

VISIT OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH ATHENAGORAS I TO ROME  
(October, 26th-28th, 1967)

DISCOURSE OF THE PATRIARCH IN ST. PETER'S  
(October 26, 1967)

Holy Brother in Christ,

He is truly great, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone performs prodigies in the Holy Spirit. May His name be always glorified now and forever throughout all ages.

“ According to the purpose of His will ” (*Eph.* 1, 6) on that historical day of July 25, of this year of grace, we were able to see Your Holiness, become the fellow traveller of the Apostle Paul and announcing peace and good will, come from ancient Rome — this city venerable to the entire Christianity — to the new Rome to give the East the kiss of charity and of peace of the West, thus giving an eminent example of brotherly charity.

First of all we express today to Your Holiness the thanks, the appreciation and the gratitude for this holy visit which comes from ourself personally, of our Church of Constantinople, in truth, of other Churches also and of everyone.

But behold, this same God of prodigies blesses us once more. What has for a long time germinated and grown in our heart and in the heart of our Church as an ardent desire and a sweet hope is today experienced as a holy reality which once more introduces us into the “ mystery of His will ” (*Eph.* 1, 9).

Holy Brother in Christ,

Fulfilling the ministry of charity, of unity and of peace, a short while ago we embraced as brothers in Christ, venerated and honored, in our holy Church of the East; today, in this eternal city of the Romans, the abode of the primary leaders of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, and glory of the Christian world, we come to Your Holiness as a brother toward a brother. With these sentiments we return to you the kiss of the charity and of the peace of our Lord Jesus and express to you our profound esteem.

We are particularly happy to do this not just simply toward the venerable Bishop of Rome, bearer of apostolic grace and the successor of a constellation of holy and wise men who made illustrious this See which is the first in honor and order in the living body of the Christian Churches scattered throughout the world, and whose holiness, wisdom and struggles for the common faith in the undivided Church are a permanent conquest and the treasure of the entire Christian world. We are also happy to do this toward a Pope of eminent spiritual worth and Christian inspiration who possesses, in humility, sublime gifts and whose sense of responsibility before the Lord, before the divided Church, before the manifold tragedies of this world leads him each day from actions of charity to acts of edification, to a service befitting God, the Church and mankind.

We stand in this holy place, next to Your Holiness, near the altar, and prepare our heart and spirit for the journey toward a common Eucharist, in the sentiments of the Lord washing the Apostles' feet. In this extraordinarily holy moment, as we do this, we hear the cry of the blood of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the voice of the Church of the catacombs and of the martyrs of the Colosseum inviting us to exhaust all ways and all means to complete the holy work undertaken, that of the perfect recomposition of Christ's divided Church: This is not only to fulfill the Lord's will but also that the world may see the splendor of what is, according to our profession of faith, the Church's first property: unity.

The ecumenical movement, the Second Vatican Council, the pan-Orthodox conferences, the Lambeth conferences and the pan-Christian congresses of the other Christian Churches and confessions, contacts with Your Holiness and between other Christian leaders have laid bare before the eyes of all the weighty wrong of the division of the Church and this in such a way that it is not possible that there should be today a local Church, a responsible pastor or Christian teacher who does not realize the absolute urgency of healing the evil.

On the other hand, the fact that we have all emerged from our isolation and self-sufficiency to search for the solid ground on which the undivided Church was founded, has revealed to us the truth that what unites us is more than what divides us.

These two facts fill our hearts with the certain hope that it will be the entire Catholic Church and the entire Orthodox Church which by common agreement and with a sense of their responsibility, will strike out along the way to their union.

In this common journey, which will be a journey toward truth, a journey toward "what has been believed always, everywhere and by all", we are called upon to continue and intensify the dialogue of charity so as to make it into an event preceding the theological dialogue. As regards the mainly theological dialogue we will direct it on the one side toward interpretation of what is already experienced in common in the Church and on the other side toward research in a spirit of charity and edification, and toward the expression of truth in a spirit of service.

Thus we hope to succeed in appreciating exactly and in distinguishing between those points of the faith which must necessarily be confessed in common and those other elements of the life of the Church which, since they do not touch on faith, can freely constitute, in accordance with the traditions of each of the Churches, the proper aspects of the life of each of them, aspects which are respected by the other.

We cannot, of course, determine how long the journey will take. It is a matter of faith in the final result, of many prayers, of holy patience, of assiduous work, but it is above all a matter of charity. In fact, it is only in charity that we will be able to purify ourselves from all the negative elements we have inherited from the past, that we will be able to remove the obstacles which arise, that we will be able to re-establish fully mutual brotherly trust and that, by creating in mutual respect a new mentality — the mentality of kinship — we will be able to construct in a stable and secure manner the unity of our churches in Christ Jesus, Who is the Head of the Church.

Holy Brother,

May our meeting please the Lord; may it be a new point of departure for our Churches towards Him and towards each other. After the expression of this ardent desire, we greet Your Holiness, the venerable Synod gathered around you, the entire hierarchy spread around the world, the holy clergy, the religious orders and all the people of the holy Roman Catholic Church, who are so dear to us.

"May the God of hope bring us such fulness of joy and peace in our faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope" (Rom. 15, 13). Amen.