



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER

OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNION OF UZHOROD

Dear Brothers and Sisters,¹ "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers" (Rom 1:8-9). The joyful occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Union of Uzhorod constitutes an important moment in the history of a Church which by that act re-established full union with the Bishop of Rome. It is therefore very understandable that I too join in the thanksgiving to God of all those who rejoice in the memory of that significant event. The facts themselves are well known: on 24 April 1646, in the church of the Castle of Uzhorod, 63 Byzantine-rite priests of the Eparchy of Mukacheve, led by the Basilian monk Parthenius Petrovyc and in the presence of the Bishop of Eger, George Jakusics, were received into full communion with the See of Peter. It was not an isolated gesture. It was part of that process of reunification between the Churches which had had its culminating moment in the Council of Florence (1439), when the decrees re-establishing full communion between the Churches of the East and the Church of Rome were signed. It was in fact the celebrated Metropolitan Isidore of Kyiv, after his return from the Council of Florence, who became in the Carpathian regions the herald of the rediscovered unity. In 1595, the representatives of the Metropolitan See of Kyiv met Pope Clement VIII; and in the following year, 1596, that union was proclaimed at Brest, with the intention of implementing the agreement reached at Florence. Very soon the impulse coming from the Ecumenical Council of Florence reached the Carpathians and, after certain initial difficulties had been overcome, became a practical reality in the Union of Uzhorod. Sown in the fertile soil of Mukacheve, it was the mustard seed of the Gospel which grew with time into a tree under the shade of which a vast group of faithful of the Byzantine tradition gathered. Taking note of this reality, on 19 September 1771, with the Apostolic Constitution *Eximia Regalium Principum*,¹ Pope Clement XIV established the Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Mukacheve, the seat of which would be transferred a few years later to nearby Uzhorod. Subsequently, like flourishing offshoots of that vigorous tree new ecclesiastical jurisdictions came into being: the Eparchies of Krichevci (1777), Prešov (1818) and Hajdúdorog (1912). In the meantime, a steady flow of the faithful, heirs of that Union, had migrated overseas. The Holy See, always careful to identify and favour God's providential designs, erected for them in the United States of America the Byzantine Metropolitan See of Pittsburgh (1969), with the suffragan Eparchies of Passaic (1963), Parma (1969) and Van Nuys (1981). The shared rejoicing of the various Eparchies born of the Union of Uzhorod, in celebrating the event which is at the root of their ecclesial identity, is a precious opportunity for renewing awareness of the bonds deriving from their common origin, and for strengthening that exchange of fellowship and co-operation which tragic historical events have long hindered.² While the Union of Uzhorod

came about as a result of the deliberations of the Council of Florence, it is certainly not out of place to highlight its close spiritual connection with the background of the mission of the Apostles of the Slavs, Cyril and Methodius, whose preaching extended from Greater Moravia to the Carpathian Mountains. Rightly therefore the faithful of the Churches linked to the Union of Uzhorod are proud to be sharers in the heritage of Cyril and Methodius. I have already drawn attention to the extraordinary value of the evangelizing work done by Cyril and Methodius in union with both the Church of Constantinople and the See of Rome.² I have also emphasized that "the fervent solicitude shown by both Brothers... to preserve unity of faith and love between the Churches of which they were members, namely, between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome on the one hand, and the Churches which arose in the lands of the Slavs on the other, was and will always remain their great merit".³ The preaching of the Gospel in the fullness of communion among Christians constitutes the aspiration, never completely lost, which marks, though in different ways, the history of the Churches which came into being in the lands of the Slavs from the time of the two holy Brothers. The events which followed the Union were filled with suffering and sorrow. Nevertheless, the Eparchy, strengthened at first by the work of Bishop George G. Bizancij, later experienced a remarkable development in the period begun by the great Bishop Andrew Bacynskij. In recent times, unfortunately, the Eparchy has once more been called, in not a few of its members, to walk with Christ the sorrowful path to Calvary in persecution, imprisonment and even the supreme sacrifice of their lives. This witness, sealed in blood, was borne by the Pastor of the Eparchy himself, Bishop Theodore Romzha, who did not hesitate to offer his life for the sheep of his flock (cf. Jn 10:11). We cannot forget these shining examples of faithfulness to Christ and his Gospel: they constitute the precious patrimony of the Greek Catholic Church linked to the Union of Uzhorod. Indeed, the children of the entire Catholic Church receive this witness with veneration and treasure this marvellous lesson of faithfulness to Christ's truth. With grateful hearts they thank the Christians of Mukacheve and all those who showed that they were ready to forsake everything they had in order to purchase the precious pearl of faith (cf. Mt 13:46).³ The joyful commemoration of the Union of Uzhorod provides a favourable opportunity for giving thanks to the Lord who has dried the tears of his children at the end of a tragic period of severe persecution. He has sustained them in such a difficult period of their history, enabling them to preserve the wealth of their Eastern tradition and to remain at the same time in full communion with the Bishop of Rome. They thus bear witness to that universality which makes the Church a diverse reality able to embrace, under the charism of Peter, that legitimate variety of traditions and rites which, far from harming her unity, shows forth all her richness and splendour.⁴ This was what Pope Leo XIII recognized when, emphasizing the precious exchange of gifts between the Latin and Eastern traditions, he affirmed that the variety of the Eastern liturgy and discipline adorns the whole Church, illustrates her catholicity and clearly shows "the divine unity of the Catholic faith".⁵ Our hope, therefore, is that that chosen portion of the People of God connected in various ways with the event which took place at Uzhorod will be able to flourish once more in new prosperity, living serenely in the present and working for a future marked by full religious freedom, by the quest for reconciliation between Catholics and Orthodox, and by a tireless commitment to the building of peace. An attitude of openness in listening to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council will help to bring this about. The Fathers gathered in the ecumenical assembly offered, under the Spirit's guidance, valuable directives on how to promote the dialogue of charity and the quest for the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). The goal to which they were looking is well expressed in these solemn words: "All people are called to be part of this catholic unity of the People of God, a unity which is harbinger of the universal peace it promotes. And there belong to it, or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful as well as all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind. For all people are called to salvation by the grace of God".⁶ The same Council reminded us that: "The Church established by Christ the Lord is, indeed, one and unique. Yet many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true heritage of Jesus Christ. To be sure, all proclaim themselves to be disciples of the Lord,

but their convictions clash and their paths diverge, as though Christ himself were divided (cf. 1 Cor 1:13). Without doubt, this discord openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature".⁷ In recent times, however, God "who is rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4) has touched the hearts of many Christians who are divided from one another and has inspired in them a sincere desire to find the path to full *koinonia*. "Today too Christ calls everyone to renew their commitment to work for full and visible communion".⁸ The Council Fathers insisted on the fact that "concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the potential of each".⁹ In order to answer this divine call, they suggested to all Catholics effective aids and means for promoting the ecumenical movement, in expectation of reaching full communion in the Church which is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic". The Eastern Catholic Churches can make a great contribution to this cause, a cause sustained by divine grace. These Churches, in fact, "have the special duty of fostering the unity of all Christians, in particular of Eastern Christians, according to the principles of this holy Synod's Decree on Ecumenism, by prayer above all, by their example, by their scrupulous fidelity to the ancient traditions of the East, by better knowledge of each other, by working together, and by fraternal regard for persons and things".¹⁰ In this regard, in the Encyclical *Ut unum sint* I have emphasized that "the method to be followed towards full communion is the dialogue of truth, fostered and sustained by the dialogue of love. A recognition of the right of the Eastern Catholic Churches to have their own organizational structures and to carry out their own apostolate, as well as the actual involvement of these Churches in the dialogue of charity and in theological dialogue, will not only promote a true and fraternal esteem for one another between Orthodox and Catholics living in the same territory, but will also foster their joint commitment to work for unity".¹¹ The effective pursuit of so noble a task presupposes on the part of the Eastern Churches a renewed and generous commitment to the formation of future Pastors, to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy as the community's lifegiving centre, to constant attention to the needs of the brethren through acts of practical charity, to the provision of a catechesis which by presenting anew the foundations of the Christian faith will hand on the "good news" as the leaven of daily life, in communion with the universal Church in her commitment to the new evangelization on the threshold of a new Christian millennium. The world in which we live "has undergone such cultural, political, social and economic transformations as to formulate the problem of evangelization in totally new terms".¹² Thus there must be devised "a new quality of evangelization, such as will succeed in setting before modern man the ageless message of salvation in convincing terms".¹³ Above all it is necessary to speed up the process towards full reconciliation between the Churches and within each ecclesial community.¹⁴ Since the Church is "a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind"¹⁵ and has the task of working for the reconciliation of the whole of humanity, this vocation cannot be fulfilled with effectiveness while there still exist divisions among those who believe in Christ. May the perspective of the forthcoming Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 bring about in everyone an attitude of humility, capable of effecting "the necessary purification of past memories"¹⁶ through prayer and conversion of heart, so as to help people to ask and give mutual forgiveness for the misunderstandings of centuries past. The gaze focused on the future which sees "the approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an examination of conscience and the promotion of fitting ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium".¹⁷ May fervent thanksgiving rise from the inmost hearts of the children of the whole Catholic Church for the path of faithfulness and courage along which the Father has led the Churches born of the Union of Uzhorod. It is a sign of his love that the planned celebrations can take place with due solemnity and freedom. At the same time let us also ardently implore the Holy Spirit that the time may be shortened for all believers in Christ to come to glorify the Trinity together with one voice (cf. Rom 15:6). An indispensable condition for such a joyful event is that the courage to forgive will mature in the hearts of

everyone: this too is a grace to be implored with tireless perseverance. As the third Christian millennium draws near, the Bishop of Rome celebrates with grateful heart this Jubilee and, remembering with emotion those who suffered to the point of heroism in order not to compromise their commitments of faith, he now offers to God their sufferings in communion with the whole Church, as a pleasing sacrifice, for the unity of Christians and the salvation of the world. May the Mother of God, who at the foot of the Cross received from her Son the task of watching over the Church with motherly care; may the Queen of Peace, who gave her assent to the Eternal Word that he might make his dwelling among us in order to reconcile us with the Father; may the Virgin of Pentecost, from whose prayers we await a renewed outpouring of the Spirit of holiness; may Mary Most Holy make her loving presence felt by these brothers and sisters of ours who are preparing to celebrate with joy such a significant anniversary. Entrusting those beloved ecclesial communities to her, the Mother of unity and peace, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, on 18 April in the year 1996, the eighteenth of my*

Pontificate.

NOTES 1 Cf. *Bullarium Romanum* IV/3 (1769-1774), 373-376. 2 Cf. Apostolic Letter *Egregiae virtutis* (31 December 1980), 1: AAS 73 (1981), 258. 3 Encyclical Epistle *Slavorum Apostoli* (2 June 1985), 14: AAS 77 (1985), 798; cf. Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (2 May 1995), 3: AAS 87 (1995), 747. 4 Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 2. 5 Leo XIII, Apostolic Letter *Orientalium dignitatis* (30 November 1894): *Leonis XIII Acta*, 14 (1894), 360. 6 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 13. 7 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, 1. 8 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 100: AAS 87 (1995), 981. 9 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, 5; cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 101: AAS 87 (1995), 981. 10 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 24. 11 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 60: AAS 87 (1995), 957-958. 12 John Paul II, Discourse to the Participants in the Sixth Symposium of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences (11 October 1985), 1: AAS 78 (1986), 179. 13 John Paul II, Letter to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Europe (2 January 1986), 6: AAS 78 (1986), 457. 14 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 78: AAS 87 (1995), 968. 15 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 1. 16 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 2: AAS 87 (1995), 922. 17 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* (10 November 1994), 34: AAS 87 (1995), 26-27. Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana