



The Holy See

ECUMENICAL MEETING AT THE GREEK-ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 5 May 2001

Your Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius

Your Holiness Patriarch Zakka

*Venerable Bishops and Representatives of the Churches
and Ecclesial Communities of Syria,*

1. "When he came and saw the grace of God, [Barnabas] was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (*Acts 11:23-24*). Such was the joy and amazement of the Apostle in Antioch, where he had been sent by the Church in Jerusalem. Today I share his joy and make my own his exhortation. This visit to Syria takes me back to the dawn of the Church, to the time of the Apostles and the first Christian communities. It concludes my pilgrimage in the Biblical lands which I began in the year 2000. It also provides the happy occasion to meet with you in Syria and to return the visits which you have made to the Church of Rome and to its Bishop.

In this Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, I greet most especially Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim. Your Beatitude, I thank you whole-heartedly for your fraternal welcome today and for this Liturgy of the Word which it is our joy to celebrate together. Your Beatitude's interest and active involvement in the cause of Christian unity is known to all. It is something which I deeply appreciate and for which I thank God. Beloved Brother, I invoke the Lord's blessing upon your ministry and upon the Church of which you are the Pastor.

2. Built upon the foundation of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Church in Syria was quick to show an extraordinary flourishing of the Christian life. With good reason, the Council of Nicea recognized the primacy of Antioch over the metropolitan Churches of the region. As we think

particularly of Ignatius of Antioch, John Damascene and Simeon Stylites, how can we fail to recall as well the many confessors and martyrs of this region who adorned the beginnings of the Church by their fidelity to God's grace, even to the point of shedding their blood! How many monks and nuns withdrew into solitude, filling the deserts and mountains of Syria with hermitages and monasteries, in order to live lives of prayer and sacrifice, praising God so that in this way they might, in the words of Theodore of Edessa, "attain to the state of beauty" (*Discourse on Contemplation*). How many Syrian theologians helped to establish the theological schools of Antioch and Edessa! How many missionaries left Syria to go to the East, following the great missionary movement to Mesopotamia and further still to Kerala in India. Is not the Church of the West greatly indebted to the many pastors of Syrian origin who assumed the ministry of Bishop there, even the ministry of the Bishop of Rome? May God be praised for the witness and the influence of the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch!

Unfortunately, the unity of the illustrious Patriarchate of Antioch was lost through the centuries, and we must hope that the different Patriarchates existing now will once again find the path that will lead to full communion.

3. Between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Greek Catholic Patriarchate a process of ecumenical rapprochement has begun, and for this I thank the Lord with all my heart. It is prompted by the desire of the Christian people, by dialogue between theologians, and by fraternal cooperation between the Bishops and pastors of the two Patriarchates. I urge all those involved to pursue this quest for unity with courage and prudence, with respect but without confusion, drawing from the Divine Liturgy the sacramental strength and theological stimulus which are needed in the process. The quest for unity between the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Patriarchates of Antioch is clearly part of the wider process of reunion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. That is why I reaffirm my sincere desire that *the Mixed International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches* may soon be able to continue its work in the most appropriate way. The more this dialogue touches upon central questions, the more demanding it will become. This is no cause for surprise, and still less an excuse for lethargy. Who can stop us from placing our hope in the Spirit of God who does not cease to kindle holiness among the disciples of Christ's Church? I wish to thank most sincerely Patriarch Ignatius IV for the positive and effective contribution which the Patriarchate of Antioch and its representatives have constantly made to this process of theological dialogue. I am likewise grateful to Patriarch Gregory III and his predecessor Patriarch Maximos V for their unfailing contribution to the climate of fraternity and understanding, which is so necessary if the dialogue is to develop well.

4. In the same spirit of gratitude and hope, I would like to mention the deepening of fraternal relations between the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate and the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate. I greet especially Patriarch Zakka I, in whom the Catholic Church has always found a faithful promoter of Christian unity, ever since the Second Vatican Council which he attended as an observer. Your

Holiness, since your visit to Rome in 1984 it has been our joy to be able to make real progress on the road to unity, having confessed together Jesus Christ as our Lord, true God and true man. On the same occasion, we were able to authorize a plan of pastoral cooperation, notably at the level of sacramental life, in cases where the faithful have no access to a priest of their own Church. With the Syro-Malankar Church in India, which looks to your Patriarchal authority, the Catholic Church has equally good relations. I beg the Lord that the day will soon come when there will be an end to the final obstacles to full communion between the Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church.

5. In the course of time, and especially at the start of the twentieth century, Armenian, Chaldean and Assyrian communities, forced by violence to leave their homelands, came to the Christian quarters of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and other parts of this region. In Syria they found refuge, a place of security and peace. I give thanks to the Lord God for the hospitality offered by the Syrian people on a number of occasions to Christians of the region suffering persecution. Transcending all ecclesial divisions, such hospitality became the pledge of an ecumenical rapprochement. In the person of the persecuted brother the Christ of Good Friday was recognized and welcomed.

Since then, by conviction and by necessity, the Christians of Syria have learnt the art of sharing hospitality and friendship. Ecumenical contact at the level of families, children, young people and the leaders of society holds the promise of the future of evangelization in this country. It will be up to you, Bishops and pastors, to accompany this happy process of rapprochement and communication with wisdom and courage. The cooperation of all Christians, whether at the level of social and cultural life, in promoting peace, or in the education of the young, is a clear indication of the degree of communion already existing between them (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 75).

By virtue of the apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist unite in very close bonds our particular Churches who call each other, and love to call each other, Sister Churches (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14). "For centuries, we lived this life of 'Sister Churches', and together held Ecumenical Councils which guarded the deposit of faith against all corruption. And now, after a long period of division and mutual misunderstanding, the Lord is enabling us to discover ourselves as 'Sister Churches' once more, in spite of the obstacles which were once raised between us. If today, on the threshold of the third millennium, we are seeking the re-establishment of full communion, it is for the accomplishment of this reality that we must work and it is to this reality that we must refer" (*Ut Unum Sint*, 57).

6. Just a few weeks ago, we had the great joy of being able to celebrate the Feast of Easter on the same day. For me, this happy coincidence in the year 2001 was a pressing invitation of Providence, addressed to all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, to return without delay to a common celebration of the Paschal Feast, the Feasts of all feasts, the central mystery of our faith. Our people rightly insist that the celebration of Easter should no longer be a cause of division. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has shown herself favourable to every

effort to re-establish the common celebration of the Paschal Feast. Yet this process seems more difficult than anticipated. Is it perhaps necessary to envisage intermediate or gradual stages, in order to prepare minds and hearts for the implementation of an arrangement acceptable to all Christians of East and West? It falls to the Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East to assume together this responsibility with regard to their communities in the various countries of the region. From the Middle East there could be born and go forth a new energy and inspiration on this point.

7. A few weeks from now, we shall celebrate together the Feast of Pentecost. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit "will stir all the disciples of Christ to desire and to work for the peaceful union of all in one flock under one Shepherd, in the way decreed by Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, 15). Let us implore the Spirit to make us grow in holiness, for there is no lasting unity which is not based upon humility, conversion and pardon, and therefore upon sacrifice.

When the Spirit came upon the Apostles at Pentecost, the Virgin Mary was there in their midst. May her example and her protection help us to listen together to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches, even today, and to welcome his words with confidence and joy!