



The Holy See

**APOSTOLIC LETTER
OF THE HOLY FATHER
JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE THIRD CENTENARY OF THE UNION
OF THE GREEK-CATHOLIC CHURCH OF ROMANIA
WITH THE CHURCH OF ROME**

Dear Brothers and Sisters

*of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania!*¹. The third centenary of the Union of your Church with the Church of Rome occurs in the Easter season of this Jubilee of the Year 2000. The Jubilee Year is a year of grace in which the whole Church recalls that our Lord Jesus Christ became man in the womb of the Blessed Virgin 2,000 years ago. In joyfully commemorating this wonderful event, the Christian community feels encouraged again to proclaim the joyful message of salvation to the world with new energy. *Verbum caro factum est*: this is the reason for our continual gratitude, this is the grace recalled and celebrated in a special way during the Jubilee period. In this perspective, we can view the whole history of humanity with the eyes of hope. **Memory and presence**². The 300 years that the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania has existed is an important part of this picture. Exactly one year ago we prayed together in your beloved homeland. During the Divine Liturgy celebrated with you at St Joseph's Cathedral in Bucharest, I said that "I consider it providential and highly significant that the celebrations of the third centenary will coincide with the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000" (*Homily*, 8 May 1999, n. 3). The possibility of being with you last May was the Lord's special gift, which enabled me in a certain way to relive with you the experience of those disciples who were "on the way": to them "Jesus himself drew near and went with them", and "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (*Lk* 24: 13-15, 27). Enlightened by Christ's words, together we could contemplate his presence reflected in the face of your Church. Then he nourished us with his Body and his Blood, and our hearts burned within us (cf. *Lk* 24: 32).³ Since then the beauty of your land and the faith of the people living there have remained in my heart. The memory of that meeting became even more vivid in the Easter season of this year, when the third centenary of your Church's Union with the Church of Rome is being celebrated. My heart longs to be united with you in that joyous hymn - *Hristos a înviat!* (Christ is risen!) - which during my visit filled me with emotion, leaving a deep echo in my heart. This proclamation goes far beyond words: it is filled with the victorious power of the Risen One, who walks with his Church through history. It is in the light of this presence that I address you who are joyfully celebrating the third centenary of the Union. **History and unity**⁴. The mystery of unity originates in the mystery of the Incarnation. For the Scriptures say that it is the Father's will to "unite all

things in Christ" (*Eph* 1: 10). To fulfil this mystery is the mission of the Church, whose task is gradually to achieve unity with God and among men: "The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). Unity and peace blossom in the Church: in this way the history of mankind can become a history of unity. The mystery of unity particularly marks the Romanian people. We know, and I recall it here with profound reverence, that the risen Christ, through the apostolic preaching, was already joined to the historical progress of your people in ancient Christian times and entrusted to them a special commitment to the precious service of unity. The names of the Apostle Andrew, brother of Peter, Nicetas of Remesiana, John Cassian and Dionysius Exiguus are emblematic in this regard. At a time when Holy Church had not yet experienced the great schism within her, divine Providence determined that you should receive the heritage of Byzantium along with that of Rome.⁵ While remaining a Latin people, Romanians were open, in fact, to receiving the treasures of Byzantine faith and culture. Despite the wound of division, this heritage continues to be shared by the Greek-Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Romania. This is the interpretive key to the history of your Church. She extricated herself from the tragic tensions that developed between the Christian East and West. The hearts of the sons and daughters of this ancient Church have always beaten with a passionate longing for the unity desired by Christ. I myself was deeply moved at witnessing this last year. This longing for unity was felt in a particular way by the Romanian Church in Transylvania, especially after the tragedy of the division between Eastern and Western Christianity. In that land, many peoples - Romanians, Hungarians, Armenians and Saxons - shared a common and sometimes difficult history, which left its marks on the human and religious make-up of the inhabitants. Unfortunately, the unity which characterized the Church in the early centuries was never achieved again, and your history too was marked by division and tears with increasing intensity. Against this background, the efforts of those who did resign themselves to the wound of schism but sought to heal it shine like bright lights of hope. In Transylvania a desire arose in the hearts of Romanian Christians and their Pastors, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, to re-establish complete communion with the Apostolic See of Peter's Successor. These disciples of Christ, spurred by an ardent longing for the reform and the unity of the Church, sensing in the depths of their hearts an ancient bond with the Church and the city where the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul were martyred and buried, started a movement that led step by step to full union with Rome. Worthy of mention among the decisive stages are the Synods held in Alba Iulia in 1697 and 1698 which were favourable to the Union: the official decision was reached on 7 October 1698 and solemnly ratified at the Synod of 7 May 1700.⁶ Thanks to the work of distinguished Bishops such as Atanasie Anghel (+1713), Ioan Inochentie Micu-Klein (+1768) and Petru Pavel Aron (+1764) and other praiseworthy prelates, priests and lay people, the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania strengthened her identity and in a short time experienced significant development. In view of this, my venerable Predecessor Pius IX, with the Bull *Ecclesiam Christi* of 16 November 1853, established the Metropolitan See of Fagaras and Alba Iulia for the united Romanians. How could we not acknowledge the precious services of the Greek-Catholic Church to all the Romanian people of Transylvania? She made a decisive contribution to their growth, symbolically represented by the "coryphaei" of the Transylvanian School of Blaj, but also by many figures - clergy and laity - who also left an indelible mark on the ecclesial, cultural and social life of Romanians. A particularly outstanding merit of your Church is to have mediated between the East and the West by adopting the values promoted by the Holy See in Transylvania and by communicating to the entire Catholic world the values of the Christian East, which were not very accessible due to the existing divisions. The Greek-Catholic Church thus became an eloquent witness to the unity of the whole Church, showing how she embodies the values of the institutions, liturgical rites and ecclesiastical traditions which in different ways derive from the same apostolic tradition (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 1). **Witnesses and martyrs of unity**⁷. The way was never easy for the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania, as her suffering shows. She was asked to bear a painful

and demanding witness of fidelity to the evangelical requirement of unity. Thus she became in a special way the Church of the witnesses to unity, truth and love. Despite the many difficulties encountered, the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania increasingly appeared to the whole Christian world as an extraordinary witness to the indispensable value of ecclesial unity. But it was especially in the second half of the 20th century, in the age of communist totalitarianism, that your Church had to suffer a very harsh trial, rightly earning for herself the title: "Church of confessors and martyrs". It was then that the struggle between the *mysterium iniquitatis* (2 Thes 2: 7) and the *mysterium pietatis* (1 Tm 3: 16) at work in the world became even more apparent. It is also since that time that the glory of martyrdom has shone with greater brightness on the face of your Church, like a light reflected in Christian consciences throughout the world, prompting admiration and gratitude.⁸ Moved by this awareness, I made the most of every opportunity to have news of you, dear brothers and sisters, and I would now like to offer you a further expression of my solidarity and support. When I was able to pray with you last year at the Catholic cemetery of Bucharest during my pilgrimage to your land, I did so bearing in my heart the entire Church of Christ and, with the whole Church, I knelt in silence at the tombs of your martyrs. We do not even know many of their burial places, because their persecutors deprived them of even this last mark of distinction and respect. But their names are inscribed in the Book of the Living, and each one has received "a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it" (Rv 2: 17). The blood of these martyrs is a leaven of Gospel life which is not only active in your land, but also in many other parts of the world. This "great multitude" (Rv 7: 9) clothed in white (cf. Rv 7: 13) of your Church's martyrs and confessors, "who have come out of the great tribulation, have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rv 7: 14), and who stand "before the throne of God" (Rv 7: 15), is resplendent with the illustrious names of Bishops such as Vasile Aftenie, Ioan Balan, Valeriu Traian Frentiu, Ioan Suciu, Tit Liviu Chinezu, Alexandru Rusu and Cardinal Iuliu Hossu. Like the men of prayer who "serve God day and night within his temple" (Rv 7: 15), they intercede for their people with the other martyrs and confessors, receiving from them true and deep veneration. May the witness of martyrdom and the profession of faith in Christ and in the unity of his Church rise like the incense of an evening sacrifice (cf. Ps 141: 2) to God's throne in the name of the whole Church, whose esteem and devotion they enjoy!

Revisiting the past: the purification of memory⁹. The splendour of the witness to faith and the generous service to unity must always be accompanied in the Church by a tireless commitment to truth, in which the dynamism of hope is purified and strengthened. This is the climate of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, in which the whole Church senses a duty to re-examine her past to recognize the inconsistencies committed by her children with regard to the teaching of the Gospel, and thus to be able to walk with a purified face towards the future desired by God. The current difficulties that your Church is encountering in her recovery since her suppression, as well as the limited human and material resources which dampen her enthusiasm, could be demoralizing. But Christians know that the greater the obstacles to be overcome, the more confidently they can rely on the help of God, who is near and walks at their side. This is also recalled in your very beautiful hymn "Cu noi este Dumnezeu", so full of meaning and so deeply impressed on your people's hearts. In this Jubilee your Church, along with the universal Church, has a duty to revisit her past, especially the period of persecution, in order to update her own "Martyrology". It is not an easy task due to the scarcity of sources and the time that has passed, a time too brief for making a sufficiently detached judgement, but long enough to expose regrettable omissions. Fortunately, many witnesses of the recent past are still alive. Therefore the necessary effort should be made to enrich the documentation of past events, so that future generations can know their history, after it has been critically weighed and is thus worthy of belief. In this perspective, it will be appropriate for the witness and martyrdom offered by your Church to be examined in the broader context of the suffering and persecution experienced by Christians in the 20th century. In my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I specifically referred to the martyrs of our century, "many of them nameless, "unknown

soldiers' as it were of God's great cause" (n. 37), and I said that "at the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a Church of martyrs.... The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants.... This witness must not be forgotten" (ibid.). In the faith and martyrdom of these Christians the unity of the Church appears in a new light. Their blood, shed for Christ and with Christ, is a sure foundation for seeking the unity of the whole Christian ecumene. In Bucharest I highlighted the fact that in Romania, too, you suffered together: "The communist regime suppressed the Church of the Byzantine-Romanian rite united with Rome and persecuted Bishops and priests, men and women religious and lay people, many of whom paid with blood for their fidelity to Christ.... I would also like to give due recognition to the members of the Romanian Orthodox Church and of other Churches and religious communities who suffered similar persecutions and grave restrictions. Death united our brothers and sisters in faith in the heroic witness of martyrdom: they have left us an unforgettable lesson of love for Christ and his Church" (*Arrival address*, Baneasa Airport, Bucharest, 7 May 1999, n. 4). In this regard, I also encourage you now, during the celebration of the Jubilee and the third centenary of your Union, to identify and appreciate the martyrs of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania, recognizing their merit in having given a considerable impetus to the cause of Christian unity.¹⁰ It will also be very useful to consider today's situation in the light of your history. For it seems necessary to make a thorough examination of the context, spirit and decisions of your Provincial Synods held in 1872, 1882 and 1900. The same revisiting of history should also concern other important events which have marked the history of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania. The example of the distinguished scholars of the Transylvanian School of Blaj, who have made a close examination of events, guided by serious historical and linguistic analysis, can serve as an important reference-point for this research in order to obtain reliable results. With this kind of re-examination, fundamental aspects for the theological, liturgical and spiritual tradition of the Greek-Catholic Church in Romania will certainly come to light. In this way, your Church's identity and her spiritual profile will appear with new vigour and thus contribute to the culture of Romania and of the whole Christian world. I wholeheartedly encourage and bless every effort made in this regard. There should also be a special effort to address the problem of the reception of the Second Vatican Council on the part of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania. Because of the persecutions at the time, your Church did not have the opportunity to participate fully in that historical event nor was the action of the Spirit clearly perceived. It was precisely that Council which devoted greater attention to the sensitive questions of the Eastern Catholic Churches, ecumenism and the Church in general. The Council's teaching was then continued by the subsequent Magisterium. I am pleased to see that the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania is currently involved in a long, laborious effort to accept fully all the Holy See's directives. **A sign of unity**¹¹. Thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit pluralism in the Church can shine with ineffable beauty without jeopardizing her unity. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council spoke of the treasures of the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome: "For in those Churches, which are distinguished by their venerable antiquity, there is clearly evident the tradition which has come from the Apostles through the Fathers and which is part of the divinely revealed, undivided heritage of the universal Church" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 1). Thus the entire Christian ecumene needs their voice and presence: "The holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy, and so form particular Churches or rites. Between those Churches there is such a wonderful communion that this variety, so far from diminishing the Church's unity, rather serves to emphasize it" (*ibid.*, n. 2). The Catholic Church, supported by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, has committed herself with all determination, especially in recent decades, to the quest for unity among Christ's disciples. My immediate Predecessors, starting with John XXIII of venerable memory, increased their efforts for ecumenical

reconciliation, especially with the Orthodox Churches, seeing this as a precise requirement of the Gospel and a response to the insistent promptings of the Holy Spirit. Under the merciful gaze of her Lord, the Church remembers her past, acknowledges the errors of her children, confesses their lack of love for their brethren in Christ and consequently asks forgiveness and forgives, seeking to re-establish full unity among Christians.¹² The attempt to seek full communion is inevitably conditioned by the historical context, the political situation and the dominant mentality of any era. In this regard, the Transylvanian Union conformed to the model of unity which prevailed after the Councils of Florence and Trent. At that time, it was the ardent longing for unity which brought the Romanians of Transylvania to union with the Church of Rome, and we are all deeply grateful to God for this gift. However, since communion among the Churches can never be considered a goal definitively reached, the gift of unity offered by the Lord Jesus once and for all must be answered with a constant attitude of acceptance, the fruit of each one's inner conversion. The changed circumstances of the present time require, in fact, that unity be pursued within a broader ecumenical horizon, in which we must be willing to listen to the Spirit and courageously rethink our relationships with the other Churches and with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, with the attitude of those who can "hope against all hope" (cf. *Rom* 4: 18).

Precisely with regard to the gift of unity, in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* I noted: "We are asked to respond to this gift responsibly, without compromise in our witness to the truth" (n. 34). It will therefore be necessary to reconsider the three-centuries-old history of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania with a new outlook, with a calm and serene approach to the events which have marked her way. Just as I encouraged the process of reviewing the ways in which the Petrine service is exercised within the Christian ecumene, while preserving the requirements that stem from the will of Christ (cf. Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, n. 95), so I urge you to start examining and bringing up to date the specific vocation of the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome in the new context, calling on all the Churches for the contribution of their study and reflection. The Theological Commissions established by the Pastors of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches as a whole should endeavour to work in this complex perspective. Christians are currently faced with the problem of "receiving the results already achieved. These cannot remain the statements of bilateral commissions but must become a common heritage. For this to come about and for the bonds of communion to be strengthened, a serious examination needs to be made, which, by different ways and means and at various levels of responsibility, must involve the whole People of God" (*ibid.*, n. 80). For "this process ... to be successful, its results must be made known in appropriate ways" (*ibid.*, n. 81). The quest for Christian unity, in love and truth, is a fundamental element for a more effective evangelization. In fact, the Church is one and indivisible by Christ's will. An authentic return to the liturgical and patristic traditions, a treasure which you share with the Orthodox Church, will contribute to reconciliation with the other Churches present in Romania. In this spirit of reconciliation the continuation of the dialogue between your Church and the Orthodox Church should be warmly encouraged at both the national and local levels, in the hope that all the disputed points will soon be clarified in a spirit of justice and Christian charity. At the same time, the spirit of dialogue requires that your Church should increasingly and gratefully discover the face of Christ Jesus traced by the Holy Spirit in her Sister Orthodox Church, and you should expect the same from her in your regard. Thus you will bear the witness that the Apostle Paul asks from the Christians of Rome (cf. *Rom* 12: 9-13). **Importance of prayer**¹³. For the Jubilee the Church seeks to renew herself in the joyful light of the risen Christ, inviting her children to respond to God's grace with a serious examination of conscience and the effort of purification and penance. It is a long process which began at the time of the Second Vatican Council and has not yet ended. We have rediscovered what has always been the holy root nourishing the Church: the Word of God, interpreted *factis et verbis* by the liturgy, the Councils, the Fathers and the saints. But we have also forcefully repeated that the principal source of unity in the Church is the Holy Trinity (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nn. 1-8). The Greek-Catholic Church of Romania is also rooted in the Word of God, in the teaching of the

Fathers and in the Byzantine tradition, but in addition finds her own particular expression in her union with the Apostolic See, in the mark of the 20th-century persecutions and in the Latin character of her people. All these elements form the identity of your Church, whose ultimate root is the Holy Trinity. These are her primary origin, the source "of living water" (*Jn 7: 38*), to which she should have constant recourse. It is my firm conviction that the return to the well-springs of the Church's traditions must be accompanied by a constant and fervent return to the Trinitarian Source. This will only be possible if each of us recovers that deep intimacy which is expressed in prayer. Prayer gives man strength and illumines his way. In the deep silence of the prayer experience, we can recognize the true image of the Church in her authentic and eternal identity, and can also discover that name known only to God which represents the truest identity of every Christian. For this reason the Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the third centenary of your Church's Union with Rome are a time of prayer to which God himself is inviting us. May the All-Holy Mother of God enlighten and accompany us, she who remains forever the perfect image of the Church and our advocate before God's throne. With this wish, I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing to my Venerable Brother Cardinal Alexandru Todea, Metropolitan Archbishop emeritus of Fagaras and Alba Iulia, to the current Archbishop-Metropolitan, Lucian Muresan, to my other Brothers in the Episcopate, and to the priests, the religious and all of you, dear faithful of the Greek-Catholic Church of Romania. *From the Vatican, 7 May 2000, the twenty-second year of my Pontificate.* Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana