

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO GREECE, SYRIA AND MALTA

May 4-9, 2001

ADDRESS TO HOLY SYNOD OF THE ORTHODOX
CHURCH OF GRECE

May 4, 2001

Your Beatitude,

Venerable Members of the Holy Synod,
Most Reverend Bishops of the Orthodox Church of
Grece;

Christos anesti!

1. In the joy of Easter, I greet you with the words of the Apostle Paul to the Church in Thessalonica: "*May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way*" (2 *Thes* 3:16).

It gives me great pleasure to meet Your Beatitude in this Primatial See of the Orthodox Church of Greece. I offer heartfelt greetings to the members of the Holy Synod and all the hierarchy. I salute the clergy, the monastic communities and the lay faithful throughout this noble land. Peace be with you all!

2. I wish first of all to express to you the affection and regard of the Church of Rome. Together we share the apostolic faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; we have in common the apostolic heritage and the sacramental bond of Baptism; and therefore we are all members of Gods family, called to serve the one Lord and to proclaim his Gospel to the world. The Second Vatican Council called on Catholics to regard the members of the other Churches "as brothers and sisters in the Lord" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3), and this supernatural bond of brotherhood between the Church of Rome and the Church of Greece is strong and abiding.

Certainly, we are burdened by past and present controversies and by enduring misunderstandings. But in a spirit of mutual charity these can and must be overcome, for that is what the Lord asks of us. Clearly there is a need for a liberating process of purification of memory. For all the occasions past and present, when sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by action or omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg of him.

Some memories are especially painful, and some events of the distant past have left deep wounds in the minds and hearts of people to this day. I am thinking of the disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople, which was for so long the bastion of Christianity in the East. It is tragic that the assailants, who had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret. How can we fail to see here the *mysterium iniquitatis* at work in the human heart? To God alone belongs judgement, and therefore we entrust the heavy burden of the past to his endless mercy, imploring him to heal the wounds which still cause suffering to the spirit of the Greek people. Together we must work for this healing if the Europe now emerging is to be true to its identity, which is inseparable from the Christian humanism shared by East and West.

3. At this meeting, I also wish to assure Your Beatitude that the Church of Rome looks with unaffected admiration to the Orthodox Church of Greece for the way in which she has preserved her heritage of faith and Christian life. The name of Greece resounds wherever the Gospel is preached. The names of her cities are known to Christians everywhere from the reading of the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St Paul. From the Apostolic era until now, the Orthodox Church of Greece has been a rich source from which the Church of the West too has drawn for her liturgy, spirituality and jurisprudence (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 14). A patrimony of the whole Church are the Fathers, privileged interpreters of the apostolic tradition, and the Councils, whose teachings are a binding element of all Christian faith. The universal Church can never forget what Greek Christianity has given her, nor cease to give thanks for the enduring influence of the Greek tradition.

The Second Vatican Council stressed to Catholics the Orthodox love of the liturgy, through which the faithful "enter into communion with the Most Holy Trinity and become sharers in the divine nature" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 15). In offering liturgical worship pleasing to God through the centuries, in preaching the Gospel even in dark and difficult times, in presenting an unending *didaskalia*, inspired by the Scriptures and the great Tradition of the Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece has brought forth a host of saints who intercede for all Gods People before the Throne of Grace. In the saints we see the ecumenism of holiness which, with Gods help, will eventually draw us into full communion, which is neither absorption nor fusion but a meeting in truth and love (cf. *Slavorum Apostoli*, n. 27).

4. Finally, Your Beatitude, I wish to express the hope that we may walk together in the ways of the kingdom of God. In 1965, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI by a mutual act removed and cancelled from the Church's memory and life the sentence of excommunication between Rome and Constantinople. This historic gesture stands as a *summons for us to work ever more fervently for the unity which is Christ's will*. Division between Christians is a sin before God and a scandal before the world. It is a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel, because it makes our proclamation less credible. The Catholic Church is convinced that she must do all in her power to "prepare the way of the Lord" and to "make straight his paths" (*Mt 3:3*); and she understands that this must be done in company with other Christians — in fraternal dialogue, in cooperation and in prayer. If certain models of reunion of the past no longer correspond to the impulse towards unity which the Holy Spirit has awakened in Christians everywhere in recent times, we must be all the more open and attentive to what the Spirit is now saying to the Churches (cf. *Rv 2:11*).

In this Easter season, my mind turns to the encounter on the road to Emmaus. Without knowing it, the two disciples were walking with the Risen Lord, who became their teacher as he interpreted for them the Scriptures, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (*Lk 24:27*). But they did not grasp his teaching at first. Only when their eyes were opened and they recognized him did they understand. Then they acknowledged the power of his words, saying to each other: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (*Lk 24:32*). The quest for reconciliation and full communion means that we too must search the Scriptures, *in order to be taught by God* (cf. *1 Thes 4:9*).

Your Beatitude, with faith in Jesus Christ, "the firstborn from the dead" (*Col 1:18*), and in a spirit of fraternal charity and lively hope, I wish to assure you that *the Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to the path of unity with all the Churches*. Only in this way will the one People of God shine forth in the world as the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the entire human race (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 1).

ORE, May 9, 2001