



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA MEETING WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES

OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL

//Columbia

Friday, 11 September 1987

Dear Friends, dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I praise "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens!" (*Eph. 1, 3*). In particular I give thanks to him today for granting me the opportunity of this meeting with you, representatives of Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the United States. I believe that our meeting is important not only in itself, for the reflections and Christian experience that we share with each other, but also as an outspoken testimony on our part that *we are definitively committed* to treading the path which the Holy Spirit has opened before us the path of repentance for our divisions and of working and praying for that perfect unity which the Lord himself wishes for his followers.

I am grateful to you for your presence, and for the statement with which you have wished to open this meeting. And in the wider perspective, I wish *to thank you for the ecumenical contacts and collaboration* in which you so willingly engage here in the United States with the National Conference of Bishops and the Catholic dioceses. Indeed I am grateful for all the earnest ecumenical activity carried out in this country.

2. In recent decades, especially under the impulse of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has placed renewed emphasis on the term "communion" (*koinonia*) as an especially appropriate way of describing the profound divine and human reality of the Church, the Body of Christ, *the unity of the baptized in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*. Our communion is primarily with the Triune God, but it intimately unites us among ourselves.

This communion is increased in us as we share in the gifts with which Christ has endowed his Church. Some of these are eminently spiritual in nature, such as the life of grace; faith, hope and charity; and other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit (Cfr. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3). In addition, there are exterior gifts, which include the word of God in Sacred Scripture, Baptism and the other

Sacraments, as well as the ministries and charisms which serve ecclesial life.

Although we are not yet in agreement as to how each of our Churches and Ecclesial Communities relates to the fullness of life and mission which flow from God's redemptive act through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is no small achievement of the ecumenical movement that after centuries of mistrust, we humbly and sincerely *recognize in each other's communities the presence and fruitfulness of Christ's gifts at work*. For this divine action in the lives of all of us we offer thanks to God.

3. I wish to note in particular the reference made in the opening statement to the sense of spiritual yearning among Christians in this country, a yearning which in part manifests itself in an increasing interest in the life of prayer, in spirituality and in ecumenism. In a word, it is *a yearning for deeper insights into our Christian identity* and, consequently, *for a renewal of our ecclesial life*. This important phenomenon can be found to a greater or lesser degree in all Ecclesial Communities, not only in the United States but throughout the world. Surely it is a sign of the action of the Holy Spirit in the People of God. As leaders in our respective Communion, we have the awesome task and privilege of collaborating to ensure that this grace will not be received by us in vain (Cfr. 2 Cor. 6, 1).

From the Catholic perspective, a primary factor relating to ecumenical involvement with other Christian bodies has been, from the outset, *the purification and renewal of Catholic life itself*. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism indicated: "In ecumenical work, Catholics must assuredly be concerned for their separated brethren, praying for them, keeping them informed about the Church, making the first approaches towards them. But their primary duty is to make an honest and careful appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and achieved in the Catholic household itself" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4).

It is not difficult to see how the internal renewal and purification of the ecclesial life of all of us is essential to any progress we may make towards unity, *for Christ's call to unity is at the same time a call to holiness and a call to greater love*. It is a call for us to render our witness more authentic. Only by becoming more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ can we hope to travel the path of unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the strength of his grace. Only by fully accepting Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives can we empty ourselves of any negative thinking about each other.

It is important for all of us to realize how much conversion of heart depends on prayer, and how much prayer contributes to unity. The Second Vatican Council spoke about a *"spiritual ecumenism"* which it described as "the soul of the whole ecumenical movement", and which it identified as "a change of heart and holiness of life, coupled with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians" (*Ibid.* 8)

4. In speaking of the priority of internal renewal and prayer in the ecumenical task, I do not intend in any way to minimize other important factors such as our *common Christian service* to those in need or our *common study* carried out in theological dialogues.

In the case of *dialogues*, the results reached in them thus far merit the most serious consideration and gratitude from all of us. They tend to increase mutual understanding in ways that have already greatly changed our relationship for the better. Our meeting here today is itself a testimony of this.

Further, these dialogues continue to uncover the deep sources of our common faith and the extent to which that faith, even while we remain apart, is truly shared by our Churches and Ecclesial Communities. In doing so, such exchanges help us *to face our remaining differences in a more intelligible context*. It is the task of dialogue to face these differences and to work towards the time when it will be possible for Christians to confess together the one faith and to celebrate together the one Eucharist.

On the international level, the response of the Catholic Church to the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which has now been sent to the Commission on Faith and Order, is an effort to contribute to this process directed towards confessing the one faith together. I am convinced that the Lord will give us the light and strength to pursue this course together for the glory of his name.

Indispensable as the work of dialogue is, and even though the act of dialogue itself begins to improve relations between us, our ultimate purpose goes beyond the statements and reports of ecumenical commissions. Those statements must be properly evaluated by our respective Churches and Ecclesial Communities in order to determine the level of ecclesial communion that actually exists, so that it may be *properly reflected in the lifestream of ecclesial life*. We must greatly rejoice in discovering the extent to which we are already united, while we respectfully and serenely acknowledge the factors that still divide us.

5. In regard to *our common service and collaboration*, the statement you have presented puts before all of us important questions. How may we collaborate to promote justice, exercise compassion, search for peace, bring the witness of the Gospel to unbelievers, and manifest our *koinonia*? These issues challenge all of us. Together we must seek to discover the concrete ways in which we may respond in common.

You rightly designate these questions as "points of conversation" among us. As an initial approach, an introduction to our conversation, I would like to make the following brief remarks. First, we are all convinced that the deepest lessons a Christian can learn in this life are learned at the foot of the Cross. When our Churches and Ecclesial Communities address one another and the whole human family, we must do so *from the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ*, the well-spring of wisdom and the sources of our witness. From the Cross we learn the qualities required in our

ecumenical search for unity. "For it is from newness of attitudes (Cfr. *Eph.* 4, 23), from self-denial and unstinted love that yearnings for unity take their rise and grow towards maturity" .'Ecumenism is not a matter of power and human "tactics". It is *a service of truth in love and humble submission to God*.

Similarly, our collaboration in the important areas you list is not a matter of measured calculation. We do not collaborate simply for the sake of efficiency, or for reasons of mere strategy, or for advantage and influence. *We collaborate for the sake of Christ*, who urges us to be one in him in the Father, so that the world may believe (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7).

6. The ecumenical community has now welcomed me twice to this country. I in turn have had the joyful opportunity of welcoming many of you to Rome, the City of the Apostles and Martyrs, Peter and Paul. I believe that these and other cordial meetings have the effect, with God's grace, of breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding that have plagued us for centuries. How often we read in the Scriptures of encounters being occasions of grace, either encounters of the Lord with his disciples, or encounters of the disciples, with others to whom they are bringing the word. I believe (Cfr. *Io.* 17, 21), that in meetings such as these, where two or three or more of are gathered in his name, *Christ is here in our midst*, asking from each of us a greater depth of commitment to service in his name and therefore, a greater degree of unity among ourselves.

I join my prayer to yours that the Christian communities of the United States may continue *to meet each other, to work with each other, and to pray with each other*, so that the Father will be glorified in the fulfilment of Christ's prayer:

"That their unity may be complete.

So shall the world know that you sent me,
and that you loved them as you loved me" (*Io.* 17, 23).

So be it.

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