



The Holy See

MEETING WITH PATRIARCHS AND BISHOPS OF SYRIA
AT THE GREEK-CATHOLIC PATRIARCHATE OF DAMASCUS

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 6 May 2001

*Your Holiness,
Your Beatitudes,
Your Eminences,
My Brother Bishops,*

1. My pilgrimage in the footsteps of Saint Paul, dear Brothers, brings me today to Syria, to Damascus, and it is a great joy for me to be among you. I thank you for your warm welcome and in particular I express my gratitude to His Beatitude Patriarch Gregory III for his kind words of welcome to his Patriarchal residence.

Every pilgrimage is an opportunity to return to the sources of our faith, to strengthen our love of Christ and the Church, and to enable us to set out again on the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us. Here, in this land which God has blessed over the centuries by the presence of eminent witnesses who, by their lives and writings, have figured in the tradition of the entire Church, sacred history can be read like an open book in the countryside, at the Biblical sites and at the Christian shrines. But this pilgrimage is also clearly meant to be a meeting with the men and women who live in this land, in particular with our brothers and sisters who share our faith in the one Lord, who himself lived in the Middle East and who revealed to us the face of the Father of all tenderness. Was it not in this land, in the city of Antioch which is one of the beacons of the East, that the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were first called "Christians" (*Acts 11:26*), that is, people who confess that Christ is the Saviour, the Messiah, and who are members of his Body? It is therefore with deep joy that I greet you with the words of Jesus after his Resurrection: "Peace be with you!" (*Jn 20:19*).

2. The Catholic Church in Syria exists in a situation of great diversity, with the simultaneous presence of several Churches *sui iuris* each representing one of the many great and rich traditions of the Christian East. Your communities and your faithful have been patiently opening up to one another, progressively overcoming a long-standing isolation due to the vicissitudes of history. While remaining firmly rooted in your own ecclesial heritage and even reasserting it, you have learned to combine efforts. The Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy in Syria, and more broadly the Council of Patriarchs of the Middle East, symbolize this indispensable coordination. I invite you, despite the difficulties which may arise, to continue this coordination, to extend it and intensify it, in order to provide a better pastoral service to the faithful entrusted to you and a real sharing of the spiritual treasures of your respective traditions. If it is true that communion is in fact first a gift of God to his Church, it is equally certain that on our part there should be a corresponding discernment, respect, mutual esteem and patience. These different elements ensure that diversity contributes to unity. They bear witness to the catholicity of the Church, and they especially glorify the name of God and serve the proclamation of the Gospel by making the word of brothers united in faith and love ever more credible.

This communion at the various levels of your different Churches takes nothing away from the episcopal communion which exists within your respective Synods. Rather, it is an expression which must constantly be put into practice and given fresh impetus.

3. Considering the very concrete circumstances of your communities, I invite you to look again to Christ and to base your entire lives on him. By returning to him, by drawing every day from the living fountain of his word and Sacraments, the Church finds the strength which gives her life and supports her in her witness. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (2:20). His example helps us to understand ever more fully the mystery of Christ's presence in our lives: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt* 28:20). Christ is with us; his is a consoling presence which gives us peace and reassurance on our journey. It is a demanding presence, which obliges us not to keep for ourselves the treasure we have received: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (*1 Cor* 9:16).

Brothers, we shall find in him the path that leads to a strong spiritual life, a path of holiness, to be offered to all the baptized of our communities. Faithful in joyfully celebrating the Eucharist which constitutes and gathers the Christian community ever since the Lord's Resurrection, the faithful find in it nourishment for their faith. As they gather round the table of the word and the Bread of Life, they overcome the distractions of everyday life and find strength. They become more aware of their identity as God's children, and they consolidate this identity in order to be true witnesses in the Church and in the world. By being rooted in prayer, and through attentive listening to the word and love of the liturgy, we become more receptive to the call of the Holy Spirit, who tells us to go forth, proclaim courageously the Gospel of peace (*Eph* 6:15) and bear witness to it in the family, culture and society. Saint Paul, overcome by the grace of Christ's call, bore greater witness than anyone else to the newness of Christianity and taught it thoroughly. He let himself be led into an

entirely new way of living, completely dedicated to Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel.

4. I wish to express once again my admiration for the harmony which exists among the Christians of Syria. The presence of His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas and His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV is an eloquent sign of this. Your Beatitude, I was touched by your recent declarations on the depth of fraternal communion that exists among the Christian Churches in this country, a communion which you intend to strengthen further. I take this opportunity to extend fraternal greetings to His Beatitude Cardinal Ignace Moussa Daoud, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, whom I have called to Rome as a worthy representative of the entire Catholic East. I also greet His Beatitude the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignace Pierre VIII, as well as the other Patriarchs, Cardinals and Bishops present. The true understanding which exists among the Patriarchs, Bishops and dignitaries of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities is a beautiful testimony to Christian love in a country where the majority of the citizens are Muslim in religion.

We remember that it was in fact in Syria that the Church of Christ discovered her truly catholic character and took on her universal mission. The Apostles Peter and Paul, each according to the grace received, worked here to gather together the one family of Christ, welcoming believers coming from different cultures and nations. It is with satisfaction that we witness the development of cooperation between the Churches and Ecclesial Communities. This cannot fail to contribute to reconciliation and the pursuit of unity. May this coming together help you to bear ever more credible witness to Jesus Christ, who died and rose in order "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Jn 11:52*). May this cooperation help to make the Church of Christ more beautiful and authentic in the eyes of the followers of other religions.

For their part, the faithful deeply appreciate the opportunities to take part in common ecumenical prayer. This openness should be further strengthened and initiatives promoted in which the Churches can cooperate in all areas.

Divisions among Christians hinder the spread the Gospel. What is more "ecumenism is not only an internal question of the Christian Communities. It is a matter of the love which God has in Jesus Christ for all humanity; to stand in the way of this love is an offence against him and against his plan to gather all people in Christ" (*Ut Unum Sint*, 99). Having lived so close to Muslim believers over the centuries, the Christians of Syria immediately understand the close connection between the unity of the community and the witness which derives from fraternal communion.

In this area too, I encourage you to engage in genuine dialogue in daily life, a dialogue marked by mutual respect and hospitality. Did not Abraham and Sara, according to a poetic tradition recounted by Saint Ephraem the Syrian, receive the gift of the child of the promise because they had eaten what was left over from the hospitable meal which they had offered to the three Angels?

5. Pastors are certainly not short of preoccupations. The most insistent, without a doubt, is the

emigration of so many Christian families, and many young people. They all hope to find a more comfortable future elsewhere. I am sure that each of you has often asked the anguished question: What can I do? You can do many things. First, you can make your contribution to making your country economically prosperous. You can help to make it a country in which every citizen has the same rights and duties before the law, where everyone is concerned with living in fairness and peace both inside its borders and with all the neighbouring countries. Contributing to increasing confidence in your country's future is one of the greatest services the Church can make to society. Another practical step is to encourage Christians to promote solidarity by sharing your people's difficulties and sufferings. Your influence on young people is great: speak to their generous hearts by explaining, correcting and encouraging, and especially by showing through your own personal example that the Christian values of mind and heart are better able to make people happy than any material possessions. Give them a human and Christian ideal, and help them to discover that, as the author of the Letter to Diognetus said, "the place that God has assigned to them is so noble that they are not allowed to desert it" (VI, 10).

In this spirit, interreligious dialogue and mutual cooperation, particularly between Christians and Muslims, is an important contribution to peace and understanding between people and communities. It should also lead to common witness to promote full recognition of the dignity of the human person.

6. Dearly beloved brothers in Christ! I cannot end these words of fraternal comfort in any better way than by making my own the recommendations of Saint Paul to the Elders of the Church of Ephesus: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood" (*Acts* 20:28).

May the same Lord give you the strength to do this, through the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and son of man, to the glory of God our Father! I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos* to whom the liturgy never ceases to sing, to her who is "our sister filled with prudence ... the treasure of our happiness" (Saint Ephraem the Syrian, *Opera*, II, 318) and who from the Upper Room watches over the Church with maternal care. Amen.