



# The Holy See

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**APOSTOLIC LETTER**  
**OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF**  
**JOHN PAUL II**  
**FOR THE FOURTH CENTENARY**  
**OF THE UNION OF BREST**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters!* The day is drawing near when the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church will celebrate the fourth centenary of the union between the Bishops of the Metropolia of Kievan Rus' and the Apostolic See. The union was effected at the meeting of representatives of the Metropolia of Kiev with the Pope on 23 December 1595 and was solemnly proclaimed at Brest-Litovsk on the River Bug on 16 October 1596. Pope Clement VIII, in the Apostolic Constitution *Magnus Dominus et laudabilis nimis*,<sup>1</sup> announced the union to the whole Church and in the Apostolic Letter *Benedictus sit Pastor*<sup>2</sup> he addressed the Bishops of the Metropolia, informing them that the union had taken place. The Popes followed with care and affection the often tragic and sorrowful journey of this Church. Here I would like to mention especially the memorable Encyclical Letter *Orientalis omnes*, in which Pope Pius XII, in December 1945, recalled the 350th anniversary of the restoration of full communion with the See of Rome.<sup>3</sup> The Union of Brest opened a new page in the history of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Today that Church wishes to sing with joy a hymn of thanksgiving and praise to the One who, once more, has brought it back from death to life, and it wishes to set forth with renewed enthusiasm on the path marked out by the Second Vatican Council. Joining the faithful of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in this thanksgiving and petition are the Greek Catholic Churches of the diaspora which date back to the Union of Brest, together with the other Eastern Catholic Churches and the entire Church. As the Bishop of Rome, I too wish to unite myself to the Catholics of the Byzantine tradition in those lands. For many years, during my pastoral ministry in Poland, I sensed a physical as well as a spiritual closeness with that Church, which was then undergoing such difficult trials. After my election to the See of Peter, I considered it a pressing duty, following the example of my Predecessors, to speak out in defence of its right to exist and freely to profess its faith, at a time when both these rights were being denied. I now have the privilege of joyfully sharing in its celebration of these days of regained freedom. *In search of unity*<sup>2</sup>. The celebrations commemorating the Union of Brest must be seen in the context of the Millennium of the Baptism of the Rus'. Seven years ago, in 1988, that event was celebrated with great solemnity. For the occasion I published two documents: the Apostolic Letter *Euntes in mundum* of 25 January 1988,<sup>5</sup> for the whole Church, and the Message *Magnum Baptismi donum*, of 14 February of the same year,<sup>6</sup> addressed to Ukrainian Catholics. It was an occasion for celebrating a moment of fundamental importance for the Christian and cultural identity of those peoples, a moment of unique significance, since at that time the Churches of the Byzantine tradition and the Church of Rome were still living in full

communion. After the division which damaged the unity between the West and the Byzantine East, frequent and intense efforts were made to restore full communion. I wish to mention two particularly significant events: the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, and above all the Council of Florence in 1439, when protocols of union with the Eastern Churches were signed. Unfortunately, various causes prevented the promise and potential of those agreements from being realized. The Bishops of the Metropolia of Kiev, in restoring communion with Rome, made explicit reference to the decisions of the Council of Florence, a Council which had numbered among its participants representatives from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In this context, the figure of Metropolitan Isidore of Kiev stands out. As a faithful interpreter and defender of the decisions of that Council, he had to endure exile for his convictions. The Bishops who promoted the union and the members of their Church retained a lively awareness of their original close ties to their Orthodox brethren, together with a full consciousness of the Oriental identity of their Metropolia, an identity which was also to be upheld after the union. In the history of the Catholic Church, it is a highly significant fact that this just desire was respected and that the act of union did not involve passing over to the Latin tradition, as some thought would happen. Their Church saw an acknowledgment of its right to be governed by its own hierarchy with a specific discipline and to maintain its Eastern liturgical and spiritual heritage. ***Between persecution and growth***<sup>3</sup>. After the union, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church enjoyed a period in which its ecclesiastical structures flourished, with resulting benefits for religious life, the education of the clergy and the spiritual commitment of the faithful. With remarkable farsightedness, great importance was attached to education. Thanks to the valuable contribution of the Basilian Order and other Religious Congregations, there was a great growth in the study of the sacred sciences and the nation's culture. In the present century, a figure of extraordinary prestige, in this regard as well as in his witness of suffering borne for Christ, was Metropolitan Andrii Sheptycky, whose education and fine spiritual qualities were combined with outstanding organizational gifts. He founded schools and academies, supported theological studies and the human sciences, the press and sacred art, and sought to preserve historical memories. And yet, all this ecclesial vitality was continually marked by the tragedy of misunderstanding and opposition. An illustrious victim in this regard was the Archbishop of Polock and Vitebsk, Josaphat Kuntsevych, whose martyrdom merited the unfading crown of eternal glory. His body now lies in the Vatican Basilica, where it is continuously venerated with devotion and gratitude by Catholics from throughout the world. The difficulties and trials continued unabated. Pope Pius XII recalled them in the Encyclical Letter *Orientalis omnes*. After describing the earlier persecutions, he predicted the tragic persecution which would take place under the atheistic regime.<sup>7</sup> Outstanding among the heroic witnesses to the rights not only of the faith but also of human conscience in those difficult years is the figure of Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj: his courage in enduring exile and prison for 18 years and his indomitable confidence in the resurrection of his Church make him one of the most powerful figures among the confessors of the faith in our time. Nor should his many companions in punishment be forgotten, particularly Bishops Hryhory Khomyshyn and Josaphat Kocylowskyj. These tempestuous events shook the Church in the homeland to its roots. But Divine Providence had already begun to make it possible for many of its members to find a way of escape for themselves and their people. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, great waves of emigrants began to cross the ocean, settling above all in Canada, the United States of America, Brazil, Argentina and Australia. The Holy See took care to be close to them, by providing assistance and establishing pastoral structures for them in their new homes, including the establishment of their own Eparchies. At the time of trial, during the atheistic persecution in their native land, the voice of these believers could thus be raised, in full freedom, with strength and courage. In the international forum they defended the right of their persecuted brethren to religious freedom, and thus strengthened the Second Vatican Council's appeal for religious freedom,<sup>8</sup> and the efforts made in this regard by the Holy See.<sup>4</sup> The whole Catholic Community recalls with deep emotion the victims of such great suffering: the martyrs and confessors of the faith of the Church in Ukraine offer us a magnificent lesson in fidelity

even at the price of life itself. And we, the favoured witnesses of their sacrifice, are aware that they helped to maintain the dignity of a world which seemed overwhelmed by atrocities. They knew the truth, and the truth set them free. Christians in Europe and throughout the world, pausing in prayer before the concentration camps and prisons, should be grateful for the light which they gave: it was the light of Christ, which they caused to shine in the darkness. For long years the darkness seemed in the eyes of the world to prevail, but it was not able to extinguish that light, which was the light of God and the light of man, wounded but not laid low. This inheritance of suffering and glory today stands at a historic crossroads: now that the chains of imprisonment have been broken, the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine has begun again to breathe in freedom and to regain fully its own active role in the Church and in history. This task, difficult yet providential, today calls for particular reflection, that it may be carried out with wisdom and farsightedness. ***In the wake of the Second Vatican Council***<sup>5</sup>. The celebration of the Union of Brest should be lived and interpreted in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. This is perhaps the most important aspect for understanding the significance of the anniversary. It is well known that the Second Vatican Council made a special point of studying the mystery of the Church, and that one of the most important documents which it produced was the Constitution *Lumen gentium*. Precisely because of this detailed study the Council takes on a particular ecumenical significance. This is confirmed by the Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, which presents a very enlightened programme of activities to be carried out in the work for Christian unity. Thirty years after the conclusion of the Council, I wished to reiterate this programme with my Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, published on 25 May of this year.<sup>9</sup> This Encyclical traces the ecumenical progress which has been made since the Second Vatican Council and, at the same time, looking to the third millennium of the Christian era, it seeks to open up new possibilities for the future. Putting the celebrations of the coming year in the context of a reflection on the Church, as proposed by the Council, I am anxious above all to encourage a deeper understanding of the proper role which the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is called to play today in the ecumenical movement.<sup>6</sup> There are those who see the existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches as a difficulty on the road of ecumenism. The Second Vatican Council did not fail to face this problem, indicating possibilities for solutions both in the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, and in the Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, which was specifically dedicated to these Churches. Both documents reflect a spirit of ecumenical dialogue with the Eastern Churches not in full communion with the See of Rome, in such a way that the richness which the other Churches share with the Catholic Church can be appreciated, and that the quest for an ever fuller and deeper communion may be founded on this shared richness. In fact, "ecumenism is directed precisely to making the partial communion existing between Christians grow towards full communion in truth and charity".<sup>10</sup> To promote dialogue with the Byzantine Orthodox Churches, there was set up, after the Second Vatican Council, a special Mixed Commission which also included among its members representatives of the Eastern Catholic Churches. In various documents efforts have been made to arrive at a deeper and greater understanding between the Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Catholic Churches, efforts which have not been without positive results. In my Apostolic Letter *Orientalium lumen*<sup>11</sup> and in my Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*<sup>12</sup> I have already written of the elements of sanctification and truth<sup>13</sup> common to Eastern and Western Christianity, and of the desirable path to follow in the search for full communion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, in the light of the greater ecclesiological understanding brought about by the Second Vatican Council: "Today we know that unity can be achieved through the love of God only if the Churches want it together, in full respect for the traditions of each and for necessary autonomy. We know that this can take place only on the basis of the love of Churches which feel increasingly called to manifest the one Church of Christ, born from one Baptism and from one Eucharist, and which want to be sisters".<sup>14</sup> The deepening of knowledge of the doctrine on the Church, brought about by the Council and continuing since the Council, has marked out what can be called a new path on the journey to unity: the path of the dialogue of truth nourished and sustained by the

dialogue of charity (cf. Eph 4: 15).<sup>7</sup> The shift from an underground existence has meant a radical change in the situation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church: this Church has found itself facing the grave problems of rebuilding the structures of which it had been completely deprived and, more generally, it has had to commit itself to rediscovering itself fully, not only from within, but also in relation to the other Churches. Thanks be to God for having enabled it to celebrate this jubilee with religious freedom regained. Thanks be to God also for the growth of the dialogue of charity, whereby significant progress has been made on the road to the much desired reconciliation with the Orthodox Churches. Numerous migrations and deportations have redrawn the religious geography of those lands; many years of official State atheism have profoundly affected people's minds; there is still not enough clergy to respond to the immense needs of religious and moral reconstruction: these are some of the more dramatic challenges facing all of the Churches. In the face of these difficulties a common witness of charity is required, in order that the proclamation of the Gospel may not be impeded. As I said in my Apostolic Letter *Orientalis lumen*, "today we can co-operate in proclaiming the Kingdom or we can become the upholders of new divisions".<sup>15</sup> May the Lord guide our feet into the way of peace. ***The blood of the martyrs***<sup>8</sup>. In the new-found freedom we cannot forget the persecution and martyrdom which the Churches of that region, both Catholic and Orthodox, suffered in their own flesh. This is an important aspect for the Church of all times, as I recalled in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*.<sup>16</sup> It concerns a particularly significant heritage of the Churches of Europe, which remain profoundly marked by it: this needs to be studied in the light of the Word of God. An integral part of this religious memory of ours is therefore the duty to call to mind the meaning of martyrdom, to propose the actual figures of those witnesses of faith to the veneration of everyone, in the awareness that even today the saying of Tertullian retains its full meaning: "*Sanguis martyrum, semen Christianorum*".<sup>17</sup> We Christians already have a common martyrology in which God maintains and brings about communion among the baptized by the supreme demand of faith, manifested in the sacrifice of life itself. Real, if imperfect communion, already present between Catholics and Orthodox in their ecclesial life, reaches perfection in all that we "consider the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (cf. Eph 2:13)".<sup>18</sup> Remembrance of the martyrs cannot be erased from the memory of the Church or of humanity: whether victims of the ideologies of the East or of the West, all of them are brought together in fellowship by the violence whereby hatred for the faith violated the dignity of the human person, created by God "in his image and likeness". ***The Church of Christ is one***<sup>9</sup>. "*Credo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam*". This profession of faith contained in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is common to both Catholic and Orthodox Christians: it emphasizes not only that they believe in the unity of the Church, but also that they live and wish to live in the one and indivisible Church as it was founded by Jesus Christ. The differences between Christianity in the East and in the West which arose and developed in the course of history are for the most part diversities of cultural origin and of tradition. In this sense, "legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendour and contributes greatly to the fulfilment of her mission".<sup>19</sup> Pope John XXIII was fond of repeating: "What unites us is much greater than what divides us". I am convinced that this attitude can be a great benefit to all the Churches. More than 30 years have gone by since the Pope made this statement. In this period of time there have been many indications which suggest to us that Christians have made progress in this direction. Eloquent signs of this progress have been the fraternal meetings between Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, and those which I myself have had with the Ecumenical Patriarchs Dimitrios and, more recently, Bartholomaios, and with other venerable Patriarchs of the Churches of the East. All this, together with the many initiatives involving meetings and dialogue which are being promoted everywhere in the Church, encourages us to have hope: the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity, does not cease to work among Christians still separated from one another. And yet human weakness and sin continue to resist the Spirit of

unity. Sometimes one even has the impression that there are forces ready to do almost anything in order to slow down, and even put an end to, the movement towards Christian unity. But we cannot give in: daily we must find the courage and strength, which at one and the same time are the gift of the Spirit and the result of human effort, to continue on the path already undertaken.<sup>10</sup> In recalling the Union of Brest we must ask ourselves what this event means today. It was a union which concerned only a particular geographical region, but it is relevant for the entire field of ecumenism. The Eastern Catholic Churches can make a very important contribution to ecumenism. The Council's Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* reminds us that "the Eastern Churches in communion with the Apostolic See of Rome have a special role to play in promoting the unity of all Christians, particularly Easterners, according to the principles of this sacred Synod's Decree on Ecumenism: first of all by prayer, then by the example of their lives, by religious fidelity to ancient Eastern traditions, by greater mutual knowledge, by collaboration, and by a brotherly regard for objects and attitudes".<sup>20</sup> From this it follows that Eastern Catholics are to commit themselves to living profoundly what the Decree lays out. They are asked to make a confession of faith full of humility and gratitude to the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church towards the fulfilment promised her by the Redeemer of the world. ***Time of prayer***<sup>11</sup>. Prayer will therefore be the fundamental element which should mark the celebration of this jubilee. Such prayer above all involves giving thanks for all that has been accomplished, down the centuries, by commitment to the Church's unity, and especially for the impulse given to the search for unity as a result of the Second Vatican Council. This prayer is one of thanksgiving to the Lord, who guides the unfolding of history, for the situation of new-found religious freedom in which this jubilee is being celebrated. It is also an appeal to the Spirit-Paraclete, that he may cause to flourish everything which promotes unity, and may give courage and strength to all those who commit themselves, according to the guidelines of the Council's Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, to this work blessed by God. It is a plea for the gift of brotherly love, and for the forgiveness of offences and injustices suffered in the course of history. It is a petition that the power of the living God will bring good even out of the cruel and many-faceted evil caused by acts of human malice. This prayer also expresses hope for the future of the ecumenical journey: the power of God is greater than all human weaknesses, whether old or new. If this jubilee of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, on the threshold of the third millennium, marks a step forward towards full Christian unity, this result will be first of all the work of the Holy Spirit. ***Time of reflection***<sup>12</sup>. The jubilee celebrations should also be a time of reflection. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church must first of all ask itself what full communion with the Apostolic See meant for it in the past, and what it will mean for it in the future. In a spirit of humble thanksgiving, the Greek Catholic Church will give glory to God, for its heroic fidelity to the Successor of Peter and, under the action of the Holy Spirit, it will understand that today this same fidelity commits it to fostering the unity of all the Churches. This fidelity cost it sufferings and martyrdom in the past: this is a sacrifice offered to God in order to implore the hoped-for union. Faithfulness to the ancient Oriental traditions is one of the means available to the Eastern Catholic Churches for promoting Christian unity.<sup>21</sup> The Council's Decree *Unitatis redintegratio* is very explicit when it declares: "All should realize that it is of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve, and foster the exceedingly rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches, in order faithfully to preserve the fullness of Christian tradition, and to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians".<sup>22</sup> ***A memory entrusted to Mary***<sup>13</sup>. We cannot fail to entrust the yearning for full Christian unity to the Mother of Christ, she who is ever present in the work of the Lord and of his Church. Chapter Eight of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* points to her as the one who goes before us on our earthly pilgrimage of faith and is tenderly present to the Church which, at the end of the second millennium, is working to re-establish among all those who believe in Christ that unity which the Lord wills for them. Because she is the Mother of the one Christ, she is the Mother of unity. Since Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, gave birth to the Son of God, who received from her his human body, she ardently wills the visible unity of all believers who make up the Mystical Body of Christ. The

eneration of Mary, which unites East and West so intimately, will serve, I am convinced, the cause of unity. The Most Holy Virgin, already present everywhere in our midst both in so many sacred buildings and in the life of faith of so many families continuously speaks of unity, a unity for which she constantly intercedes. If today, in commemorating the Union of Brest, we recall the marvellous wealth of veneration that the Christian people of the Ukraine have offered to the Mother of God, we cannot but draw from this admiration for the history, spirituality and prayer of those peoples the consequences for unity which are so closely linked to those treasures. Mary, who has inspired in their trials fathers and mothers, young people, the sick and the aged; Mary, the column of fire capable of guiding so many martyrs of the faith, is certainly at work in preparing the hoped-for union of all Christians: in the light of this, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church certainly has its own role to play. To Mary the Church offers her thanks and asks her to make us share her concern for unity. With filial trust let us abandon ourselves to her, that we may be with her where God will be all in all. To you, dear Brothers and Sisters, I impart my Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, on 12 November, Memorial of Saint Josaphat, in the year 1995, the eighteenth of my*

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*Pontificate.*

**NOTES**1) Cf. *Bullarium romanum* VI/2 (1594-1602), 87-92.2) Cf. A. Welykyj, *Documenta Pontificum Romanorum Historiam Ucrainae illustrantia*, t. I, p. 257-259.3) Cf. AAS 38 (1946), 33-63.4) Cf. John Paul II, Letter to Cardinal Myroslav I. Lubachivsky, Major Archbishop of Lviv of the Ukrainians (25 March 1995), 3: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 5 May 1995, p. 65) Cf. AAS 80 (1988), 935-956.6) Cf. *ibid.*, 988-997.7) Cf. AAS 38 (1946), 54-57. Those fears would be disturbingly confirmed a few years later, as the same Pope precisely brought out in the Encyclical Epistle *Orientalis Ecclesias* (15 December 1952): AAS 45 (1953), 7-10.8) Cf. Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*.9) Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 31 May 1995, 1-8.10) *Ibid.*, n. 14, loc. cit., 2.11) Cf. nn. 18-19; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 May 1995, 4.12) Cf. nn. 12-14; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 31 May 1995, 2.13) Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3.14) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen* (2 May 1995), n. 20; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 May 1995, 4.15) N. 19; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 May 1995, 4.16) Cf. AAS 87 (1995), 29-30; Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, n. 84; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 31 May 1995, 7.17) *Apol.* 50, 13: CCL I, 171.18) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, n. 84: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 31 May 1995, 7.19) *Ibid.*, n. 50, loc. cit., 5.20) N. 24.21) Cf. *ibid.*22) N. 15. Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana