



## The Holy See

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*Your Eminences,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

A cordial welcome to all of you who are taking part in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In the first place my greeting goes to the Cardinal President, to whom I also express my gratitude for the courteous words with which he described the work you have done during these days. I extend my greeting to the Secretary and to the other collaborators of the Pontifical Council, as well as to all those, from various places, who have contributed their experience to the common reflection on the theme of your meeting: "Reception and future of ecumenical dialogue". This is a topic of considerable interest for the journey towards full unity among Christians, a subject that has two essential dimensions: first, the appraisal of the ground covered thus far, and second, the identification of new ways on which to continue on our way, seeking together how to overcome the divergences that unfortunately still endure in the relations among Christ's disciples.

It is indisputable that theological dialogue is an essential element for re-establishing the full communion we all long for and it should therefore be supported and encouraged. This dialogue is taking place increasingly in the context of ecclesial relations which, by the grace of God are extending to involve not only Pastors but all the various members and structures of the People of God. Let us thank the Lord for the important advances that have taken place, for example, in relations with the Orthodox Churches and with the ancient Oriental Orthodox Churches, as regards both the theological dialogue and the consolidation and growth of ecclesial brotherhood. The latest Document of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches on the theme, "Ecclesial communion, conciliarity and authority" to which H.H. Bartholomew I referred in his discourse to the recent Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, certainly unfolds a positive prospect of reflection on the relationship that exists between primacy and synodality in the Church. This is a matter of crucial importance in relations with our Orthodox brethren and will be the subject of examination and exchanges at the next meetings. It is also comforting to note that a sincere spirit of friendship between Catholics and Orthodox has been growing in recent years and has also been manifested in the many contacts that have taken place between the Heads of Dicasteries in the Roman Curia

and Bishops of the Catholic Church with the Heads of various Orthodox Churches, as well as during the visits of important Orthodox representatives to Rome and to particular Catholic Churches.

At your Plenary Meeting you have reflected in a special way on the Harvest Project: "Ecumenical consensus/convergence on some basic aspects of the Christian faith found in the reports of the first four international bilateral dialogues in which the Catholic Church has taken part since the Second Vatican Council". This exchange has led you to examine the results of four important dialogues: with the Lutheran World Federation, with the World Methodist Council, with the Anglican Communion and with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. While you have outlined what, with God's help, you have already managed to achieve through reciprocal understanding and with the identification of elements of convergence, with great honesty you have not avoided bringing to the fore all that has yet to be done. It might be said that we find ourselves *on the way*, in an intermediate situation, in which an objective examination of the results achieved certainly seems useful and opportune. Moreover I am certain that the work of this assembly will make a valid contribution to elaborating, in this perspective, a more extensive, precise and detailed reflection.

Dear brothers and sisters, in many regions the ecumenical situation today has changed and, as it is undergoing further changes, this implies endeavouring toward a frank engagement. New communities and groups are surfacing, unheard-of trends are coming into focus and sometimes tensions, even between Christian communities. The theological dialogue that will concern the area of practical life of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities is therefore important. Placed in this light are the theme of your Plenary Assembly and the discernment indispensable for outlining in practical terms the prospects of ecumenical commitment that the Catholic Church intends to pursue and intensify with prudence and pastoral wisdom. Christ's command, the "*mandatum novum*" and his prayer for unity "*ut omnes unum sint... ut mundus credat quia tu me misisti*" (Jn 17: 21) reverberate in our minds. Charity will help Christians to foster the "thirst" for full communion in truth. And by meekly following the Holy Spirit's inspirations, we may look forward to reaching the hoped for unity on the day chosen by the Lord. This is why ecumenism urges us to make a fraternal and generous exchange of gifts, well aware that full communion in the faith, in the sacraments and in the ministry remains the goal and end of the entire ecumenical movement. Spiritual ecumenism, as the [Second Vatican Council](#) clearly affirmed, is the pulsating heart of this vast undertaking.

We are living the days of Advent that prepare us for Christ's Birth. May this season of watchful expectation keep awake within us hope for the fulfilment of God's Kingdom, of the *Basileia tou Theou* and may Mary, Mother of the Church, accompany and guide us on the less than easy journey towards unity. With these sentiments, I express my good wishes for the forthcoming Christmas celebrations and, as I thank you once again for the work you have carried out at this assembly, I invoke God's Blessing upon each and every one of you.

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