



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
AT THE ECUMENICAL MEETING OF PRAYER**

*Washington
Sunday, 7 October 1979*

Dearly beloved in Christ,

1. I am grateful to the providence of God that permits me on my visit to the United States of America to have this meeting with other religious leaders, and to be able to join with you in prayer for the unity of all Christians.

It is indeed fitting that our meeting should occur just a short time before the observance of the fifteenth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Decree of Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Since the inception of my pontificate, almost a year ago, I have endeavored to devote myself to the service of Christian unity; for, as I stated in my first Encyclical, it is certain "that in the present historical situation of Christianity and of the world the only possibility we see of fulfilling the Church's universal mission, with regard to ecumenical questions, is that of seeking sincerely, perseveringly, humbly and also courageously the ways of drawing closer and of union" (Redemptor Hominis, 6). On a previous occasion, I said that the problem of division within Christianity is "binding in a special way on the Bishop of the ancient Church of Rome, founded on the preaching and the testimonies of the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul" (General Audience, January 17, 1979). And today I wish to reiterate before you the same conviction.

2. With great satisfaction and joy I welcome the opportunity to embrace you, in the charity of Christ, as beloved Christian brethren and fellow disciples of the Lord Jesus. It is a privilege to be able, in your presence and together with you, to give expression to the testimony of John, that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (1 Jn 4 :15), and to proclaim that "there is one Mediator between

God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (*1 Tim 2 :5*).

In the united confession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ, we feel great love for each other and great hope for all humanity. We experience immense gratitude to the Father, who has sent his Son to be our Savior, "the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world" (*1 Jn 2 :2*).

By divine grace we are united in esteem and love for Sacred Scripture, which we recognize as the inspired word of God. And it is precisely in this word of God that we learn how much he wants us to be fully one in him and in his Father. Jesus prays that his followers may be one "so that the world may believe ..." (*Jn 17 :21*). That the credibility of evangelization should, by God's plan, depend on the unity of his followers is a subject of inexhaustible meditation for all of us.

3. I wish to pay homage here to the many splendid ecumenical initiatives that have been realized in this country through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the last fifteen years there has been a positive response to ecumenism by the Bishops of the United States. Through their committee for ecumenical and interreligious affairs, they have established a fraternal relationship with other Churches and ecclesial Communities—a relationship which, I pray, will continue to deepen in the coming years. Conversations are in progress with our brothers from the East, the Orthodox. Here I wish to note that this relationship has been strong in the United States and that soon a theological dialogue will begin on a worldwide basis in an attempt to resolve those difficulties which hinder full unity. There are also American dialogues with the Anglicans, the Lutherans, the Reformed Church, the Methodists and the Disciples of Christ—all having a counterpart on the international level. A fraternal exchange exists likewise between the Southern Baptists and American theologians.

My gratitude goes to all who collaborate in the matter of joint theological investigation, the aim of which is always the full evangelical and Christian dimension of truth. It is to be hoped that, through such investigation, persons who are well prepared by a solid grounding in their own traditions will contribute to a deepening of the full historical and doctrinal understanding of the issues.

The particular climate and traditions of the United States have been conducive to joint witness in the defense of the rights of the human person, in the pursuit of goals of social justice and peace, and in questions of public morality. These areas of concern must continue to benefit from creative ecumenical action, as must the fostering of esteem for the sacredness of marriage and the support of healthy family life as a major contribution to the well-being of the nation. In this context, recognition must be given to the deep division which still exists over moral and ethical matters. The moral life and the life of faith are so deeply united that it is impossible to divide them.

4. Much has been accomplished but there is still much to be done. We must go forward, however, with a spirit of hope. Even the very desire for the complete unity in faith—which is lacking between us, and which must be achieved before we can lovingly celebrate the Eucharist together in

truth—is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, for which we offer humble praise to God. We are confident that through our common prayer the Lord Jesus will lead us, at a moment dependent on the sovereign action of his Holy Spirit, to the fullness of ecclesial unity.

Faithfulness to the Holy Spirit calls for interior conversion and fervent prayer. In the words of the Second Vatican Council : "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement ..." (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8) . It is important that every individual Christian search his or her heart to see what may obstruct the attainment of full union among Christians. And let us all pray that the genuine need for the patience to await God's hour will never occasion complacency in the status quo of division in faith. By divine grace may the need for patience never become a substitute for the definitive and generous response which God asks be given to his invitation to perfect unity in Christ.

And so, as we are gathered here to celebrate the love of God that is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, let us be conscious of the call to show supreme fidelity to the will of Christ. Let us together perseveringly ask the Holy Spirit to remove all division from our faith, to give us that perfect unity in truth and love for which Christ prayed, for which Christ died : "to gather together in unity the scattered children of God" (*Jn 11 :52*).

I offer my respectful greeting of grace and peace to those whom you represent, to each of your respective congregations, to all who long for the coming of "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (*Tit 2 :14*).

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