



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES**

Clementine Hall

Thursday, 21 November 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Christ is the light of humanity”: so exhorts the [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church](#) of the [Second Vatican Ecumenical Council](#). The entire Church from East to West renders this testimony to the Son of God. That Church which, as the same Conciliar text goes on to highlight, is “present in all the nations of the earth.... All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit” (n. 13). “So that”, it adds, citing St John Chrysostom, “he who dwells in Rome knows those in the most distant parts to be his members (*Homily on John* 65, 1: pg 59, 361)”.

The memorable meeting of Vatican II also had the merit of explicitly recalling that in the ancient liturgies of the Oriental Churches, in their theology, spirituality and canonical discipline “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” (Decree [Orientalium Ecclesiarum](#), n. 1).

Today I am truly delighted to receive the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops, together with the Cardinals, the Metropolitans and Bishops who are members of the [Congregation for the Oriental Churches](#). I thank Cardinal Leonardo Sandri for the greeting which he addressed to me and I am grateful to him for the collaboration I receive from the Dicastery and from each one of you.

This Plenary Session intends to regain the grace of the [Second Vatican Council](#) and of the subsequent teaching on the Christian East. From an evaluation of the ground covered so far,

appropriate guidelines will emerge to support the mission entrusted by the Council to our brothers and sisters in the East: that of “fostering the unity of all Christians, in particular of Eastern Christians” (*ibid.*, n. 24). The Holy Spirit guided them in this task on the often difficult paths of history, nourishing in them their faith in Christ, in the Universal Church and in Peter’s Successor, even at great cost, not infrequently unto martyrdom. The entire Church is truly grateful to you for this!

Placing myself on the path traced out by my Predecessors, I wish to reaffirm that “holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the Chair of Peter which presides over the whole assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 13). Yes, authentic variety, legitimate variety, that which is inspired by the Spirit, does not injure unity but rather contributes to it; the Council tells us that this variety is necessary for unity!

This morning I was able to learn from the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops themselves about the situation of the various Eastern Churches: the blossoming vitality of those long oppressed under Communist regimes; the missionary dynamism of those which hail from the preaching of the Apostle St Thomas; the perseverance of those who live in the Middle East, not infrequently as a “little flock” in areas riven by hostility, conflict as well as by hidden persecution.

In your meeting you are addressing various issues regarding the internal life of the Eastern Churches and the size of the diaspora, which has grown considerably on every continent. Everything possible must be done so that the Council’s hopes are realized, by facilitating pastoral care both within the original territories as well as where Eastern communities have long been established, at the same time also fostering communion and fraternity with the communities of the Latin rite. To this effect, it may be useful to give new vitality to already existing consulting bodies between the individual Churches and the Holy See.

My thoughts turn in a special way to the Holy Land where Christ lived, died and rose again. In that land — I heard it today too from the voice of the Patriarchs present — the light of faith is not extinguished, indeed it shines resplendent. It is “the light of the East” which “has illumined the universal Church, from the moment when ‘a rising sun’ appeared above us (cf. Lk 1:78): Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*, n. 1). Every Catholic therefore owes a debt of thanks to the Churches that live in that region. From these Churches we may learn, among other things, the effort of the daily exercise of the spirit of ecumenism and of interreligious dialogue. The geographical, historical and cultural context in which they have lived for centuries has indeed made them natural interlocutors with numerous other Christian confessions and with other religions.

Great concern arises from the condition of life faced by Christians who in many parts of the Middle

East suffer gravely as a consequence of the current tensions and conflicts underway. Tears still flow in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and other areas of the Holy Land. The Bishop of Rome will not rest while there are still men and women of any religion, whose dignity is wounded and who are deprived of their basic needs for survival, robbed of their future, or forced to live as fugitives and refugees. Today, we join the Pastors of the Oriental Churches, in appealing that the right of everyone to a dignified life and to freely profess one's own faith be respected. We must not resign ourselves to thinking of a Middle East without Christians, who for 2,000 years have confessed the name of Jesus, and have been fully integrated as citizens into the social, cultural and religious life of the nations to which they belong.

The suffering of the smallest and weakest, coupled with the silence of the victims poses the insistent question: "What of the night?" (Is 21:11). Let us continue to keep watch, like the watchman in the Bible, certain that the Lord will not withhold his help from us. I turn therefore to the entire Church to exhort her to pray, that she may obtain reconciliation and peace from the merciful heart of God. Prayer disarms ignorance and leads to dialogue where there is open conflict. If our prayer is sincere and persistent, it will make our voice humble and firm, capable of being heard by the leaders of nations.

Lastly, my thought goes to Jerusalem, our spiritual birthplace (cf. Ps 87[86]:5). I wish her every consolation, so that she may truly be a prophecy of that definitive convocation, from East to West, promised by God (cf. Is 43:5). May Blesseds [John XXIII](#) and [John Paul II](#), who were tireless peacemakers on earth, be our intercessors in Heaven, with the All Holy Mother of God, who has given us the Prince of Peace. Upon each of you and upon the beloved Eastern Churches I invoke the Blessing of the Lord.