



The Holy See

WELCOME ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW I

Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul

Tuesday, 29 June 2004

Your Holiness,

Venerable and Beloved Brothers of the Ecumenical Patriarchate,

1. Welcome in the name of the Lord! Our thanks go to him because he is granting us to meet today on the *Feast of Sts Peter and Paul*, who are also venerated in the Orthodox Liturgy as the *Protothronoi* [the first to be enthroned].

Let us also give thanks to God as we commemorate together the blessed encounter 40 years ago between my venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, and the venerable Patriarch Athenagoras I.

They met in Jerusalem, where Jesus was raised on the Cross to redeem humanity and to gather it into unity. *How providential that meeting was for the life of the Church*, and courageous and joyful at the same time! Inspired by trust and love for God, our enlightened Predecessors were able to overcome age-old prejudices and misunderstandings and set a wonderful example as pastors and guides of the People of God. In rediscovering each other as brothers, they felt a sentiment of deep joy that impelled them confidently to resume relations between the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople. May God reward them in his Kingdom!

2. Your Holiness, I welcome you with great affection and I am truly delighted to be able to offer you hospitality at this house in which the memory of the Holy Apostles lives on. Together with you, I greet those who have accompanied you, and in particular the Metropolitans and the Delegation of the Patriarchate; I also greet the Group of the faithful from the Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese in America and the Group of Professors and students from the Chambésy Institute of Orthodox Theology for Higher Studies, led by Bishop Makarios. I thank them all for their cordial presence.

In the past 40 years, our Churches have had *important opportunities for contact* that have fostered the spirit of reciprocal reconciliation. We cannot forget, for example, the exchange of visits between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I in 1967. I then cherish a vivid memory of my own Visit to the Phanar in 1979, and of the announcement with Patriarch Dimitrios I of the beginning of theological dialogue. I also remember Patriarch Dimitrios I's visit to Rome in 1987, and that of Your Holiness in 1995, which was the prelude to other important opportunities for meeting. These are many *signs of our common commitment to persevere in following the way on which we have set out*, so that Christ's desire may be fulfilled as soon as possible: *ut unum sint!*

3. *On this journey, we have certainly been oppressed by the memory of the painful events in our past history.* In particular, on this occasion we cannot forget what happened during the month of April 1204. An army that had set out to recover the Holy Land for Christendom marched on Constantinople, took it and sacked it, pouring out the blood of our own brothers and sisters in the faith. Eight centuries later, how can we fail to share *the same indignation and sorrow* that Pope Innocent III expressed as soon as he heard the news of what had happened? After so much time has elapsed, we can analyze the events of that time with greater objectivity, yet with an awareness of how difficult it is to investigate the whole truth of history.

In this respect, the Apostle Paul's recommendation is helpful to us: *"Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart"* (1 Cor 4: 5). Let us pray together, therefore, that the Lord of history will purify our memory of all prejudice and resentment and obtain for us that we may advance in freedom on the path to unity.

4. The example bequeathed to us by Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI that we are commemorating today also invites us to do this. May the memory of that encounter encourage a *leap forward in dialogue and in the reinforcement of our mutual, brotherly relations.* For this purpose, the theological dialogue through the "Joint Commission" will continue to be an important instrument. This is why I hope that it will be able to resume as soon as possible. Indeed, I am convinced of the urgent need for it, and it is my desire and that of my collaborators to avail ourselves of every possible means to foster the spirit of reciprocal acceptance and understanding, in fidelity to the Gospel and to our common apostolic Tradition. The old and ever new commandment of love, which the Apostle Paul echoed in his famous words: *"love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour"* (Rom 12: 10), urges us to take this path.

5. I entrust these resolutions of reconciliation and full communion to the Holy Apostles whom we commemorate today. Let us invoke them confidently, so that their heavenly intercession will strengthen us in the faith and make us persevere in the endeavour to satisfy Christ's desire as soon as possible. May Mary, Mother of the One who calls us all to full unity in her love, obtain this gift for us.

With these sentiments I renew to you, Your Holiness, and to all of you, my welcome guests, a most cordial greeting.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana