarity and love. Never feel alone, never lose hope: the Lord certainly holds unexpected consolations in store for those who trust in him. Work together in harmony, with gentleness and charity, courageous in the truth.

Know that the Pope remembers you and your work daily in his prayer, which from this day forward is strengthened by the joy of this meeting.

With affection I impart to you and to your communities my Apostolic Blessing.

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