



The Holy See

JUBILEE PILGRIMAGE

OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO MOUNT SINAI

**ECUMENICAL MEETING AT THE NEW CATHEDRAL
OF OUR LADY OF EGYPT**

SPEECH OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

Cairo, 25 February 2000

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!” (2 Cor 13:14).

Your Holiness Pope Shenouda,

Your Beatitude Patriarch Stephanos,

Distinguished Representative of His Holiness Petros,

Bishops and Dignitaries of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of Egypt,

1. With the blessing of Saint Paul, which leads us directly to the heart of the mystery of Trinitarian communion, I greet all of you with deep affection and in the bonds of love which unite us in the Lord.

It is for me a great joy to be a pilgrim in the country which gave hospitality and protection to our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Family; as it is written in the Gospel of Saint Matthew: “Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’” (*Mt 2:14-15*).

Egypt has been home to the Church from the beginning. Founded upon the apostolic preaching and authority of Saint Mark, the Church of Alexandria soon became one of the leading

communities in the early Christian world. Venerable bishops like Saint Athanasius and Saint Cyril bore witness to faith in the Triune God and in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, as defined by the first Ecumenical Councils. It was in the desert of Egypt that monastic life originated, in both its solitary and communal forms, under the spiritual fatherhood of Saint Anthony and Saint Pachomius. Thanks to them and to the great impact of their spiritual writings, monastic life became part of our common heritage. During recent decades that same monastic charism has flourished anew, and it irradiates a vital spiritual message far beyond the borders of Egypt.

2. Today we give thanks to God that we are ever more aware of our common heritage, in faith and in the richness of sacramental life. We also have in common that filial veneration of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, for which the Coptic and all the Eastern Churches are renowned. And “when we speak about a common heritage, we must acknowledge as part of it, not only the institutions, rites, means of salvation and the traditions which all the communities have preserved and by which they have been shaped, but first and foremost this reality of holiness” (Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, 84). For faithfully guarding and preaching this heritage, the Church in Egypt has undergone heavy sacrifices and continues to do so. How many martyrs appear in the venerable Martyrology of the Coptic Church, which dates back to the terrible persecutions of the years 283-284! They gave glory to God in Egypt, through their unfaltering witness unto death!

3. From the beginning, this common apostolic tradition and heritage has been transmitted and explained in various forms which take account of the specific cultural character of peoples. As far back as the fifth century however, theological and non-theological factors, combined with a lack of fraternal love and understanding, led to painful divisions in the one Church of Christ. Mistrust and hostility arose between Christians, in contradiction with the fervent desire of our Lord Jesus Christ who prayed “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21).

Now, in the course of the twentieth century, the Holy Spirit has brought the Christian Churches and communities closer together in a movement of reconciliation. I recall with gratitude the meeting between Pope Paul VI and His Holiness Pope Shenouda III in 1973, and the *Common Christological Declaration* which they signed on that occasion. I give thanks for all those who contributed to that important achievement, especially the Pro Oriente Foundation in Vienna and the International Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Please God, this International Joint Commission, and the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church will soon function normally once more, especially in view of certain fundamental ecclesiological questions needing clarification.

4. I repeat what I wrote in my Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, that whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome (cf. No. 95). I therefore wish to renew the invitation to all “Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving

useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church” (No. 96). With regard to the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, I ask the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us, enlightening all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek together the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned (cf. *Homily*, 6 December 1987, 3; *Ut Unum Sint*, 95). Dear Brothers, there is no time to lose in this regard!

5. Our communion in the one Lord Jesus Christ, in the one Holy Spirit and in one baptism already represents a deep and fundamental reality. This communion enables us to bear common witness to our faith in a whole range of ways, and indeed it demands that we cooperate in bringing the light of Christ to a world in need of salvation. This common witness is all the more important at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium which present enormous challenges to the human family. For this reason too, there is no time to lose!

As a basic condition for this common witness, we must avoid anything which might lead, once again, to distrust and discord. We have agreed to avoid any form of proselytism, or methods and attitudes opposed to the exigencies of Christian love and what should characterize the relationship between Churches (cf. *Common Declaration* of Pope Paul VI and Pope Shenouda III, 1973). And we recall that true charity, rooted in total fidelity to the one Lord Jesus Christ and in mutual respect for each one's ecclesial traditions and sacramental practices, is an essential element of this search for perfect communion (*ibid.*).

We do not know each other sufficiently: let us therefore find ways to meet! Let us seek viable forms of spiritual communion, such as joint prayer and fasting, or mutual exchanges and hospitality between monasteries. Let us find forms of practical cooperation, especially in response to the spiritual thirst of so many people today, for the relief of their distress, in the education of the young, in securing humane conditions of life, in promoting mutual respect, justice and peace, and in advancing religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

6. At the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, on 18th January, I opened the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Paul-outside-the-Walls and crossed its threshold together with representatives of many Churches and Ecclesial Communities. Together with me, His Excellency Amba Bishoi of the Coptic Church, and representatives of the Orthodox Church and of the Lutheran Church raised the Book of the Gospels to the four cardinal points. This was a deeply symbolic expression of our common mission in the new millennium: together we have to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the saving message of life, love and hope for the world.

During that same liturgy, the Apostles Creed was proclaimed by three representatives of different Churches and Ecclesial Communities – the first part was proclaimed by the representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. Afterwards, we offered one another the sign of peace, and for me that joyful moment was a foreshadowing and a foretaste of the full communion which

we are striving to achieve among all Christ's followers. May the Spirit of God soon grant us the complete and visible unity for which we yearn!

7. I entrust this hope to the powerful intercession of the *Theotokos*, the Archetype of the Church. She is the all pure, all beautiful, all holy creature, able to "be the Church" as no other creature can ever be. Sustained by her maternal presence, we shall have the courage to admit our faults and hesitations, and seek the reconciliation which will enable us to "walk in love, as Christ loved us" (cf. *Eph* 5:2). Venerable Brothers, may the third Christian millennium be the millennium of our full unity in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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