



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO POLAND AND HUNGARY

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS OF JOHN PAUL II
AT THE ECUMENICAL MEETING WITH THE PROTESTANT AND ORTHODOX HUNGARIAN
COMMUNITIES**

Calvinist Church of Debrecen

Sunday, 18 August 1991

1. I consider this ecumenical encounter not an act of external courtesy, but a moment of great significance on the path which the Lord himself set before his disciples when he prayed that they might be one as he and the Father are one (cf. Jn. 17:21-23). One of the reasons for the many pastoral journeys I have undertaken during my Pontificate is to reaffirm that *the Catholic Church is committed to the ecumenical movement with an irrevocable decision*, and she desires to contribute to it with all her possibilities. A fundamental aspect of my office as Bishop of Rome is to be of service to unity. It is my fervent hope therefore that my coming to Hungary may advance and encourage ecumenical relations among Christians.

2. I am well aware that this meeting would not have been possible in former times. A Pope visiting Hungary would not have come to Debrecen. The citizens of Debrecen would not have desired his presence. The changes that have taken place in this regard can be attributed to various factors which have a profound meaning for Christian life and witness. The Second Vatican Council speaks of a duty to scrutinize the "signs of the times" (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4), namely those events which speak to us of the presence and of the design of God who is the Lord of history. In the light of such signs, the Council clearly affirmed that *the movement for the restoration of unity among all Christians is "fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1)*

3. Among the "signs of the times" which we should note there is the *mutual esteem* which Christians feel towards one another today, even though they belong to communities which are still divided. In their approach to one another in the past, divided Christians tended to accentuate the ideas or practices of the other which they considered contrary to the will of Christ.

This tendency and the controversies which result from it may still not have been completely put aside. But today, through ecumenical dialogue, we have discovered common ground and convergence on many important points. There are also aspects in the life of the other which we joyfully recognize as the fruit of God's special gifts. I would repeat what I stated on a similar occasion: "It is no small achievement of the ecumenical movement that, after centuries of mistrust, we humbly and sincerely recognize in each other's communities the presence and fruitfulness of Christ's gifts at work. For this divine action in the lives of all of us we offer thanks to God" (John Paul II, *Meeting with the Representatives of Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities*, 2 [11 Sept. 1987]).

These areas of common ground belong to a heritage which is basic to all of us. They include faith in Jesus Christ, the one and only Saviour, love and veneration of Sacred Scripture, great esteem for Baptism as the beginning of "new life" in the Holy Spirit. There are also other concerns, which in the past may not have been given so much attention but which today stand out more and more as areas in which the various communities can fruitfully cooperate with each other. I am thinking, for example, of *joint prayer for common needs, shared concern for justice and peace in society, joint action to show solidarity* and to create conditions and structures for a more equitable distribution of the world's resources and for greater responsibility in their use.

4. There is a further "sign of the times" through which God manifests his will to us with regard to the ecumenical movement.

It consists in the fact that greater unity among the Churches and ecclesial communities *takes on even more importance today in the face of the modern challenges to Christian faith*. Our ancestors on this continent, even after the Reformation, shared the conviction, often taken for granted, that European society and culture had their source and inspiration in religious values: faith in the Triune God and in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the vision of life on earth as a pilgrimage to eternal life, the innate and inalienable value of the human person from conception until death.

Today, society tends to ignore and even repudiate much of this common heritage. While there are those who still militate against religious beliefs, the recent crumbling of the ideologies with which some European Governments thought to substitute the Gospel has created a vacuum. There are many people of good will who have never received the gift of faith. Others seek advancement and happiness in purely economic and material well-being. *There is no time to be lost in the mission of re-evangelization*; hence the urgency of promoting the work of Christian unity, since "the fact that the Good News of reconciliation is preached by Christians who are divided among themselves weakens their witness" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 50). How joyful and encouraging it is therefore when, in a society which includes many who are without God and without hope, we meet those with whom, to paraphrase Saint Paul, we are "drinking of the same Spirit" (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13).

This joyful empathy and esteem for one another contrasts sharply with the antipathy which

members of the various Christian communities have sometimes displayed towards other Christians. I am aware of the sad history of the preachers who were condemned to imprisonment and forced labour on the galleys, and whose fate is recalled here in this church. Other tragic events also come to mind. Today, such things are unthinkable. It is our present task to make even more progress in reciprocal esteem and fraternal love.

5. Mindful of history and of the theological differences between us, we are conscious of the enormity of the task before us. On the one hand, there is the objective difficulty of the goal towards which we must move. True ecumenism does not endorse ideas of religious indifference and relativism which insinuate that all religions are equally good and therefore that it is enough that they are practised with good will. No! Our search is a *quest together for unity in the one apostolic faith* that "was once for all delivered to the saints" (*Ibid.*, 3). On the other hand, there is the subjective difficulty felt by some who fear efforts to bring about greater unity because they think it will impose a uniformity which they will be unable to accept.

First, it should be said that within the context of the one apostolic faith, which ought to be the goal of our ecumenical endeavours, there is a legitimate diversity which is not opposed to the unity willed by God. The variety of gifts of the Spirit can *make truly rich the wedding-garment in which the Spouse of Christ ought to present herself to him*. The Church in fact is "a unity that embraces diversity and that is verified in diversity . . . The Church will always be a unity in diversity" (John Paul II, *Homily during the Holy Mass at the Globe Stadium in Stockholm, Sweden*, 1 [8 June 1989]). At the same time we must serenely recognize that "we are not yet in agreement as to how each of our Churches and ecclesial communities relates to the fullness of life and mission which flow from God's redemptive act through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (John Paul II, *Meeting with the Representatives of Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities*, 2 [11 Sept. 1987]) . In our search let us commit ourselves to dealing with each other, not in the spirit of conflict which so often characterized our relations in the past, but rather in the spirit of Saint Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians about love: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor. 13:4-5).

Ecumenism is not only a seed which divine Providence has put into the hearts of believers in recent times. It is also a fruit that God wants to bring to maturity in us. We are all responsible for its development.

6. In relations between divided Christians, there is another "sign of the times" in which the guidance of the Holy Spirit is particularly eloquent. Today we are more fully aware that *the progress of ecumenism implies metanoia or conversion*. The Second Vatican Council put it in this way: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from newness of attitudes..., from self-denial and unstinted love that yearnings for unity take their rise and grow toward maturity. We should therefore pray to the divine Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly

generosity toward them" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 7). This is really an echo of Saint Paul's challenge: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). This challenge is directed to us, both individually and in our communities.

A spirit of conversion will help us to put aside all caricatures of others and all temptations to falsify their views. It will make us aware of the good that the Holy Spirit works in them. A spirit of conversion enables each follower of Christ to look upon those belonging to other Christian communities more objectively, without prejudices, seeking to know them more fully as they see themselves. A spirit of conversion is essential in preparing the way for *the purification of our collective memories*, so that at every step in our advance towards unity we may be guided by truth alone.

7. A new Europe is struggling to take shape before our eyes. The great nation of Hungary is searching to redefine its goals after the recent momentous changes in Central and Eastern Europe. As Christians, the best service we can contribute at this time is *a renewed common witness to the Christian values which were the foundation of Europe and of Hungary*. Those values were not the result of fortuitous intuition or arbitrary consensus. They flowed from consideration of the mystery of man in the light of the inalienable dignity that comes to him from being *created* and *re-created* in the image and likeness of God. That dignity appears in all its truth and richness in the Incarnate Word, the only-begotten Son. Without Jesus Christ and his Gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16), it will not be possible to build a Europe of lasting peace, of justice and solidarity between individuals and peoples. Europe must be more than a community of shared interests; on a deeper level, its peoples have *a shared vocation to build, in Christ, the one great family of the children of God*.

In this time of change, the willingness of Christian communities to work together in restoring Europe to its Christian foundations is of special value. However, the task before Hungary and before Europe is greater than anything that our material and cultural resources alone can achieve. *Prayer is vital*. Our Saviour has promised that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them (cf. Mt. 18:19-20). If not just two or three but thousands of believers, who have been separated too long, are reunited in mutual love and common invocation, surely Christ will bless their efforts. If then we who are still divided can learn to pray together for our own continual conversion and for the conversion of our non-believing brothers and sisters who do not yet know God, but are searching for the truth, our heavenly Father will not refuse to grant us his Spirit, his forgiveness and his grace (cf. Lk. 11:9-13).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, *this very meeting is already a stage on the way towards the goal of unity*. The "signs of the times" tell us that the Spirit of the Lord is exhorting us to continue our course. Our immediate duty is to hear the exhortation of Saint Paul: to lead a life worthy of the calling which we have received, "with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one

another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-4). This is the hope and commitment which lie before us. This is the path of our growing together in solid faith and effective love. May God who began a good work in us bring it to completion (cf. Phil.1:6)!