

MEETING OF THE HOLY FATHER WITH THE COLLEGE OF CARDINALS
AT THE VIGIL OF THE PUBLIC ORDINARY CONSISTORY

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To present information and reflections on the current ecumenical situation in the time allotted will be possible only in broad outline and unfortunately, in a non-exhaustive way. However, I hope that my report will reveal the activity of divine providence, which leads separated Christians toward unity in order to make their witness an ever clearer sign to the world.

I will begin with an initial observation that I hold essential. What we call ecumenism - to distinguish it from interreligious dialogue - has its foundation in the testament left to us by Jesus himself on the eve of his death: "*Ut unum sint*" (Jn 17: 21). The Second Vatican Council defined the promotion of Christian unity as one of its principle aims (cf. [*Unitatis Redintegratio* \[UR\]](#), n. 1) and as an impulse of the Holy Spirit (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 1, 4). Pope John Paul II declared that the ecumenical effort is an irreversible path (cf. [*Ut Unum Sint* \[UUS\]](#), n. 3), and Pope Benedict XVI, from the first day of his Pontificate, made it his primary commitment to work sparing no effort to reconstruct the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. He is aware that the manifestation of good sentiments is not enough to achieve it. Concrete gestures that enter into souls and move consciences, inviting each one to that interior conversion which is the prerequisite for any progress on the path to ecumenism, are needed (cf. [*Homily before the College of Cardinals*](#), 20 April 2005). Therefore, ecumenism is not an option but a holy obligation.

Naturally, ecumenism is not synonymous with good-natured humanism nor with ecclesiological relativism. It is based on the firm awareness that the Catholic Church has of herself and of her Catholic principles spoken of in the Decree on Ecumenism (cf. [*UR*](#), nn. 2-4). It is an ecumenism of truth and charity; the two are intimately connected and cannot substitute for each other. Above all, in dialogue truth must be respected. The concrete norms are laid out in a binding way in the [*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*](#) of 25 March 1993.

The most significant results of ecumenism in the last decades - and also the most gratifying - are not the various documents, but rediscovered fraternity: the fact that we have rediscovered one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, that we have learned to appreciate one another and together we have taken up the journey towards full unity (cf. [*UUS*](#), n. 42). Along this journey, in the course of the last 40 years, the Chair of Peter has become an ever more important reference point for all Churches and all Ecclesial Communities. If an attitude of greater sobriety has followed the initial enthusiasm, it demonstrates that ecumenism is becoming more mature, more adult. It is already a daily reality, perceived as normal in the Church's life. It is with great gratitude that we must recognize in this development the Spirit's action that guides the Church.

In a more specific way, we can distinguish three fields of ecumenism. First of all, the relationship with the ancient Eastern Churches and with the Orthodox Churches of the first millennium must be mentioned, which we recognize as Churches in so far as they have maintained the faith and apostolic succession on an ecclesiological level, like us. Secondly, we

recall the relationship with the Ecclesial Communities born directly or indirectly, like the free churches, from the Reform of the 16th century. They have developed their own ecclesiology, taking Sacred Scripture as their foundation. Lastly, recent Christian history has known a so-called third wave, the Charismatic Movement and the Pentecostal Movement, which began at the beginning of the 20th century and have spread in the meantime throughout the world with exponential growth. Ecumenism must therefore face a variegated and differentiated reality, characterized by very different phenomena according to the cultural contexts and the local Churches.

We begin with the Churches of the first millennium. Already in the first 10 years of dialogue with the Pre-Chalcedonian Eastern Churches, or referring to the period between 1980 and 1990, we have accomplished important results. Thanks to the consensus reached between Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II with the respective Patriarchs, it has been possible to overcome the ancient Christological controversies that arose around the Council of Chalcedon (451) and, for what regards the Eastern Assyrian Church, around the Council of Ephesus (381).

In its second phase, the dialogue centred on ecclesiology, or rather, on the concept of ecclesial communion and its criteria. The next meeting is scheduled to be held in Damascus from 27 January to 2 February 2008. In this session the draft of the document on the "Nature, constitution and mission of the Church" will be discussed for the first time. Thanks to this dialogue, the Churches of ancient traditions and indeed of the apostolic tradition will again establish contact with the Universal Church after having lived on her margins for 1,500 years. That this takes place gradually, step by step, is completely normal considering the circumstances, namely, the long centuries of separation and of great differences of culture and mentality.

Dialogue with the Orthodox Churches of Byzantine, Syrian and Slavic tradition officially began in 1980. With these Churches we have the first millennium dogmas in common, the Eucharist and the other sacraments, the veneration of Mary, the Mother of God, and the Saints, the episcopal structure of the Church. We consider these Churches together with the ancient Eastern Churches as Sister Churches of the local Catholic Churches. Differences already existed in the first millennium, but in that epoch they were not perceived as a factor of division within the Church. The separation true and proper came by way of a long process of distancing and alienation due to a lack of understanding and reciprocal love, as the Second Vatican Council observed (cf. [UR](#), n. 14).

What occurs today, therefore, is necessarily a process towards mutual reconciliation.

The first important steps were taken during the Council. Recall, for example, the meeting and exchange of correspondence between Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, the famous "*Tomos agapis*", and the cancellation from the Church's memory of the reciprocal excommunication of 1054, on the day before the Council closed. On these bases, it has been possible to reestablish some forms of ecclesial communion of the first millennium: the exchange of visits, messages and letters between the Pope and the Patriarchs, and above all, the Ecumenical Patriarch; the cordial coexistence and collaboration of many local Churches; the concession of places of worship for liturgical use to Christian Orthodox Churches who live among us in the diaspora as a sign of hospitality and communion by the Catholic Church. During the [Angelus pronounced on the occasion of the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul in 2007](#), Pope

Benedict XVI emphasized that we are "very close to each other and can already count on a communion that is almost full" with these Churches.

In the first 10 years of dialogue, from 1980 to 1990, it has been defined and emphasized that in this regard we have in common the sacraments (above all the Eucharist) and the episcopal and presbyteral ministry. Yet, the political changes of 1989-1990, instead of simplifying our relationships, complicated them. With the Eastern Catholic Churches' return to public life after years of brutal persecution and heroic resistance paid even at the price of blood, a new "Uniatism" has been seen as a threat by the Orthodox Churches. Hence, in the 1990s, notwithstanding the important clarifications brought about by the meetings at Balamand (1993) at Baltimore (2000), the dialogue came to a halt. The crisis situation became more acute above all in the relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church after the canonical erection of four dioceses in Russia in 2002.

Thanks be to God, after much effort conducted with patience, it was possible to begin dialogue again last year. In 2006 a meeting was held in Belgrade, and about a month ago we met anew in Ravenna. On this occasion, a decisive improvement came about on the level of atmosphere and relationship, notwithstanding the departure of the Russian Delegation due to inter-Orthodox motives. Thus, a third and promising phase of dialogue has begun.

The [Ravenna Document](#): "Ecclesiological and canonical consequences of the sacramental nature of the Church", has marked an important turning point. For the first time the Orthodox representatives recognized a universal level of the Church and admitted that at this level there also exists a *Protos*, a Primate, who can only be the Bishop of Rome according to the *taxis* of the ancient Church. All the participants are aware that this is only a first step and that the journey toward full ecclesial communion will be long and difficult; yet, with this document we have set a base for future dialogue.

The theme that will be discussed in the next plenary session will be: "The role of the Bishop of Rome in the communion of the Church in the first millennium".

More specifically, regarding the Patriarch of Moscow of the Russian Orthodox Church, the relationships in the last years are perceptibly smoothing out. We can say that it is no longer frigid, but thawing. From our viewpoint, a meeting between the Holy Father and the Patriarch of Moscow would be useful. The Patriarchate of Moscow has never categorically excluded such a meeting, but it deems it opportune to first resolve the problems that exist in Russia and above all in the Ukraine.

It should be recalled, however, that many meetings have also taken place at other levels. Among these we mention the recent visit of the Patriarch Alexij to Paris, considered an important step by both parties. To sum up, we can affirm that a continuous purification of the historic memory and much prayer will still be necessary so that, on the common base of the first millennium, we will be able to heal the schism between the East and the West and to reestablish full ecclesial communion.

Notwithstanding the difficulties that remain, the hope is strong and legitimate that, with God's help and thanks to the prayers of many faithful, the Church will return in the third millennium, after the division in the second millennium, to breathing with its two lungs.

We now move to relationships with the Ecclesial Communities born from the Reformation. Encouraging signs are also seen in this field. All the Ecclesial Communities have said they are interested in dialogue, and the Catholic Church is in dialogue with almost all Ecclesial Communities.

A certain consensus has been reached in the area of the truth of faith, above all for what concerns the fundamental questions of the doctrine on justification. A fruitful collaboration exists in many places in the social and humanitarian sphere. An attitude of reciprocal trust and friendship has spread characterized by a profound desire for unity, which remains such even though there are from time to time harder tones and bitter delusions. In fact, the close network of personal and institutional relationships which has developed in the meantime is able to resist such occasional tensions.

There is no stopping, but there is a profound change in the ecumenical situation. It is the same change experienced by the Church and the world in general. Here I will limit myself to citing only some aspects of this transformation.

1) After having reached a fundamental consensus on the doctrine of justification, we find that we must again discuss the classic controversial themes, among which are above all ecclesiology and the ecclesial ministries (cf. [UUS](#), n. 66). On this matter, the "Five Responses" released last July by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have brought about perplexity and given rise to a certain discontent. Indeed, the agitation that developed around this Document was unjustified, since the text said nothing new but repeated Catholic doctrine in a summary form. Yet, it would be advisable to review the form, the language and the presentation of similar declarations to the public. 2) Different ecclesiologies necessarily give rise to different views of the goal of ecumenism. Hence, the fact that we lack a common concept of ecclesial unity as an objective to be reached is a problem. This problem is graver if we consider that ecclesial communion is for us Catholics the presupposition for a Eucharistic communion and that the absence of Eucharistic communion brings with it great pastoral difficulties, especially in the case of mixed couples and families. 3) While on the one hand we try to overcome the old controversies, on the other, new differences of opinion emerge in the ethical field. This regards in particular the questions related to the defence of life, matrimony, the family and human sexuality. Because of these gaps that appear, the common public witness is significantly weakened if not actually rendered totally impossible. The present crisis within the respective communities is clearly exemplified by the situation that arose in the Anglican Communion, which is not an isolated case. 4) Protestant theology, marked during the first years of dialogue by "reborn Lutheran" and by Karl Barth's theology of the Word of God, has now returned to motives of liberal theology. As a result, we notice that, on the Protestant side, those Christological and Trinitarian foundations which until now were presupposed as common are sometimes diluted. What we hold to be our common patrimony has begun to dissolve here and there like glaciers in the Alps.

But strong counter currents have also come about in reaction to the above-mentioned phenomena. Throughout the world a strong growth of evangelical groups is noted, whose positions in most cases coincide with ours on fundamental dogmatic questions, above all in the ethical field, but which are often very divergent by their ecclesiology, theology of the sacraments, Biblical exegesis and understanding of tradition. There are groups in the High Church that desire to exercise in Anglicanism and Lutheranism elements of the Catholic tradition regarding the liturgy and ecclesial ministry. Monastic communities are increasingly joining

them, who, often living according to the Benedictine Rule, feel near to the Catholic Church. What is more, Pietist communities, faced with the crisis concerning ethical questions, feel somewhat uncomfortable within the Protestant Ecclesial Communities; they look with gratitude to the clear positions taken by the Pope, whom they had reproached with less than benevolent tones not long ago.

All these groups, together with the Catholic communities of Religious life and the new spiritual movements, have recently formed a "spiritual network", often centred around monasteries like Chevetogne, Bose and above all Taizé, and also in movements such as the *Focolare* and *Chemin neuf*. In this way, we can say that ecumenism is returning to its origins in small groups of dialogue, prayer and Bible study. Recently, these groups have also taken the word publically, for example, in the large gatherings of movements at Stuttgart in 2004 and 2007. Hence, next to the official dialogue which is often more difficult, there emerges new and promising forms of dialogue.

This general panorama shows us, however, that not only is there an ecumenical nearing, but that there is also fragmentation and centrifugal forces at work. If we additionally take into consideration the numerous so-called independent "Churches" that continue to appear above all in Africa and the spread of often very aggressive small political groupings, we become aware that the ecumenical landscape is now very differentiated and confused. This pluralism is none other than a mirror of the pluralistic situation of so-called post-modern society, which often leads to a religious relativism.

In the actual context, therefore, meetings like the Plenary Assembly of the World Council of Churches that took place in February of last year in Porto Alegre (Brazil, 14-24 February 2006), and the "Global Christian Forum" and the "European Ecumenical Assembly" held in September 2007 at Sibiu/Hermannstadt (Romania) are particularly important. These conventions want the various divergent groups to gather in dialogue and, as much as possible, to keep the ecumenical movement together, with its lights and shadows and with the new challenges in a situation that is and continues to be rapidly changing.

Speaking of pluralism leads me to a third wave of Christian history: the diffusion of charismatic and pentecostal groups who, with about 400 million faithful throughout the world, take second place among the Christian communities in numerical terms and are experiencing exponential growth.

Lacking a common structure or a central organ, they are very different from one another. They consider themselves as the fruit of a new Pentecost; consequently, Baptism in the Spirit has a fundamental role for them. Referring to them, Pope John Paul II already pointed out that this phenomenon must not be considered only in a negative way, since, beyond the inevitable problems, they testify to the desire for a spiritual experience. Unfortunately, this does not alter the fact that many of these communities at the same time have become a religion that promises earthly happiness.

With the classical Pentecostals it is possible to have an official dialogue. With others, serious difficulties exist because of their rather aggressive missionary methods. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, faced with this challenge, has organized seminars on various

continents for Bishops, theologians and laity active in ecumenism: in Latin America (São Paulo and Buenos Aires), in Africa (Nairobi and Dakar) and in Asia (Seoul and Manila). The result of these seminars appears also in the Final Document of Aparecida (2007) of the Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences. First of all, it is necessary to make a pastoral examination of conscience and ask ourselves in a self-critical way: why have so many Christians left our Church? We must not begin by asking ourselves what is wrong within the Pentecostals, but what are our own pastoral deficiencies. How can we react to this new challenge with a liturgical, catechetical, pastoral and spiritual renewal?

This question takes us to the final question: how should we continue the ecumenical journey? A single response is not possible. The situation is too diverse according to geographical regions, cultural environments and local Churches. The individual Episcopal Conferences must assume the responsibility.

In principle we must begin with the common patrimony of faith and remain faithful to what, with the help of God, we have already achieved ecumenically. We must give, as much as possible, a common witness of faith in an ever more secularized world. This means, in the current situation, to also rediscover and strengthen the foundations of our faith. In fact, everything wavers and has no sense if we do not have a solid and conscious faith in the living God, One and Triune, in the divinity of Christ, in the salvific power of the Cross and in the Resurrection. For those who no longer know what sin is and what sin implies, the justification of the sinner has no meaning.

Only resting on the common faith is it possible to dialogue on our differences. And this must happen in a clear and non-polemical way. We must not offend the sensitivity of others or discredit them. We must not point a finger at what our ecumenical interlocutors are not and at what they do not have. Rather, we must witness the richness and beauty of our faith in a positive and accepting way. Others expect this same attitude from us. If this happens, then between us and our interlocutors there can be, as the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) says, an exchange not only of ideas but of gifts that mutually enrich (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 28, 57). Such an ecumenism of exchange is not an impoverishment, but a reciprocal enrichment. In the dialogue founded on spiritual exchange, theological dialogue will also have an essential role in the future. However, it will only be fruitful if it is sustained by an ecumenism of prayer, conversion of heart and personal sanctification. Indeed, "spiritual ecumenism" is the very soul of the ecumenical movement (cf. *UR*, n. 8; *UUS*, nn. 21-27) and must be promoted by us in the first place. Without a true spirituality of communion, which permits making space for the other without renouncing one's own identity, our every effort would lead to arid and empty activism.

If we make Jesus' prayer pronounced on the eve of his death our own, we will not lose heart and waver in our faith. As the Gospel says, we must be confident that what we ask in Christ's Name will be heard (cf. Jn 14: 13). When, where and how is not for us to decide. This is left to the One who is Lord of the Church and who will gather his Church from the four winds. We must be content to do our best, recognizing the gifts received with gratitude, or rather, what ecumenism has accomplished up to now, and look to the future with hope. It is enough to cast a glance with a minimum of realism at the "signs of the times" to understand that there is no other realistic alternative to ecumenism, and above all, no alternative of faith.