



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER  
TO MARK THE CENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE PONTIFICAL ORIENTAL  
INSTITUTE  
AND THE CONGREGATION FOR ORIENTAL CHURCHES**

*To Venerable Brother  
Cardinal Leonardo Sandri  
Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Oriental Institute*

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, several months after the centenary of the establishment of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches (cf. Benedict xv, *Motu Proprio Dei Providentis*, 1 May 1917), it is my pleasure to address a cordial greeting to you, venerable Brother, and to the entire Academic Community.

Almost half a century before the Conciliar Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, my venerable Predecessor wished to draw attention to the extraordinary richness of the Eastern Churches, by founding the Pontifical Oriental Institute here in Rome, on 15 October 1917. Even in the midst of the turbulence of the first world conflict, the Pontiff understood the need to pay special attention to the Eastern Churches. For its foundation, Benedict xv recalled that openness to the Orient that had blossomed with the Eucharistic Congress of Jerusalem of 1893, with the aim of creating a study centre which would serve — as affirmed in the founding document — as “an ideal setting for the advanced study of Oriental issues”, destined to train “also Latin priests who wish to exercise their sacred ministry among Orientals”. From the outset, it was intended that this “study centre [be] open to Orientals, both the affiliated and the so-called Orthodox”, so that “the exposure of Catholic and, at the same time, Orthodox doctrine could proceed simultaneously” (Benedict xv, *Motu Proprio Orientis Catholici*, 15 October 1917: aas 9 [1917], 532). With this latter clarification, the Founder placed the new institution within a horizon that we can describe today as eminently ecumenical.

Accepting the suggestion of the first Dean, Blessed Ildefonso Schuster, to resolve the Institute’s initial difficulties, Pius xi decided in 1922 to entrust it to the Society of Jesus (Letter *Decessor*

*Noster*, 14 September 1922: aas 14 [1922], 545-546), and later assigned the Institute, located at the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, its own headquarters, which opened its doors on 14 November 1926.

In 1928, with the Encyclical *Rerum Orientalium* on the promotion of Oriental studies, the Pope warmly invited bishops to send students to the Oriental Institute in order to ensure that every seminary might have a qualified teacher to impart some rudimentary knowledge of Oriental studies (cf. aas 20 [1928], 283-284). In less than one month, this Encyclical was followed by the Motu Proprio *Quod Maxime*, by which the Gregorian University was associated with the Biblical and Oriental Institutes (cf. aas 20 [1928], 310). The following year, alongside the existing Oriental Institute, Pius xi went on to establish the *Collegium Russicum*, the direction of which was likewise entrusted to the Society of Jesus (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Quam Curam*, 15 August 1929: aas 22 [1930], 146-148).

The most important development since then came in 1971 with the founding of the Faculty of Oriental Canon Law, to date the only such faculty in existence (cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, Decree *Canonicae Orientalium*, 7 July 1971: aas 63 [1971], 791-792), alongside the faculty which was identified with the Institute and which, at that time, came to be called the Faculty of Oriental Ecclesiastical Sciences, divided into three sections: theological-patristic, liturgical and historical.

Another important novelty was the transfer — in 1993 — of the title of Grand Chancellor of the Oriental Institute from the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. Thus, while maintaining the proper academic competence of the Institute as exercised by the Congregation for Catholic Education, the two “Oriental” institutions, established in the same year, were called to “promote closer co-operation and unity of intent” in their service to the Christian Orient (*Rescript of the Secretariat of State*, 31 May 1993).

This look at history leads us to examine the *missio* that this Institute will be called to undertake in the future.

If at the very beginning a certain conflict was felt between study and pastoral work, today we must recognize that such antinomianism does not exist. It is not a question of “*aut ... aut*”, but rather of “*et ... et*”. I therefore call upon the professors to place scientific research first among their commitments, following the example of their predecessors who distinguished themselves by their prestigious contributions, erudite monographs, precise liturgical, spiritual, archaeological and canonical editions, and even bold collective works, such as the publication of the Acts of the *Concilium Florentinum* and the critical edition of *Anaphorae Syriacae*. The contributions of the Institute’s professors are well known, beginning with the drafting of the Conciliar Documents *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), followed by that of the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (1990).

On the other hand, the times in which we live and the challenges that war and hatred pose to the very roots of peaceful co-existence in the devastated lands of the East, place the Institute once again at the centre of a providential crossroads, just as it was 100 years ago.

Maintaining intact the attentiveness and application of traditional research methods, I invite all to offer to those Churches and to the entire ecclesial community their capacity for listening to life and for theological reflection in order to support their existence and progress. Many students and professors are aware of this important moment in history. Thanks to the research, teaching and witness this Institute offers, it has the task of helping these brothers and sisters of ours to strengthen and reinforce their faith in the face of these tremendous challenges. It is called to be the privileged place to promote the formation of men and women, seminarians, priests and laypeople, capable of giving reason for the hope that inspires and supports them (cf. 1 Pt 3:15), and prepared to cooperate in Christ's reconciliatory mission (cf. 2 Cor 5:18).

I urge the professors to remain open to all the Oriental Churches, considered not only in terms of their ancient configuration, but also of their current diffusion and at times troubled geographical distribution. In relation then to the venerable Oriental Churches, with whom we are still journeying towards full communion and that continue autonomously on their path, the Pontifical Oriental Institute has an ecumenical mission to pursue, through its care for fraternal relations, detailed study of the issues that still appear to divide us, and active collaboration on themes of primary importance, awaiting the moment that, when the Lord wills and in the manner that he alone knows, "they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). In this respect, the growing presence of students belonging to non-Catholic Oriental Churches confirms the trust they place in the Oriental Institute.

On the other hand, the task of the Institute is also to make known to the Western World, the treasures of the rich Traditions of the Oriental Churches in order to make them better understood and so that they can be assimilated.

Noting that many students of the various Oriental colleges in Rome attend institutions in which they receive a formation that is not always fully consistent with their Traditions, I invite reflection on what could be done to address this shortcoming.

With the fall of the totalitarian regimes and of the various dictatorships, which in some countries has unfortunately served to further the spread of international terrorism, Christians of the Oriental Churches are experiencing the trial of persecution and an increasingly distressing diaspora. We cannot close our eyes to these situations. As part of the "Church going forth" (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20-24), the Oriental Institute is called to prayerful listening, to perceive what the Lord wants at this precise moment and, consistent with the Ignatian *magis*, to seek new paths to follow. It means, for example, motivating future pastors to instil in their Eastern faithful, wherever they may be, a profound love for their original Traditions and the rite to which they belong; and, at the same time, to raise awareness among the bishops of Latin Dioceses of

the need to assume responsibility for the geographically dislocated Eastern faithful who lack their own hierarchy, ensuring appropriate spiritual and humane assistance to individuals and families.

I address a warm invitation to the Society of Jesus to implement, with the provisions requested today, what Pius xi previously prescribed in 1928 regarding the Gregorian Consortium, with the purpose of promoting, along with notable savings in men and means, a greater unity of intentions. Beside the *missio* carried out by the Gregorian University and the Biblical Institute, respectively, there is that of the Oriental Institute, which is of no less importance. It is therefore urgent to guarantee to this Institution a stable team of Jesuit formators, with whom others may commendably cooperate. Inspired by Ignatian pedagogy and with fruitful community discernment, the members of the community, both religious and academic, will employ the most suitable forms for introducing candidates to the austere discipline of research and the needs of pastoral care that the Churches may wish to entrust to them.

Joining in giving thanks to God for the work carried out in these 100 years, I offer my hope that the Pontifical Oriental Institute may pursue its mission with renewed zeal, studying and disseminating with love and intellectual honesty, with scientific rigour and a pastoral outlook, the Traditions of the Oriental Churches in their liturgical, theological, artistic and canonistic variety, responding ever better to the expectations of today's world in order to create a future of reconciliation and peace. With these hopes I impart to you, venerable Brother, and to the entire community of this Institute, a special Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, 12 October 2017*

**FRANCIS**