



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF PAUL VI TO THE REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Friday, 28 March 1969

My dear Brothers in Christ,

It is a pleasure and a joy for Us to welcome you in Our home today. We would like to express our appreciation that such distinguished representatives of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America have desired to discuss with Us and with Our Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity the progress that has been made and the questions that are being raised concerning the development of the movement towards unity among Christians in your great country.

We are also grateful for the delicate gesture by which you have invited to accompany you, as your guests, the Secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States as well as the Director of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. We interpret this not only as a sign of the Christian cooperation which already exists between your Council and the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, but also as a happy omen of your desire to find ways and forms for even closer collaboration with Our brother Bishops of that nation.

In 1964, We stated to the representatives of the various Christian Churches and Communities gathered in Bombay: "It is Our hope that Our efforts can accompany yours, can mingle with yours so that together, in humility and charity and mutual understanding, we can seek out the ways by which Christ's will 'that all may be one' can one day be fully realized" (Cf. *Il Viaggio di Paolo VI in India*, p. 74). More recently We affirmed that "the ecumenical question has been raised by Rome in all its gravity, its breadth, and its innumerable doctrinal and practical implications. It has not been considered with an occasional and passing glance, but has become the object of permanent interest, of systematic study and of unceasing charity. It remains such, in accordance with a line

which has now become part of Our apostolic ministry. The Council makes this an obligation for us and traces the way for us” (cf. *L'Oss. Rom.*, 28 April, 1967).

What a consoling source of joy it is for Us to know that the Roman Catholic bishops and faithful of the United States have well understood and warmly accepted this serious engagement, so that already many fruitful accomplishments have been realized in close cooperation with your Council and those who belong to its member churches.

Your distinguished spokesman had mentioned the common initiatives which you are making as Christians to help resolve the pressing problems of war and violence, of conflict between races and between the rich and the poor, of the gap between the generations. Indeed, “not everyone who cries, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father’s will and take a strong grip on the world at hand” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 93). We are happy to know that while you are endeavoring to carry out these activities, you are together reflecting on the biblical message itself.

For We are convinced that doctrine and practice are inextricably intertwined in the common effort towards that unity through which Christ will truly be a sign to the world. Doctrine animates action; it guides it, gives it deeper inspiration and ensures that action is truly Christian. On the other hand, action gives a new and dynamic dimension to reflection upon the doctrine of Christ and its meaningful application to the concrete problems of today’s world.

This dialectic between truth and love, doctrine and action, experience and reflection, is the fulfilment of those words of St. Paul which form, what could be called, “the great ecumenical commandment : ‘Veritatem facientes in caritate?’. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (*Eph.* 4, 15).

Fidelity to that Pauline “commandment” will help us to search out, understand and exploit those many bonds which already unite us as brothers in Christ, so that both in our teaching and in our common activity, the Good News of the Resurrected Lord may become more visible in the living practice of Christians. Such fidelity will indeed more clearly reveal the painful differences which still exist among brothers in Christ, but will help us discern better those ways of activity which can make an authentic contribution towards resolving those differences, and distinguish them from others which, though often inspired by sincere good will and love, in the final analysis impede rather than assist the search for that restoration of christian unity which will make more vivid our common witness to the world.

You no doubt are aware that the witness of your ecumenical spirit, attitudes and activities is not confined to your own country. The relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the United States have, in many ways, implications for the general ecumenical and-We would add-missionary movements throughout the world. A difficult task, but should we not be hopeful?

Ecumenism is indeed a mission of hope, for its holy objective “transcends human powers and gifts”, and we place our hope “entirely in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 24). Your visit and the words of your spokesman have also expressed this common confidence. This encourages Us in the exercise of Our own apostolic office; We are deeply grateful.

We wish to assure you that We are deeply sensitive to the seriousness and the loyalty to our common Lord Jesus Christ which marks the work of your Council itself, and the various types of collaboration you have already undertaken and propose to undertake with the Roman Catholic Church.

In a particular way, then, may Christians in the United States, “being rooted and grounded in love” (*Eph.* 3, 17) realize in themselves and for the world “the immeasurable greatness of his power, in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places” (*Eph.* 2, 19-20).