



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE SECRETARIAT FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY

Saturday, 18 November 1978

Dear Brothers in the episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It strikes me as very significant that, hardly a month after my accession to the See of Rome, I am able to receive you, who have come from five continents to take part in the plenary meeting of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The restoration of unity among all Christians was indeed one of the principal aims of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1) and since the moment of my election I have formally engaged myself to promote the carrying out of its guiding principles and directions, seeing this as one of my first duties. Hence your presence here today has a symbolic value. It shows that the Catholic Church, faithful to the direction taken at the Council not only wants to go forward on the way that leads to the restoration of unity, but is anxious, according to its means and in full submission to the promptings of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24), to strengthen at every level its contribution to this great movement of all Christians (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4).

A movement does not stop, should not stop before reaching its goal. We have not reached it, even though we have to thank God for the road we have covered since the Council. You have been meeting precisely to take stock, to look where we are. After these years of many-sided efforts, animated by immense good will and untiring generosity, nourished by so many prayers and sacrifices, it is good to survey the ground so as to assess the results obtained and make out the best routes for further progress. For it is this we are concerned with. As the apostle tells us, we should be "straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3: 13) with a faith which knows no fear because it knows what it believes in and who it counts on. But our haste to get there, the eagerness to put an end to the intolerable scandal of Christian divisions, means that we must avoid "all superficiality, all rash enthusiasms which might hinder the progress towards unity"

(*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24)

You do not heal a sickness by giving painkillers but by attacking its causes. In particular I would like to remind you here that the Council was persuaded that the Church is chiefly manifest in the assembly of all its members for the celebration of the same eucharist at the one altar where the bishop presides surrounded by his *presbyterium* and his ministers (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41). Even if it is rarely that we can have such a solemn eucharistic celebration in our modern world, it remains true that in every eucharist it is the whole faith of the Church that comes into play; it is ecclesial communion in all its dimensions that is manifested and realised. We cannot arbitrarily separate its component parts. To do so would be to fall into that superficiality the Council tells us to guard against. It would be a failure to perceive the close relations between eucharist and church unity, their richness, the demands they make on us. I know that the more we find how we are brothers in the charity of Christ, the more painful it is for us not to be able to take part together in this great mystery. Have I not said that the divisions between Christians are becoming intolerable? This suffering should incite us to overcome the obstacles which still hold us back from unanimous profession of the same faith, from the reunification of our divided communities by means of the same sacramental ministry. We cannot escape the obligations of solving together those questions which have divided Christians. It would be a very unenlightened charity that expressed itself at the expense of truth. The first president of the Secretariat, the venerated Cardinal Bea, whose tenth anniversary you have celebrated this week, was fond of repeating the principle: seek the truth in charity.

For thirteen years, in close and trusting collaboration with our brethren of other Churches, the Secretariat has been devoting itself to this search for agreement on points which still divide us, at the same time trying to promote throughout the Catholic Church a mind and spirit loyally at one with the wishes of the Council—something without which the positive results achieved in the various dialogues could not be received by the faithful. Here it should be remembered that the Council demanded a particular effort in teaching theology and forming the outlook of future priests. (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 10). This is especially important now, when this teaching must take account of the work of the dialogues which are in progress. Once they are engaged in the ministry, how will priests be able under their bishops' direction to find judicious and pastorally responsible ways of informing the faithful about the dialogues and their progress, if they have not been initiated into them during their training? Indeed there should be no loosening of the bond, still less opposition, between the deepening of the Church's unity by renewal and the search for restoration of unity among divided Christians. Both are aspects of the same unity for which Christ prayed and which is brought about by the Holy Spirit; there should therefore be an unceasing interaction between them as between two manifestations of a single pastoral effort which must come from the whole Church. You know this, you who come from your dioceses to help us to work out, in the light of your experience, all that is implicit in the Council about unity, and to face up to the demands created by new circumstances and the progress of the ecumenical movement itself. I thank you most warmly for coming and for having given me some of that time which I know is very precious.

To those who carry out their service to unity as members of the Secretariat I want to express my gratitude very particularly, and my hope that you will, in your dioceses and episcopal conferences, be thoughtful and ardent promoters of local and regional ecumenical commitment. The constant efforts and vigilance of all are needed to foster and deepen continually that unity which is at the heart of the Church's ministry. We know that "By her relationships with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). To serve the Church is to serve Christ in his design "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:52), to renew and gather up everything in himself so that he may offer all to the Father and we may in the Spirit be eternally in praise of his glory. This is a grand service! It deserves all our energies. It is in truth beyond our own strength. It demands our continual prayer. May the Lord inspire and strengthen us. In his name I bless you.

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