



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

***HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II AND
HOMILY OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW I***

Tuesday, 29 June 2004

Introduction of the Holy Father to the Patriarch's Reflections:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel passage we have just heard in Latin and in Greek invites us to think more deeply about the importance of today's Feast of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul.

I would now like to invite you to listen to the Reflections that the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew I, will offer to us, mindful that both our voices speak of unity.

Homily of His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

Your Holiness,

With sentiments of both joy and sorrow we come to you on this important feast day of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, to express our love for you, Your Holiness, and for all the members of our Sister Church of Rome, which is celebrating her patronal feast day. We rejoice with you who are rejoicing, but we regret that what would have completed the joy of both of us is lacking, that is, the re-establishment of full communion between our Churches.

Today we are focusing our attention on the joyous 40th anniversary of the meeting in Jerusalem in 1964 of our Predecessors of venerable memory. It was an encounter that put an end to the process of our mutual separation and was the start of a new journey to draw our Churches closer together.

During this new journey, many steps have been taken towards a reciprocal *rapprochement*.

Dialogues have been initiated, meetings have taken place and letters have been exchanged; love has grown, but we have not yet attained the desired goal. In 40 years, it has not been possible to eliminate the differences that have accumulated in more than 900 years.

Hope, which proceeds with faith and with love that is ever hopeful, is one of God's important gifts. We too hope that what it has not been possible to achieve up to now will be attained in the future, and we hope in a near future. Perhaps it will be a distant future, but our expectation and our love are not constrained by temporal limits. Our presence here today very clearly expresses our sincere desire to remove all the ecclesial obstacles that are not dogmatic or essential, so that we may concentrate our concern on the study of the essential differences and dogmatic truths that have divided our Churches until now, as well as on the way of living the Christian truth of the united Church.

Far from wishing to associate our name with goals that only the Holy Spirit can obtain, we do not attribute to our actions a greater efficacy than that which God will deign to grant them. Yet, demonstrating all our longing, we work tirelessly with a view to what we pray for every day: "the union of one and all". Since we know from the priestly prayer of Our Lord Jesus Christ how necessary our unity is, so that the world may believe that he comes from God, we collaborate with you in order to reach this unity, and we urge everyone to pray fervently for the success of our joint efforts.

Dear Christians,

The unity of the Churches of which we are speaking and for which we ask your prayers is not a worldly union like that of the unions of States, or of corporations of persons and structures, through which a higher level of organizational union is created. This is very easy to achieve, and all the Churches have already set up various organizations in which context they collaborate in various sectors.

The unity to which the Churches aspire is a spiritual quest whose aim is to live spiritual communion with Our Lord Jesus Christ in person. It will be possible when we have all acquired "the mind of Christ", "the love of Christ", "the faith of Christ", "the humility of Christ", "Christ's disposition to self-sacrifice" and, in general, when we live everything that pertains to Christ as he lived it, or at least when we sincerely desire to live as he wants us to.

In this very delicate spiritual endeavour, difficulties emerge that are due to the fact that most of us human beings all too often propose our own positions, opinions and assessments as if they were expressions of Christ's thought, of Christ's love and generally speaking, of Christ's spirit. Since these personal judgments and evaluations, and at times even personal experiences, neither

coincide with one another, nor with the lived experience of Christ, disagreements arise. By means of inter-ecclesial dialogues, we seek in good faith to understand one another with a superabundance of love; just as we also seek to ascertain in what way and why our experiences expressed with different dogmatic formulas differ. We are not making abstract discourses on theoretical matters on which our position has no consequences for life. We are seeking among a multitude of lived experiences that are expressed in different ways, what correctly, or at least as fully as possible, expresses the spirit of Christ.

Remember the behaviour of the two disciples of Christ when the inhabitants of a certain region would not receive him. The disciples were indignant and asked Christ if he wanted them to bid God to send down fire from heaven to consume those who refused to welcome him. The Lord's answer was the same as the answer given to so many Christians down the centuries: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them" (cf. Lk 9: 55-56). In the course of the centuries, certain members of the faithful have asked Christ time and again to approve deeds that did not correspond with his mind. Rather, they attributed to Christ their own opinions and teachings, claiming that one or other was interpreting the spirit of Christ. From this stemmed disagreement among the faithful who, as a result, split into groups, assuming the form of the different Churches that we have today.

Today our common efforts seek to live the spirit of Christ in a way he would have approved had he been asked. Such a lived experience implies purity of heart, disinterested aims, holy humility, in short, holiness of life. Differences that have accumulated and age-old concerns prevent us from seeing clearly and delay our common understanding of the spirit of Christ that will be followed by the ardently longed for unity of the Churches, namely, their union in Christ, in his same spirit, in his very Body and in his very Blood. Of course, from the spiritual point of view, the acceptance and realization of an external union makes no sense so long as diversity about his spirit continues.

Thus, it is understandable that it is not a levelling out of the traditions, customs and habits of all the faithful that is sought; all that is being sought is to live in common the person of the one, unique and unchanging Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, communion in the lived experience of the Incarnation of the Logos of God and of the coming down of the Holy Spirit in the Church, as well as of the common experience of the event of the Church as the Body of Christ recapitulating all things in himself. This sought spiritual experience constitutes the supreme experience of human beings, constitutes their union with Christ and, consequently, dialogue on this point is the most important of all. We have therefore asked and are asking Christians to pray fervently to Our Lord Jesus Christ that he will direct their hearts to reaching the goal of this aspiration, so that once it is obtained, please God, we will be able to celebrate every ecclesial celebration in full spiritual communion and joy. Amen.

Homily of the Holy Father:

1. "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Mt 16: 16). When the Lord questions him, Peter, also speaking on behalf of the other Apostles, makes his profession of faith.

In it is affirmed the solid foundation of our journey towards full communion. Indeed, if we want unity among the disciples of Christ, we must *start out afresh from Christ*. Like Peter, we too are asked to profess that he is the cornerstone, the Head of the Church. In my Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* I wrote: "To believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity" (n. 9).

2. *Ut unum sint!* It is from these words that our commitment to communion stems, in response to Christ's ardent desire. It is not a matter of a vague neighbourly relationship but of the *indissoluble bond* of theological faith, which is why our future is not one of division but of communion.

Today we profoundly regret what in the evolution of history broke our bond of unity in Christ. In this perspective, our meeting today is not only a courteous gesture, but a response to the Lord's commandment. Christ is the Head of the Church, and we want to continue together to do all that is humanly possible to remedy what still divides us and prevents us from communicating in the same Body and Blood of the Lord.

3. With these sentiments, I would like to express my warm gratitude to you for coming here, Your Holiness, and for the reflections that you have desired to offer us. I am also delighted to celebrate together with you the day on which we commemorate Sts Peter and Paul; this year it coincides with the 40th anniversary of that blessed meeting in Jerusalem of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I, on 5 and 6 January 1964.

Your Holiness, I would like to thank you with all my heart for having accepted my invitation to make visible with our meeting the spirit that inspired those two outstanding pilgrims who directed their steps towards each other and chose to embrace for the first time in the very place where the Church was born.

4. That meeting cannot be merely a memory. *It is a challenge for us!* It shows us the road to reciprocal rediscovery and reconciliation. The journey will certainly be far from easy, nor is it free from obstacles. In the moving gesture of our Predecessors in Jerusalem we can find the strength to overcome every misunderstanding and difficulty, in order to devote ourselves without interruption to this commitment to unity.

The Church of Rome has moved with firm determination and great sincerity on the path to full reconciliation, by means of initiatives that have proven on each occasion to be possible and appropriate. *Today I would like to express the hope that all Christians, each in his or her own capacity, may redouble their efforts* to hasten the day when the Lord's desire "*that they may be*

one" (Jn 17: 11, 21) is completely fulfilled. May our conscience never reprove us for having omitted something, for having wasted opportunities or for not having tried every possible approach!

5. We know very well that the unity we seek *is first and foremost a gift of God*. However, we are aware that hastening the time of its total achievement also depends on us, on our prayers and on our conversion to Christ.

Your Holiness, as far as I am concerned, I am eager to confess that I have always let myself be guided by *the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as by a trustworthy compass*. The Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, published just a few days before Your Holiness' memorable visit to Rome in 1995, reasserted exactly what the Council had declared in the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the 40th anniversary of whose promulgation occurs this year. I reassert today what I have had several opportunities to emphasize in solemn circumstances, namely, that the commitment assumed by the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council *is irrevocable. It cannot be renounced!*

6. The *rite of the conferral of the Palliums on the new Metropolitans* helps to complete the solemnity and joy of today's celebration and to enrich its spiritual and ecclesial content.

Venerable Brothers, the *Pallium* that you will receive today in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch, our Brother in Christ, is a sign of the communion that binds you in a special way to the apostolic witness of Peter and Paul. It links you to the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of Peter, called to carry out a special ecclesial service for the entire College of Bishops. I thank you for being here and offer you my best wishes for the ministry you carry out for the Metropolitan Churches present in the various nations. I willingly accompany you with affection and prayer.

7. *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"*. How often these words that constitute Peter's profession of faith recur in my daily prayers! The precious icon that Patriarch Athenagoras I gave to Pope Paul VI on 5 January 1964, shows *the two Holy Apostles, Peter the "Corypheus" and Andrew the "Protokletos"*, embracing in an eloquent language of love, beneath Christ in glory. Andrew was the first to follow the Lord and Peter was called to strengthen his brethren in the faith.

Their embrace under Christ's gaze is an invitation to continue on the journey we have set out on, towards that goal of unity which we both want to reach.

Let no difficulty hinder us. Let us rather journey on with hope, sustained by the intercession of the Apostles and the maternal protection of Mary, Mother of Christ, Son of the living God.

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