



The Holy See

LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO CARD. JOSEPH RAZINGER

*To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger
Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*

It is my deep desire, Your Eminence, to express my heartfelt thanks to you for the initiative taken by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under your direction, to organize a symposium on the theme: *The Primacy of the Successor of Peter* and to ask for the collaboration of many renowned scholars and experts. Please convey to all the distinguished participants my sentiments of grateful appreciation for their willingness and commitment.

In the Encyclical *Ut Unum sint*, I recognized that it is “significant and encouraging that the question of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome has now become a subject of study which is already under way or will be in the near future. It is likewise significant and encouraging that this question appears as an essential theme not only in the theological dialogues in which the Catholic Church is engaging with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, but also more generally in the ecumenical movement as a whole” (n. 89).

The Catholic Church is aware of having preserved, in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition and the faith of the Fathers, the ministry of the Successor of Peter, whom God has made the “perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). This service to unity, rooted in the work of divine mercy, is a gift entrusted, within the same College of Bishops, to the one who succeeds the Apostle Peter as Bishop of Rome. The same power and authority proper to this ministry, without which this function would be illusory, must always be seen in the perspective of service to the merciful plan of God who desires all to be “one” in Christ Jesus. In this capacity, the primacy is exercised at different levels regarding the service to the unity of the faith, to vigilance over the celebration of the sacraments and the liturgy, to mission, to discipline and Christian life, in the awareness, however, that all this must always take place in communion.

At the same time, it must also be emphasized that the Petrine ministry’s service to the unity of the faith and of the Church is a form and instrument of evangelization: the very destiny of the new evangelization is linked to the Church’s witness to unity, of which the Successor of Peter is the guarantor and visible sign.

On the other hand, as I stated during my meeting with the World Council of Churches in Geneva in June 1984, this conviction of the Catholic Church “is a difficulty for most of you, [the other Christians] whose memories are perhaps marked by certain sorrowful recollections” (*Insegnamenti*, VII, 1 [1984], 1686; *Address to World Council of Churches*, n. 2, 12 June 1984, *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 June 1984, p. 6).

Thus, because of the concern for unity which is one of the primacy's essential functions, I expressed in the Encyclical *Ut Unum sint* my conviction that “I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (n. 95).

This requirement is also expressed in the Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Communio innotio*, on some aspects of the Church understood as communion, where it is hoped that “all may be enabled to recognize the continuity of the primacy of Peter in his Successors, the Bishops of Rome, and to see the Petrine ministry fulfilled, in the manner intended by the Lord, as a worldwide apostolic service, which is present in all the Churches *from within*, and which, while preserving its substance as a divine institution, can find expression in various ways according to the different circumstances of time and place, as history has shown” (n. 18).

In your symposium, the commitment of scholars, experts in the various theological disciplines — biblical, historical and systematic theology — testifies to the precision and thoroughness of the research carried out in the different fields of theological knowledge, which, according to the doctrinal form given to the study meeting, wishes to make an important contribution to the service of furthering the theological dialogue, precisely by indicating the essential elements of the teaching of the Catholic faith on this aspect of ecclesiology, and by distinguishing them from questions that are legitimately disputable or at least not definitively binding.

This particular characteristic, far from constituting a difficulty for the same ecumenical dialogue, is instead a necessary condition for it to be an instrument for recognizing the divine truth.

I therefore follow your work with deep interest, as I extend to you, venerable Brother, and to all who are attending and collaborating in the symposium, my fervent wishes for its success, thanks to the joint sincere and disinterested search for the truth.

I accompany these wishes with a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 30 November 1996.

JOHN PAUL II

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