



The Holy See

Your Eminences,

Dear Brother Bishops,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. I extend a warm welcome to the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. This year you are holding your deliberations at a particularly significant moment in the history of this Council. You are celebrating a double anniversary: the Twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration " *Nostra Aetate* ", and also of the creation of what was then known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians. I rejoice with you and praise the Holy Spirit who has guided the Church in an ever deeper commitment to dialogue and cooperation with all those who worship God. At the same time, this is not only an occasion to remember your own history and to reflect on all that has taken place in the world in the past quarter-century, but even more importantly, to look afresh to the future. For this is your first Plenary Assembly since the publication of " *Pastor Bonus* ", through which your Council not only received its new name, but also a renewed mandate.

Allow me to call to your attention the relevant passage in that document: " The Council's concern is to see that dialogue with the followers of other religions is conducted in a suitable way and to foster various forms of contact with them. It encourages appropriate studies and meetings with the purpose of building mutual knowledge and esteem and, by working together with others, of promoting human dignity and spiritual and moral values. It is concerned with the formation of those who are engaged in this type of dialogue ".

2. A glance at the world around us shows that your task has lost none of its importance with the passing years, but is even more important than before. Questions involving relations among believers of different religions arise everywhere in the world today. In our age people are far more mobile than ever before. They leave the villages and cities of their birth and travel to new places, for reasons of education and work or, in many cases, to seek freedom from fear, hunger or repression. Peoples who previously would never have met or known one another must now discover how to build a harmonious and peaceful life in societies that are racially, ethnically, linguistically and religiously pluralistic in their composition. The challenge that not only Christians but people of all religions face is how to learn to understand other religious beliefs and practices, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to build esteem and respect among those whose ways and values are different.

The pervasiveness of the communications media is another factor which calls for greater attention

to dialogue. A conflict in one part of the world has immediate repercussions elsewhere. Christians and others are called upon to contribute towards just and peaceful solutions. Thus, the need for accurate information and deep studies about other religions form a part of the task of the Christian in today's world.

Furthermore, when we reflect on the Church's mission to make God's name and his will known, loved and lived throughout the world, a world in which God is too often denied, ignored, or made to seem irrelevant, we Christians find that we are not alone in this task. There are other believers who, in their own ways and according to their own convictions, believe in God and pray to him, look to him for guidance and solace, and try to live according to his will and build society according to the values which he teaches. Thus, we find much which draws us to approach believers of other religions as partners in discussion and collaboration.

3. Reflecting on the mandate given your Council twenty-five years ago and renewed recently in "Pastor Bonus", we may mention the priority enunciated in that document, namely: "to promote studies and encounters". The central work of your current plenary session is the study of the relationship between dialogue with people of other religions and the commission given by Christ himself to proclaim the Good News of the Father's saving deeds. Through the publication of such studies, in collaboration with other departments of the Holy See and with Episcopal Conferences throughout the world, and also enriched by the contributions of many theologians and experts, you offer a valuable service to the whole Church.

Much careful theological investigation still has to be done regarding the relation between the Church and other religions. The question of how God accomplishes the salvation of all those who call upon him through the unique mediation of Christ is one which demands the continued attention of the Church: likewise the work of the Spirit of Christ in the members of other religions. There are also theological and pastoral questions regarding prayer and worship among the followers of various religions. I encourage you in your own reflection on these themes and in your efforts to foster further study on them in institutes of theological formation.

4. This Council however is not only concerned with theological research. It is to be the arm of the Church, and as such, of Christ, who reaches out personally and lovingly to all religious believers. Dialogue is not so much an idea to be studied as a way of living in positive relationship with others. Hence, it is important that you come to know and understand, through personal contact and experience, the religious convictions of others. Such mutual encounters can indeed enrich all those who participate. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth and the life', in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself".

I encourage you to pursue those meetings with other believers in which you discuss and explore together the issues which demand the attention of all. The transmission of human and spiritual values to new generations; human rights and responsibilities; ways to support the struggle of the poor, the hungry, the sick and the homeless for a dignified life; preservation of God's creation, his

original gift to humanity; the search for peace; the call to justice: these are but some of the issues which must be solved through encounter and cooperation with others.

Finally, one cannot fail to mention the ecumenical dimension of your Council's work. It is true that relations with people of other religions can help to bring Christians together. I am aware of your collaboration with the Sub-Unit for Dialogue of the World Council of Churches and am happy to salute its representative in your midst.

5. I ask God to grant you steadfast patience in your endeavours. In this Paschal season, we remember the lessons of Christ's Resurrection from the dead: we work in faith, we live in hope, we remain in his love. Results may not be immediate. Do not be satisfied with easy solutions. Your patient but steady efforts must reflect the rhythm of the Divine Gardener, who makes his sun to shine, gives rain in season, and, at their own proper time, produces the fruits of his work.

May God bless you all!

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