



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY**

Clementine Hall

Friday, 17 November 2006

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1: 7).

With St Paul's greeting to the Romans I address you who dedicate your intelligence, love and zeal to promoting the full communion of all Christians, according to the will of the Lord himself who prayed for that unity on the eve of his passion, death and Resurrection.

First of all, I thank Cardinal Walter Kasper, your President, for his greeting and his full summary of your Plenary Assembly, and I thank all of you who have contributed your experience and hope to this meeting in an attempt to identify satisfactory responses to a changing situation.

This very factor is the focus of the theme you have chosen to study: *"The changing ecumenical situation"*. We are living in a period of great changes in practically all the contexts of life, hence, it is not surprising that they are also affecting the life of the Church and inter-Christian relations.

Yet, it must be said at the outset that even in the presence of changing situations, sensitivities and problems, the goal of the ecumenical movement has stayed the same: the *visible unity of the Church*. As is well known, the Second Vatican Council considered the restoration of full unity among all Christians as one of its principal aims (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1).

This is also my own aim. I gladly take this opportunity to repeat and confirm, with renewed conviction, what I affirmed at the beginning of my ministry upon the Chair of Peter: "Peter's current

Successor", I said then, "takes on as his primary task the duty to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This is his ambition, his impelling duty" (*Initial Message of Pope Benedict XVI*, 20 April 2005; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 27 April, p. 4).

And I added, "The current Successor of Peter is allowing himself to be called in the first person by this requirement and is prepared to do everything in his power to promote the fundamental cause of ecumenism" (ORE, *ibid.*).

In fact, from the Second Vatican Council to this day, many steps have been taken towards full communion.

I picture before me the Council Hall in which the Observer Delegates of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities were attentive but silent. In the 10 years that followed, this image gave way to the reality of a Church in dialogue with all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of East and West.

Silence has been transformed into words of communion. This has been brought about by an enormous amount of work on a global and local scale.

Brotherhood among all Christians has been rediscovered and re-established as a condition for dialogue, cooperation, common prayer and solidarity. This is what my Predecessor, Pope John Paul II of happy memory, emphasized in his Encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism, in which he explicitly asserted, among other things, that "a valuable result of the contacts between Christians and of the theological dialogue in which they engage is the growth of communion. Both contacts and dialogue have made Christians aware of the elements of faith which they have in common" (Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 49).

That Encyclical highlighted the positive results of ecumenical relations between Christians of both East and West.

How can we fail to remember in this context the experience of communion lived with the representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities who came from every continent to attend the funeral of the unforgettable Pope John Paul II, as well as the inauguration of my own Pontificate?

Sharing in sorrow and joy is a visible sign of the new situation created among Christians. Blessed be God!

My upcoming Visit to His Holiness Bartholomew I and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate will be a further sign of consideration for the Orthodox Churches and will act as an incentive - we are confident of this - to hasten our steps toward the re-establishment of full communion.

Realistically, however, we have to recognize that much ground still remains to be covered. Many aspects of the situation have changed since the Second Vatican Council, and Cardinal Kasper has outlined these changes for us. The rapid upheavals in the world have also had repercussions on ecumenism.

At the time of the Council, many of the venerable Churches of the East existed in conditions of oppression under dictatorial regimes.

Today, they have recovered their freedom and are involved in a broad process of reorganization and revitalization. We are close to them with our sentiments and our prayers.

The Eastern and Western parts of Europe are drawing closer to each other. This encourages the Churches to coordinate their efforts to safeguard the Christian tradition and to proclaim the Gospel to the new generations. The situation of advanced secularization, especially in the Western world, makes this collaboration particularly urgent.

Fortunately, after a period fraught with difficulty, the theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches has acquired a new impetus.

The International Joint Commission for Dialogue had a positive meeting in Belgrade, generously hosted by the Orthodox Church of Serbia. We have great hopes for the future journey that will be undertaken, with respect for the legitimate theological, liturgical and disciplinary variety, for the achievement of an ever fuller communion of faith and love in which an increasingly profound exchange of the spiritual riches of every Church will be possible.

With the Ecclesial Communities of the West too, we are engaged in various bilateral dialogues that are open and friendly. They are recording progress in reciprocal knowledge, in overcoming prejudices, in the confirmation of certain convergences and even in a more precise identification of the real divergences.

I would like to mention in particular the "[Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#)" which was achieved in the dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation, and the fact that for its own part, the World Methodist Council gave its assent to this Declaration.

In the meantime, various important issues have arisen that require deeper examination and agreement.

The main difficulty consists in finding a common conception of the relationship between the Gospel and the Church, and related to this, of the mystery of the Church and of her unity as well as on the question of ministry in the Church.

New difficulties are then appearing in the field of ethics, with the result that the different positions taken by the Christian Confessions on current problems have reduced the effect of their guidance on public opinion. Precisely from this viewpoint, an in-depth dialogue on Christian anthropology and on the interpretation of the Gospel and its concrete application is essential.

In any case, what should be encouraged first of all is the ecumenism of love, which directly descends from the new commandment that Jesus left to his disciples. Love accompanied by consistent behaviour creates trust and opens hearts and eyes.

The dialogue of charity nourishes and enlightens by its nature the dialogue of truth: indeed, the definitive encounter to which the Spirit of Christ leads us will take place in the full truth.

It is certainly not relativism or a facile and false irenicism that will resolve the ecumenical search; indeed, they distort it and confuse it.

Furthermore, ecumenical training should be intensified, starting from the foundations of the Christian faith, that is, from the proclamation of the love of God who revealed himself in the Face of Jesus Christ, and at the same time revealed man to himself and brought to light his most high calling (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22).

These two essential dimensions are supported by the practical cooperation among Christians that "vividly expresses that bond which already unites them, and... sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 12).

As a conclusion to my words, I would like to reaffirm the quite special importance of spiritual ecumenism. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, therefore, is rightly committed to it, relying on prayer, charity and conversion of heart for personal and communal renewal.

I urge you to continue in this direction, which has already produced so much fruit and will bear more.

For my part, I assure you of the support of my prayers as I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all, as confirmation of my trust and affection.