



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL JOSEPH SLIPYJ
FOR THE MILLENIUM OF CHRISTIANITY
IN RUS (THE UKRAINE)**

To Our Esteemed Brother Joseph Cardinal Slipyj

*Major Archbishop of Lwow of the Ukrainians*¹. When on the twentieth of November last we granted you, our Esteemed Brother, an audience together with the other members of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Ukraine, you recalled that the completion of the first millennium since the Christian faith was brought into the region of "Rus" is approaching. At the same time you made known to us the proposal to prepare yourself and the whole community of your Church for that important Jubilee during the next ten years. However among the various forms the celebration of the Jubilee will take, the highlight will be the great pilgrimage to the Holy Land, that is, to those places where the Divine Redeemer once uttered these words: "Going therefore teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28,19). This proposal, which your Episcopate has thus made known, appealed strongly to us. For it takes account of the events of past ages and of the more recent age, which are linked with the whole work of evangelization in the Ukrainian nation whose known accomplishments are especially dear to us and are the object of our attention.² Furthermore the very character of this commemoration, which will bring to mind the beginnings of Christianity in "Rus", even now permits us with a single glance of the mind, as it were, to comprehend what sort of a millennium that has been, and likewise takes us right into the course and movement of events which are closely connected with the history of a people and a nation in which the hand of Divine Providence is seen to be present. The hand of that Providence, we say, which through the complicated changes of human fortunes arranged everything beforehand and also brings everything to that very end which more fully corresponds to his merciful decrees. Moved, therefore, by the impulse of a living faith, we must have confidence in the Divine Justice, which is at the same time Mercy, and we must have confidence in this same Mercy in which Justice is shown at the end. Indeed in it not the life alone of every man "who comes into the world" but also the history of peoples and nations through which Divine Providence writes the history, of all of us individually, will discover its proper level.³ Hence we turn our thoughts to those days when Prince Vladimir of Kiev and the whole province of "Rus" together with him accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ and received the grace of baptism. In fact, with his hidden designs, God in his wisdom had already prepared the way for that favourable and joyous event from the start of the ninth century when the just developing state of Kiev had begun to establish close links of a political and commercial nature with Byzantium. These relationships begun with the Greeks—as well as with other neighbouring Slavonic peoples who had already likewise embraced the Christian faith—also contributed greatly to the effective spread

of the same religion among the inhabitants of "Rus". The soldiers were the first to be converted—although the instances were scattered and individual—and the merchants of Prince Inguarus who had come to know the peoples outside. Then came Princess Olga, Inguarus's wife, who succeeded her husband at his death, and was the first member of the royal house to profess Christianity. Then several from the retinue of Boiarus followed her example. And so we reach the year 988 when Prince Vladimir, the nephew of the above-mentioned Olga decided to make the Christian faith known to the inhabitants of his state and he ordered all the inhabitants of the chief city to be baptised publicly and collectively in the river Broysthene (Dnieper) in the presence of himself, his family, and the Greek Clergy. And so in this way he began to spread the faith first within the boundaries of his realm, then throughout the neighbouring parts surrounding the province of "Rus" situated to the east and the north. Therefore with the nearness of the commemoration of the millennium of this same historic event, one must be very glad that what Christ our Lord commanded before his Ascension has been happily carried out also in the holy region of "Rus". Likewise one must thank profusely the God who is One and Three in whose name your ancestors were baptised.⁴ The Christian faith from the city of Rome came to "Rus" of Kiev through the city of Constantinople. It was from there that Catholic missionaries set out and were the first to bring the gospel with them to your ancestors whom they washed with the saving water of baptism. Moreover that took place when the Church in the West and the East was preserving its unity, although it drew abundantly from the two different traditions and belonged to two different human cultures: from this flowed the remarkable richness of the universal Church. It was only in the eleventh century that the division came which brought great sorrow and anguish both to the Christians of that time and to the followers of Christ in the succeeding centuries even down to our own day. Since "Rus" of Kiev—with the spread of the Christian faith which had been brought there at the end of the tenth century after Christ—on account of its geographical position was found to be situated within the ambit of authority of the Eastern Church, the centre of which was, as it were, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, it is not surprising that several solutions put forward for healing the unity which had been broken were to be met with rather frequently in "Rus". For the present it suffices to recall here the discussions about that unity held at the end of the fourteenth century and the attempts made—alas unsuccessfully—in the Councils of Constance and Basel and finally in the Council of Florence where Isidore the Metropolitan of Kiev strongly promoted and sought the unity of the Eastern and Western Church which was so greatly to be desired. Nevertheless, when that Council was over, it is well known that Isidore, that same Metropolitan whom the Supreme Pontiff appointed as his Legate 'a latere' in Lithuania, Livonia, and Russia, whom he had raised to the dignity of Cardinal and whom his people praised very much on account of the union of the Churches that had been brought about, suffered much because of his devoted ecumenical zeal—he was even thrown into prison in Moscow and having escaped from there he finally arrived in Rome from where he directed the whole cause of unity. But the more serious conditions which prevailed in his fatherland at length made the high hopes of unity, which had been seen in the Council of Florence, come to nothing. Nevertheless the desire to return to communion with the Apostolic See was always with the Ruthenian Bishops. In December 1594 and in July 1595 they declared that they were ready to enter upon the path of unity with Rome and so they sent some representatives to discuss that very subject. Therefore the flame of unity which was kindled by Isidore the Metropolitan at the Council of Florence and which because of rather strong pressures from outside had grown dim for more than one hundred and fifty years, finally began to burn and opened the way for the Brest-Litovsk union of which we will speak later. However that may be, these facts and events bear witness to the fact that the Church was never happy about the sad state of her disunity and she has always considered it to be contrary to the will of Christ the Lord. However much importance the Church attaches to, and however clearly she respects, the different traditions and historical and cultural differences of the people she embraces, nevertheless she does not cease to search for more suitable ways through which that unity may be restored. The words of the priestly prayer of Jesus "Holy Father keep them . . . that they maybe

one" (Jn 17:11) were such that from then on they could never escape from the memory of the disciples and followers of him who had uttered them the night before he died on the Cross.⁵ Therefore from these sources and regions the union of the Churches which took place in the year 1596 at Brest-Litovsk, came about. Without doubt that union entered the whole historical context of the Ruthenian, Lithuanian, and Polish peoples who at that time lived in the one kingdom. But although the same history in common belongs to the past, nevertheless the religious and ecclesial influence of that union of Brest continues even now and is bearing abundant fruit. The origin of this fruitfulness was and, without a doubt, is the blood shed by Saint Josaphat, Bishop and Martyr. He put his seal, as it were, on the difficult work of uniting the disunited Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, that union has had a good effect on the lives of so many bishops and priests and other fearless confessors of the faith even down to our own day. In the past, as today, the Apostolic See has always attributed a special importance to this same unity which shines forth amid the very differences of the Byzantine rite and ecclesial tradition, in the Slavonic liturgical language, in the ecclesiastical chant and in all the forms of devotion which are so deeply ingrained in the history of your people. For these things reveal its spirit and in some definitive way show the peculiar nature as well as the complexity of the matter itself. That is confirmed, for example, when sons and daughters of the Ukrainian people leave their own state. Even as immigrants they still retain their association with their Church which through its traditions, language and liturgy stays with them as if it were a spiritual "fatherland" in foreign lands. Indeed in each of these circumstances the special qualities of the cross of Christ, which so many of you, dear brothers, have carried on your shoulders, are easily detected. This same cross has already played its part in your own life, our esteemed brother, and even in the lives of many of your brothers in the Episcopate who, whilst enduring sorrows and injustices for Christ, were faithful to the cross right up to their last breath. The same must be said of many other priests, men and women religious, and the faithful laity of your Church. Fidelity, then, to the cross and to the Church gives a special witness by which the faithful of your nation prepare themselves at this time to celebrate the first millennium of Christianity in "Rus".⁶ The Second Vatican Council resumed afresh the great work of ecumenism. Indeed while she tries new ways more suited to the mentality of the people of our times, the Church is anxious to promote Christian unity. Also other Christian communities, among whom are to be found Churches in their own right or "autonomous" Churches in the East, are likewise proposing the same thing among themselves at the same time. This is clearly shown by several declarations, pronouncements, and delegations. But it is shown especially in the common prayer by which we are all united to carry out the will of our Lord expressed in his prayer: "Father... that they may be one" (Jn 17:11), The ecumenical work of our day, that is, that striving after mutual fellowship and communion, especially between the Churches of the West and East, cannot overlook or lessen the importance and usefulness of each of the attempts at restoring the unity of the Church which were made in the past and which—even if only partially—had happy results. Your Church among other Eastern Catholic Churches which have their own rite is considered to prove the truth of this. Without doubt the genuine ecumenical spirit—according to the more recent meaning of the word—must be shown and proved by a special respect for your Church just as for the other Eastern Catholic Churches which have their own special rites. We expect much in the future from this very concern for and witness to the ecumenical spirit which our brothers the Patriarchs and Bishops display, as also the clergy and all the communities of the Orthodox Churches, whose traditions and forms of devotion the Catholic Church and the Apostolic See regard with great veneration and esteem. Moreover the same relationship springs from the principle of religious freedom which constitutes one of the chief doctrines of "The Declaration of the Rights of Man" (By the United Nations or UNO in the year 1948) and which is to be found in the Constitutions of each state. By virtue of this principle to which the Apostolic See has again and again appealed and which it has declared, it is lawful for each believer to profess his own faith and to be an active member of the Church community to which he belongs. The observance of this principle of religious freedom requires that the right

of living and acting proper to the Church to which each citizen belongs should be respected.⁷ Therefore at the approach of the solemn commemoration of the first millennium of Christianity in "Rus", the great community of the Catholic Church has a strong desire, dear brothers and sisters, to embrace you with friendly, prayerful, and loving sentiments. We ourselves, holding the office of the first servant in the community, ask and invite all, nay the whole people of God, to do the same. But with the friendly announcement of the splendid commemoration of your anniversary and with the fervent exhortation to prayer, we turn to all the Churches and Christian communities with whom we do not yet enjoy full communion—but all of us whom Christ alone unites. May our hearts and minds, while following Christ who sent his apostles to "the ends of the earth", be directed now to the holy region of "Rus" which one thousand years ago accepted the gospel and received baptism. May we strive to call to mind the history of that Christian society. May we enter with admiration and love into its spirit: we say the spirit of faith, of prayer, and of constant obedience to Divine Providence. Let us linger mentally in each of the places where Christ is praised and his mother is honoured. Finally while we commend to the Divine Saviour through the Mother of God herself, all the recipients of that baptism, which "Rus" in its good fortune received one thousand years ago, we renew the ties of spiritual fellowship and communion with them before him who is "the father of the world to come" (Is 9:6). *From the Vatican on the 19th day of March in the year 1979, the first of Our Pontificate.*

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