ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ANGLICAN –
ROMAN CATHOLIC WORKING GROUP
Saturday, 24 November 2001

Dear Friends in Christ,

1. In the peace of the Lord Jesus I greet you as you come to Rome for the inaugural meeting of the new Anglican – Roman Catholic Working Group, a meeting which began in London where you met Archbishop Carey of Canterbury. Your presence here is a sign of how far Anglicans and Catholics have travelled towards one another since the days of the Second Vatican Council. "The ecumenical journey is certainly still difficult, and will perhaps be long" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 12), but this should not blind us to the fact that we have already made much progress. We cannot but praise the God of all mercies for the many genuine advances of ecumenism.

2. On this significant occasion our minds turn spontaneously to the meeting between Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Ramsey in 1966, from which there came the first Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission. In their Joint Statement, the Pope and the Archbishop spoke of the need for "a serious dialogue which, founded on the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions, may lead to that unity in truth for which Christ prayed". Now we can look back and say that that dialogue has continued fruitfully in the years since then. It was given new impetus by my own visit to Canterbury in 1982, when Archbishop Runcie and I agreed to establish the second Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission. Our Joint Declaration recognized that theological dialogue "must be accompanied by the zealous work and fervent prayer of Roman Catholics and Anglicans throughout the world as they seek to grow in mutual understanding, fraternal love and common witness to the Gospel" (No. 4). This was itself a sign of growth; for theological dialogue was seen to be essential but not enough. Our common journey required as well that Anglicans and Catholics learn to pray and work together.

Another milestone came in 1996, when Archbishop Carey and I issued a Common Declaration which called on our people "to repent of the past, to pray for the grace of unity and to open themselves to God's transforming power". It had become increasingly clear that full and visible unity would come not as the result of human will and planning, however important these are, but as a divine gift at a time which we cannot know but for which we must prepare. The Declaration also foreshadowed last year's International Meeting of Anglican and Catholic Bishops in Mississauga, Canada, where it was decided to establish the new Working Group to which you have been appointed.

3. As an international group of Bishops, you are especially well qualified to consider the next practical steps which might be taken not only to consolidate the gains already made, but also to lead us to new depths of communion on the way to that fullness of unity which is the will of Christ. Only the experience of deeper communion will enable us to bear more effective witness to Christ in the world and to accomplish the mission which he has entrusted to us (cf. Mt 28:19-20). It is clear that disunity has impaired our mission in the world. In these troubled times the world needs more than ever the common witness of Christians in every area, from the defence of human life and dignity to the promotion of justice and peace.

4. I am certain that the new Working Group will feel sustained by "the hope that comes from being led by the Risen One and the inexhaustible power of his Spirit, always capable of new surprises" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 12). We have seen many of these surprises in recent decades; and when discouragement threatens or new difficulties arise, we need to focus once more upon the Spirit's power to do what seems to us impossible. At times of apparent pause we must wait for the Holy Spirit to do what we ourselves cannot do. Yet this waiting is not passive. It is the very active experience of Christian hope, which cries out "Come, Holy Spirit!" but also implies the hard work of dialogue and shared witness which you are undertaking. Today I wish to encourage you in that hope and to offer my prayers in the certainty that Christ "who calls you [to this work] is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thess 5:24).

The Season of Advent will soon begin, and our prayer will then be: "Come, Lord Jesus!" In our ecumenical journey it is already Advent. Today therefore, as we look confidently to the success of the new Working Group, let our common prayer be: Come, Lord Jesus! Make us one as only you can, so that the world may see at last "the Bride of the Lamb...coming down out of heaven from God, shining with the glory of God" (Rev 21:9-10). Amen.

© Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana