



The Holy See

MEETING WITH CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND CHRISTIAN LAITY
OF THE ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC CHURCHES OF SYRIA
SYRIAN-ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL, DAMASCUS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sunday, 6 May 2001

*Your Holiness,
Your Beatitudes,
Eminences and Excellencies,
Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

1. As evening approaches on the Lord's Day, we are gathered in this sacred place – the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George – to celebrate *the undying light of the Most Holy Trinity*. The fullness of the light of "the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come" (*Rev 1:8*) shines in the face of Jesus Christ (cf. *2 Cor 4:6*). Through him, in the Holy Spirit, we give God glory, for the sublime heritage of faith that is ours, and for the call to the ministry of truth and love which makes us servants of the Gospel.

My heart is filled with gratitude to God that I have been able to come to Damascus as *a pilgrim in the footsteps of Saint Paul*. It was on the road to Damascus that the Apostle of the Nations was claimed by Jesus Christ; and it was here that he received the light of the Holy Spirit and was baptized. Here, the Holy Spirit has now gathered us for this common prayer – to listen to the word of God, to implore his forgiveness for our sins and divisions, and to praise his infinite mercies. In the peace of the Risen Christ, let us pray with one mind and one heart, eager to heed the call of the great Syrian theologian and mystic, Ab al-Faraj, who exhorts believers to "destroy in the depth of their hearts the roots of enmity between Christians" (*Book of the Dove*, IV).

2. With fraternal affection, I greet His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, whose guests we

are in this magnificent cathedral. I am especially pleased to be able to return the visits made to Rome by Your Holiness and your predecessor Moran Mor Ignatius Jacob III. Mutual contacts of this kind help to sustain and deepen our brotherly love; they seal the agreement of our Churches regarding the common profession of faith in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, truly God and truly man; and they encourage us to pursue still further the pastoral cooperation which we began seventeen years ago with our Common Declaration. Your Holiness, the marked ecumenical openness of your Church is a source of deep joy to many, and an encouragement to move steadily along the path towards full communion (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 62-63). It is a sign of the spiritual and pastoral vitality of your Church, to which the many vocations to the priesthood and monastic life also bear witness.

In the same fraternal bond I greet His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV and His Beatitude Patriarch Gregory III, as well as the Metropolitans and Bishops accompanying them. I welcome the Patriarchs and Bishops who have come from neighbouring countries and I thank them for honouring us with their presence. With a brother's love I greet His Beatitude Patriarch Emeritus Ignace Moussa Daoud I. When I appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and created him Cardinal, I wished not only to draw upon his experience and wisdom, but also to pay tribute to the Churches of the East and to the Church in Syria in particular.

I extend heartfelt greetings to the priests, monks and nuns, religious men and women, and all the faithful here present: I am truly happy to be among you!

3. The joy of Easter flowered on the wood of the Cross. Here in Damascus the disciple Ananias was told in a vision to go to Saul, the persecutor of the Church. Despite his doubts and fears Ananias obeyed the Lord, and without hesitation he addressed the enemy of the Christians as "brother" (*Acts 9:17*). Here we see two essential marks of the Church's mission: *courageous obedience to God's word and a willingness to forgive and be reconciled*. When God acts, the impossible becomes possible. It is our task to say "yes" to God's saving will and to accept his mysterious plan with our whole being.

When Ananias came to him, Paul was praying (cf. *Acts 9:11*). He was, in a sense, preparing to receive the mission which would bind him ever after to the Cross: "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (*Acts 9:16*). These are two further marks of our call to discipleship: *prayer and endurance in the face of trials*. Perhaps more than ever today, these will be the marks of our fidelity to God: *to pray, to carry the Cross, to obey God's will and to honour everyone as a brother or sister*. In following this path, we will walk in the footsteps of a "cloud of witnesses" (cf. *Heb 12:1*), including the countless monks and nuns who have gone before you in these lands. By God's providence, the whole of the Middle East is deeply marked by the culture of Syrian monasticism and its ardent witness.

4. Here in Damascus I wish to pay homage to the entire Syrian tradition, with its rich unity in

diversity. Saints Paul, Ignatius of Antioch, Ephraem, John Chrysostom, Simeon Stylites, John Damascene and so many others are luminous teachers for us all. In them we see that the obedience of faith and the suffering of the Cross never fail to bear fruits of salvation.

The wonderful creativity of your tradition appears in a figure like Saint Ephraem of Nisibis, the "harp of the Holy Spirit", whose works were quickly translated into all the languages of Christian antiquity. May such an exchange of gifts never cease! It is my fervent hope that Christians everywhere will once again open their hearts to the spiritual and doctrinal treasures of the Churches of the Syrian tradition.

Among the great host of those who followed the Lamb was that matchless saint of your country, *Simeon Stylites*, who was in his time a living icon of holiness and is now venerated by the Church throughout the world. *His prayer was ceaseless and his charity universal*, as he welcomed all who came to him from near and far, the greatest and the least. He also bore in his body the wounds of the Crucified Lord (cf. Theodoret of Cyr, *Historia Religiosa*, 26). In the account of his life written by his disciples fifteen years after his death, Saint Simeon's extraordinary vocation is described in these terms: "*By the sufferings of his servant, God wished to rouse the world from its deep slumber*". The world today needs to be awakened to God's love and to his saving plan. The Gospel reading has exhorted us: "Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest" (*Jn 4:35*). The harvest is ready for reaping because the human heart is always hungry for "the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (*Jn 14:6*). *A more united witness on the part of Christians is essential if the world of the Third Millennium is to believe* (cf. *Jn 17:21*). May the Holy Spirit hasten the day of our complete union!

5. At the end of our brief meeting, I make my own the words spoken by the Bishop or priest at the end of the Divine Liturgy in the West Syrian Rite: "Go in peace, my beloved, as we entrust you to the grace and mercy of the holy and glorious Trinity. . . Saved by the victorious Cross of the Lord and sealed by the seal of holy Baptism, may the Holy Trinity forgive you your sins, remit your debts and grant peace to the souls of your departed ones". May all these blessings come upon you through the mighty intercession of the holy Saints and Martyrs, and of the All Holy Mother of God, the *Theotokos - Yoldat Aloho*. Amen.