



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

MEETING WITH HIS HOLINESS PATRIARCH MAXIM
AND THE MEMBERS OF THE HOLY SYNOD

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Patriarchal Palace, Sophia
Friday, 24 May 2002

*Your Holiness,
Venerable Metropolitans and Bishops,
Dear Brothers in the Lord!*

Christ is risen!

1. I am happy to meet with you today, 24 May, for this is a special day etched deep in my heart and memory. From the beginning of my service as Bishop of Rome, I have had the joy of welcoming Bulgarian delegations to the Vatican each year on this date, and these have been pleasant opportunities to meet not only the noble Bulgarian nation but also the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria and Your Holiness, in the person of the Bishops who have represented you.

Today the Lord enables us to meet personally and to exchange "the kiss of peace". I am grateful for the readiness with which Your Holiness and the Holy Synod permitted me to realize a deep desire which I have long nurtured in my heart. I come to you with a sense of esteem for the mission which the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria is undertaking, and I wish *to express my respect and appreciation* for your commitment to the good of the people of this land.

2. Down the centuries, despite the complex and at times hostile turn of historical events, the

Church now led by Your Holiness has not failed in its steadfast proclamation of the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Only-Begotten Son of God. From generation to generation, your Church *has passed on the Good News of salvation*. Today too, at the beginning of the Third Millennium, your Church witnesses with renewed vigour to the salvation which the Lord offers to every person, and it holds out to all the hope which does not disappoint and of which our world has so great a need.

Your Holiness, *this first time in history* that a Bishop of Rome visits this land and meets you and the Holy Synod is rightly a moment of joy, because *it is a sign of a gradual growth in ecclesial communion*. Yet this cannot distract us from sincerely recognizing that Christ our Lord founded a single Church, while we today appear to the world divided, as if Christ himself were divided. "Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature" (Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1).

3. The fullness of communion between our Churches has suffered grievous wounds in the course of history, "for which, often enough, people of both sides were to blame" (*ibid.*, 3). "These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them, and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness" (Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 34).

One thing, however, consoles us: the estrangement between Catholics and Orthodox has never extinguished in them *the desire to restore full ecclesial communion*, so that the unity for which the Lord prayed to the Father might be manifested more clearly. Today we can give thanks to God that the bonds between us have been much strengthened.

In this regard, the Second Vatican Council stressed that the Orthodox Churches "possess true sacraments, above all – by apostolic succession – the Priesthood and the Eucharist" (Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15). Moreover, the Council recalled and recognized that "far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, ... diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to the accomplishment her mission" (*ibid.*, 16). And it added: "The perfect observance of this traditional principle, which has not always been observed, is required for any restoration of union" (*ibid.*).

4. In broaching this theme, we cannot fail to look to *the example of unity* offered in the first millennium in very concrete ways by *the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius*, whose memory in your land is so vivid and legacy so profoundly felt. Their witness is relevant even to those who, in the field of politics, are working *to bring about European unification*. In searching for its own identity, the Continent cannot but return to its Christian roots. The whole of Europe, both West and East, expects *Catholics and Orthodox to work together* for the defence of peace and justice, human rights and the culture of life.

The example of Saints Cyril and Methodius is above all emblematic for *the unity of Christians in the one Church of Christ*. They were sent to Eastern Europe by the Patriarch of Constantinople in order to bring the true faith to the Slav peoples in their own tongue; and in the face of obstacles placed on that path by the neighbouring Western dioceses, which claimed that it was their responsibility to bring the Cross of Christ to the Slav countries, *they came to the Pope* in order to have their mission confirmed (cf. Encyclical Epistle, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 5). For us, therefore, they are as it were "the connecting links or spiritual bridge between the Eastern and Western traditions, which both come together in the one great Tradition of the universal Church. For us they are the champions and also the patrons of the ecumenical endeavour of the sister Churches of East and West, for the rediscovery through prayer and dialogue of visible unity in perfect and total communion, 'the unity which...is neither absorption or fusion', [but which] is a meeting in truth and love, granted to us by the Spirit" (*ibid.*, 27).

5. As we meet today, I am glad to recall *the many contacts between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria*, beginning with the Second Vatican Council, to which the latter sent observers. I am confident that these direct contacts, which happily have increased in recent years, will also have a positive impact on the theological dialogue in which Catholic and Orthodox are involved through the relevant Mixed International Commission.

Precisely with a view to increasing our knowledge of each other, our mutual charity and our fraternal cooperation, I am pleased to offer to the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Rome for their worship the use of *the Church of Saints Vincent and Anastasius at the Trevi Fountain*, according to the terms which our respective delegates will decide.

I have also been informed that last December the Fifth Council of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church re-established the Metropolitan See of Silistra, the ancient Dorostol. From that region came *the young soldier Dasius*, the 1700th anniversary of whose martyrdom occurs this year. Responding to the fervent appeals made to me, I have brought with me, with the generous agreement of the Archdiocese of Ancona-Osimo, *a famous relic of the saint* as a gift to this Church.

6. Finally, Your Holiness, I would like to express to you and to all the Bishops of your Church *my deepest thanks for the welcome which has been given to me*. I am very touched by it.

In a spirit of brotherhood, I assure you of my constant prayer, that the Lord will grant the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria to accomplish with courage, together with the Catholic Church, the mission of evangelization which he has entrusted to your Church in this land.

May God bless the efforts of Your Holiness, the Metropolitans and Bishops, the clergy, the monks and nuns, and grant to the apostolic efforts of each of you an abundant spiritual harvest.

May the Virgin most holy, tenderly venerated by the faithful of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria,

watch over your Church and protect it today and always!

Christ is risen!

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