



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

LETTER

TO EUROPEAN BISHOPS

ON THE RECENT CHANGES

IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Dear Brother Bishops,

As preparations for the forthcoming Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops intensify, I would like to share with you my joy at the new situation which is emerging in Central and Eastern Europe in particular. I would also like to express my hope for the new opportunities being presented for the life of the Church in those regions. The effects and the positive developments on a world level of the changes which have taken place in that part of the "old Continent", the universal dimension of the episcopal ministry and the communion of all the Bishops with the Successor of Peter all lead me to share with you some reflections on the new situation and its consequences with regard to relations between Catholics and members of the Orthodox Churches.

Changes in Central and Eastern Europe

1. Several peoples of Eastern Europe have recently regained - by God's grace, without bloodshed - the right to respect for civil liberties, including freedom of religion, which for decades in those lands had been limited, repressed or suppressed. These changes and advances are certainly the result of the intervention of God, who with wisdom and patience directs the course of history towards its eschatological goal: "to unite all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10).

The climate of aversion to religious freedom and of open persecution has affected, in one form or other, all believers: Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and members of other religions. Persecution reached its greatest intensity in the cases where, as in the Ukraine, Romania and Czechoslovakia, the local Catholic Churches of the Byzantine tradition were declared dissolved and non-existent by

the use of authoritarian and devious methods. Pressure, sometimes of a violent nature, was put on Catholics to join the Orthodox Churches.

The recent laws on religious freedom seek to guarantee for all the possibility of legitimately expressing their faith, with their own structures and places of worship.

This positive new situation has thus made it possible to reorganize the Latin Rite Catholic Church in a number of nations and enabled the Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches to return to a normal life in countries where they had been suppressed. History is remedying an act of grave injustice. The Lord has granted me the grace of naming Bishops for those Byzantine Rite Churches in the Western Ukraine and in Romania. These Churches are now resuming the normal process of public Church life, emerging from the clandestine situation to which, sad to say, persecution had relegated them.

I have likewise been able to provide Bishops for various Latin sees which for years had remained empty. This makes possible an ordered growth of Church life. Bishops, as teachers of the faith and ministers of reconciliation, promote the harmonious growth of their Churches; at the same time they develop fraternal relations with other believers in Christ with a view to the restoration of the full unity which he willed, and in this they carry out the norms established by the Second Vatican Council and repeated in the Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches: "Praesertim vero Ecclesiae Pastores debent pro ea a Domino optata Ecclesiae unitatis plenitudine orare et allaborare sollerter participando operi oecumenico Spiritus Sancti gratia suscitato" (CCEO, Canon 902; cf. also CIC, Canon 755).

Tensions between Catholics and Orthodox in these regions

2. But in the course of this process of the reorganization of the Catholic Church, and also as a result of the wounds left by the painful experiences of the past, there has unfortunately been evidence of problems and tensions between Catholics and Orthodox, especially with regard to the ownership and use of places of worship which formerly belonged to Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches and which were later confiscated by the respective governments and, in part, handed over to the Orthodox Churches.

Disagreement over places of worship has also had negative repercussions within the theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, which had been fruitfully pursuing its course for over ten years. Joint reflection on the demands which arise from fraternal coexistence, which ought to tend towards full ecclesial communion in accordance with the will of Christ for his Church, will help all concerned to find a solution that is fair and worthy of the Christian calling. Reparation for a past injustice can only help the positive development of mutual relations.

All must be convinced that also in cases such as these disputes over relatively contingent and practical matters, dialogue still remains the best instrument for embarking upon a fraternal exchange which aims at settling the issue in a spirit of justice, charity and forgiveness. Brothers who once shared the same sufferings and trials ought not to oppose one another today, but should look together at the future opening before them with promising signs of hope.

The Oriental Catholic Churches in other parts of the world

3. The question of relations between Oriental Rite Catholics and Orthodox is not however limited to the countries of Eastern Europe, but, in different forms, also arises wherever Oriental Catholic Churches are present. In the Middle East in particular, in addition to the Churches of the Byzantine tradition, there also coexist the ancient Churches of the Alexandrian, Antiochene, Armenian and Chaldean traditions. Here the most recent events have revealed a special threat for the Catholic communities, which are generally small in numbers. By reason of the difficulties of those countries, often marked by lengthy and at times armed conflicts, emigration is becoming more and more frequent, and this brings in its wake increasing problems both for those who remain in their native country and for the Oriental communities being established abroad.

The spirit of mutual understanding and communion, guided by the words of Saint Paul who invites us to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2), will help to resolve the objective difficulties existing both in the countries of origin and in those of the diaspora. This is especially necessary since in those areas Catholics and Orthodox often come from an identical ecclesial tradition and share a common ethnic and cultural heritage.

Bishops will be careful to ensure that dialogue in charity and truth inspires the reorganization and the life of the Oriental Catholic Churches, in accordance with the detailed guidelines of the Second Vatican Council. The Bishops of the Catholic Church gathered at the Council declared, in the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, that "the Catholic Church highly esteems the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and way of Christian life of the Eastern Churches" and they expressed the hope that those Churches will "flourish and fulfil with fresh apostolic vigour the task entrusted to them" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 1). To this end, the Council Fathers requested that "steps be taken for the preservation" of all the particular Churches (*ibid.*, 4), and that suitable pastoral tools be placed at their disposal for carrying out the service which these Churches should provide for governing, educating and sanctifying their faithful, inasmuch as the liturgical, disciplinary and theological traditions of each of those Churches are "more suited to the customs of their faithful and more suitable for assuring the good of souls" (*ibid.*, 5). This criterion and pastoral orientation will inspire the organization of the structures of these Churches, the theological formation of their clergy, and the catechetical instruction of their faithful. Genuine pastoral service in fact consists of precisely this.

Concern for Christian unity

4. The Second Vatican Council also taught that an integral part of the life of these Churches, as also of the whole Catholic Church, is the concern, particularly strong in them because of their origins, to promote the unity of Christians: "The Oriental Churches in communion with the Apostolic See of Rome have a special role to play in promoting the unity of all Christians, particularly Oriental Christians, according to the principles of this Council's Decree on Ecumenism: first of all by prayer, then by the example of their lives, by religious fidelity to ancient Oriental traditions, by greater mutual knowledge, by collaboration, and by a brotherly regard for objects and attitudes" (ibid., 24).

This orientation was recently re-affirmed by the new Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches (cf. CCEO, Canon 903).

In the complex history of the origin - differing in time and place - of these Churches, and independently of the influence of culture and politics, the desire to re-establish full ecclesial communion was certainly not lacking, in accordance, obviously, with the methods and sensitivities of the age. The conflicts which later arose have not cancelled out that prospect, even though they have sometimes obscured it. In our own time the theological dialogue taking place between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches as a body is directed towards that goal with a new method and with a different form and outlook, in accordance with the teachings and directives of the Second Vatican Council.

The Decree on Ecumenism, with a powerful expression full of theological meaning, recalled that "through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 15). Through the service of these Churches "the faithful, united with their Bishop, gain access to God the Father, through the Son, the Word made flesh, who suffered and was glorified, in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and so are made 'partakers of the divine nature' and enter into communion with the Most Holy Trinity" (ibid.). Hence with these Churches relations are to be fostered as between sister Churches, to use the expression of Pope Paul VI in his Brief to the Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras I (*Anno ineunte*, 25 July 1967: AAS 59 [1967], pp. 852-854).

The unity with these Churches which is sought - and must be sought - is full communion in one faith, in the sacraments and in ecclesial government (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 14), with full respect for legitimate liturgical, disciplinary and theological diversity, as I explained in my Apostolic Epistle *Euntes in mundum universum*, on the occasion of the Millennium of the Baptism of Kievan Rus' (25 January 1988, No. 10: AAS 80 [1988], pp. 949-950).

Pastoral consequences

5. From this there follow immediate and practical consequences. The first of these was stated by Pope Paul VI in the Address which he gave in the Cathedral of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the

occasion of his visit, and it retains all of its validity today: "Nous voyons plus clairement ainsi que c'est aux chefs des Églises, à leur hiérarchie, qu'il incombe de mener les Églises sur la voie qui conduit à la pleine communion retrouvée. Ils doivent le faire en se reconnaissant et en se respectant comme pasteurs de la partie du troupeau du Christ qui leur est confiée, en prenant soin de la cohésion et de la croissance du peuple de Dieu et en évitant tout ce qui pourrait le disperser ou mettre de la confusion en ses rangs" (25 July 1967: AAS 59 [1967], p. 841).

A second consequence is the rejection of all undue forms of proselytism, with the avoidance in the most absolute way in pastoral action of any temptation to violence and any form of pressure. At the same time, pastoral action will not fail to respect the freedom of conscience and the right which each individual has to join, if he wishes, the Catholic Church. In brief, it is a matter of respecting the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 16:13). The Council's Decree on Ecumenism stated this and gave the reason thus: "it is evident that the work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who wish for full Catholic communion is of its nature distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no opposition between the two, since both proceed from the wondrous providence of God" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 4).

The third consequence is that it is obviously not enough just to avoid mistakes: it is also necessary to promote positively coexistence with mutual and harmonious respect. This attitude has certainly been proposed and re-affirmed as the rule of conduct in relations between Catholics and Orthodox, as was stated by Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras I in their joint declaration: "Le dialogue de la charité entre leurs Églises doit porter des fruits de collaboration désintéressée sur le plan d'une action commune au niveau pastoral, social et intellectuel, dans un respect mutuel de la fidélité des uns et des autres à leurs propres Églises" (28 October 1967: AAS 59 [1967], p. 1055). As I had occasion to state in my Encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*, all this will help the mutual enrichment of the two great traditions, the Eastern and the Western, and the path towards full unity.

At the service of Ecumenism

6. The Oriental Catholic Churches know and accept with an attitude of trust the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on ecumenism, and they intend to play their part in the search for full unity between Catholics and Orthodox. It is a source of joy to see that this fact is also being given positive consideration in bilateral relations, as has happened in recent declarations.

It is my heartfelt hope that wherever Oriental Catholics and Orthodox live side by side there will be established relations which are fraternal, mutually respectful and sincerely seeking a common testimony to the one Lord. This will help not only coexistence in practical circumstances but will also facilitate the theological dialogue directed to overcoming whatever still divides Catholics and Orthodox. Being faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ who has set us free should be the main concern in our time of cultural, social and political changes, so that we can preach together and with

credibility the one Gospel of salvation, and be builders of peace and reconciliation in a world always threatened by conflicts and wars.

Entrusting these sentiments and hopes to the intercession of the Virgin Theotokos, venerated both in the East and in the West, that as the Hodegitria she may guide all Christians on the path of the Gospel and of full communion, I gladly impart my special Apostolic Blessing to you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, and to the communities entrusted to your care.

From the Vatican, 31 May 1991