

VISITE TO ROME OF PATRIARCH ATHENAGORAS

(October, 26-28, 1967)

DISCOURSE OF THE HOLY FATHER IN ST. PETER'S

Dearly beloved Brother in Christ,

“ All with one accord ” (*Acts* 1, 14) we have just given thanks to God for the wonders He is working in His Church. Surely it is to His almighty goodness that we owe our great happiness in being here together amid our brothers in the episcopacy, to exchange once again the kiss of peace and reconciliation above the tomb of the leader of the Apostles, the glory of the Church of Rome, whose good people are gathered about us and share our spiritual joy and our prayer.

Before giving expression to our deepest sentiments we should begin by proclaiming that we owe every excellent gift to the Father of Lights (cf. *James* 1, 17), and in giving glory to Him open ourselves to the enlightenment of His Spirit Who alone can guide us in understanding His mysterious ways.

You, dearly esteemed Brother, have for a considerable time made no secret of your desire to visit us in our Church of Rome. Now today we see that the Lord has allowed us to have you in our midst, the representative of the traditions of the Churches “ of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia ” to which “ Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ ” (*I Pet.* 1, 1), long ago wrote his letter, a faithful reflexion of the life, faith and hope of the early

Church. That letter with its instruction and exhortations also carried the greetings of the Church of Rome to those Churches (cf. I *Pet.* 5, 13). It is thus a first testimony to the relations which developed so fruitfully in the following centuries, although we must admit that these have not been without clashes and misunderstanding. Even after the unhappy breach between us had been made, efforts were unceasing, notably in the 13th and 15th centuries, to repair it. Alas, these attempts did not have lasting positive effects. But we may ask if they have ever been freer than they are today of every political element or of any other purpose than the sole desire of realising Christ's will for His Church. In fact, on both sides we are impelled by the single desire of purifying our souls in obedience to truth to love one another sincerely as brothers, loving one another earnestly from the heart (cf. I *Pet.* 1, 22). This rightness of our intentions and the sincerity of our decision are surely a sign of the Holy Spirit's action, His powerful action of profound renewal that we are experiencing and marvelling at in the Church and in every member of the Christian Faithful.

We are pleased to repeat this and to reflect on it with you during this Year of the Faith at the beginning of which we desired to visit you in your noble country. In visiting Smyrna and Ephesus we heard echoing in our hearts the message addressed by the Spirit through John to the Churches of Asia Minor: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (*Rev.* 2, 7, 11, 17, 29; 3, 6, 13, 22). The Spirit gives us to know Christ (cf. I *Cor.* 12, 3), to guard the truths entrusted to the Church (cf. II *Tim.* 1, 14), to penetrate the mystery of God (cf. I *Cor.* 2, 11) and His truth (cf. *Jn.* 16, 13), for He is life (cf. *Gal.* 5, 25) and inward transformation (cf. *Rom.* 8, 9, 13). And He demands with greater insistence than ever that we be one that the world may believe (cf. *Jn.* 17, 21). This request of the Holy Spirit we see manifested first of all in the movement of renewal that He is bringing about everywhere in the Church. This renewal, the desire to be more attentive and receptive in our faithfulness, is in fact the most fundamental prerequisite for our drawing closer to one another (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6). The Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church is one of its stages. Its decisions are being followed out with prudence and determination on every level of the Church's life. The Synod of Bishops gathered here, is a sign of it; today when problems are on a world scale it guarantees in new forms a better cooperation between local Churches and the Church of Rome which presides in charity (St. Ignatius, *Rom.* title). We have also undertaken the revision of our Canon Law, and without waiting for its completion have already promulgated new directives with a view to removing certain obstacles to development in the daily life of the Church and of the brotherhood we are increasingly finding again between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church.

We know that a like effort for renewal is in progress in the Orthodox Church and we are following its development with love and attention. You also are experiencing the need we have mentioned of securing a better cooperation between local Churches. The first Panorthodox Conference at Rhodes, the fruit in great measure of the patient and persevering efforts of Your Holiness, marked an important stage on this path, and it is significant that the programme it set itself, although worked out previously and independently, bears in essentials a striking resemblance to that of the Second Vatican Council. Is that not a further sign of the Spirit's action, urging our Churches to active preparation so as to make possible the re-establishment of their full communion with one another?

We should on both sides take courage and follow up this effort developing it as much as we possibly can by contacts and by a cooperation whose forms we should work out together. Far more than by a discussion of the past, it is in a positive collaboration towards giving a response to what the Spirit asks of the Church today that we shall eventually surmount the obstacles still separating us.

If in our efforts for renewal we see a sign of the action of the Spirit urging us on to re-establish full communion with one another and preparing us for it, does not the contemporary world, filled with unbelief in many forms, also give us a peremptory reminder of the need we have for unity with one another? If the unity of Christ's disciples was given as the great sign that was to call forth the faith of the world, is not the unbelief of many of our contemporaries also a way whereby the Spirit speaks to the Churches, causing in them a fresh awareness of the urgency there is to fulfil this precept of Christ, Who died "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Jn.* 11, 52)? This common witness, one yet varied, decided and persuasive, of a faith humbly self-confident, springing up in love and radiating hope, is without doubt the foremost demand that the Spirit makes of the Churches today.

That is why we wanted to dedicate to the Faith, to the renewal and deepening of the Faith, this nineteenth century of Peter and Paul's martyrdom, their supreme witness of their faith, love (cf. *Jn.* 15, 13) and hope. How can there be a renewal if it does not result in a strengthening of faith, a more fervent charity, a greater certitude of hope; if it does not revive our faith in this deep mysterious communion effected between us by a like obedience to Christ's Gospel, by the same Sacraments, and especially by the same Baptism and the same priesthood which celebrates the same Eucharist, Christ's one sacrifice, a like episcopacy received from the Apostles to guide God's People to the Lord and preach His word to it (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 15-17)? There we have so many ways which the Holy Spirit uses to bring us with our whole being towards the fulness of this communion already so rich yet still incomplete, uniting us in the mystery of the Church.

We come now to the other aspect of the action of the Spirit that we mentioned when we began, His action in each member of the Christian Faithful, the fruits of holiness and generosity it produces, another fundamental prerequisite for our drawing closer to one another: change of heart (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7) which enables us in our personal life to hear and carry out with ever greater docility the bidding of the Spirit. Without this effort, which must be unceasing, to be faithful to the Holy Spirit Who transforms us into the likeness of the Son (cf. II *Cor.* 3, 11) there can be no true lasting brotherhood. It is only by becoming truly sons in the Son (cf. I *Jn.* 3, 1-2) that we also truly become in a mysterious manner brothers of one another. "We can achieve depth and ease in strengthening mutual brotherhood to the degree that we enjoy profound communion with the Father, the Word and the Spirit"

(*Unitatis Redintegratio* , 7). Besides , this effort for holiness provides the setting for the entire common heritage we have recently alluded to, which the Second Vatican Council saw fit to mention at length (*Unitatis Redintegratio* , 13-18). What help we also have and what bonds of brotherhood in knowing by faith that in this quest to make Christ our own (cf. *Phil.* 3, 12 ), “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ” (*Heb.* 12, 1), among whom are, above all, the martyrs of our common faith who are, as you said so graciously when you wrote to announce your visit, the finest ornament of the Church of Rome. All these saints of the East and West are with us here, rejoicing and praying Him Who has begun this wonderful work to bring it to completion. All these saints also, who amid innumerable difficulties, sufferings and temptations remained steadfast as if they saw the invisible, teach us by their example to strain forward to what lies ahead (cf. *Phil.* 3, 13) “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ” (*Heb.* 12, 2).

All this is certainly brought to our minds and expressed symbolically in the fact that your visit is taking place when the Church of the West is preparing to celebrate the feast of All Saints. We shall look with eyes of faith on this assembly of the people of the elect, gathered around Christ, risen and glorious, seated at the right hand of the Father, and united in a fraternal love that nothing must be allowed to lessen, and inspired alone by the desire to carry out what the Spirit asks of the Church, we shall, in a hope stronger than all obstacles, go forward *in the name of the Lord*.