



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL WALTER KASPER
FOR THE PLENARY MEETING
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL
FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY**

*To my Venerable Brother CARDINAL WALTER KASPER
President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*

1. I cordially greet you and all those participating in the plenary session of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, dedicated to a weighty theme: *Communion: gift and commitment - Analysis of the results of the dialogues and the future of ecumenical research.*

I fervently hope that this important meeting will give an impetus to the ecumenical journey towards the restoration of full unity among all Christians, a pastoral priority I have constantly kept before me from the beginning of my Pontificate. Indeed, in carrying out my Petrine ministry, I want to comply fully with the Second Vatican Council's invitation that the Catholic Church be committed "irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical venture, thus heeding the Spirit of the Lord who teaches people to interpret carefully the "signs of the times" (Encyclical Letter, *Ut unum sint*, n. 3).

"The signs of the times"! Aware that "to believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church" (*ibid.*, n. 9), the Catholic Church never ceases to advance with confidence on this path, that is difficult *but so rich in joy*, which leads to unity and full communion among Christians (cf. *ibid.*, n. 2). How many *signs of the times* have reassured and sustained us on our journey in the various decades since the Council, and at the beginning of this new millennium! The ecumenical celebrations at key moments of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 offered *moving and prophetic signs* and have "given us a more vivid sense of the Church as a mystery of unity" (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 48).

Moreover, what can be said of the many *encouraging signs* given by the theological research of the major Churches and Ecclesial Communities? The commissions of international dialogue, with patience and perseverance and at times overcoming discouragement and distrust, have attained results of convergence which, although they are intermediate, constitute a solid basis on which to continue in our common research. At the national level there are more initiatives of dialogue, study and reflection, which show how profitable these exchanges are: they help people to become better acquainted and to compare their respective positions in charity, encouraging the rapid attainment of results in this age of *on line* communications. The reception of the results and the consequent emphasis on the ecumenical dimension in catechesis, in formation and in *diakonia*, likewise represent a providential pair that will not fail to give substance to the ecumenical efforts made so far. From the readiness of this ecclesial task comes the possibility of entering more deeply into that *dynamism of mutual enrichment among ecclesial communities*, which we have received as a gift and which is a force that impels us towards full *koinonia*.

2. "It is the first time in history that efforts on behalf of Christian unity have taken on such great proportions and have become so extensive. This is truly an immense gift of God, one which deserves all our gratitude" (Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, n. 41). I have experienced this gift personally on my apostolic pilgrimages, during which I often receive many signs of genuine, fraternal charity from members of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I have been able to see the degree of communion that exists among Christians, which has strengthened my conviction that knowing how "to make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing their burdens and entrusting them with our own, encourages growth in the *spirituality of communion* that must mark all our actions and, in particular, our ecumenical activity.

Two tasks must always guide this effort: *the dialogue of truth* and the *meeting in fraternity*.

These tasks are welded into an organic whole, enabling us to continue on our long journey: we have more clearly identified its destination, we have sought the means to continue it effectively, we have established norms and principles that can sustain the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church. In particular, we call for the presence of other Christians. On every solemn and significant occasion, when we run into difficulties or obstacles, our *rediscovered brotherhood* comes to our rescue, encouraging us to have that fundamental attitude of conversion that opens hearts to forgiveness. Nor would it otherwise be possible, because several times already we have exchanged the promise to forgive one another, placing the memories and wrongs of the past in God's merciful hands.

Yes! Unfortunately, the full communion of all Christians has not yet been achieved, nor have we been granted to know what development the Holy Spirit will desire to give to ecumenical research in the years to come. However, it cannot be denied that we have come a long way, and that the climate prevailing between Catholics and the Christians of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities is quite different today from what it was in the past. We are beginning the third

millennium knowing that we are in a new situation that we could hardly have imagined even 50 years ago. Today we feel we cannot do without this endeavour that brings us together. May the Lord help us treasure what has been achieved so far, safeguard it with care and hasten its developments. We must make this intermediate period, as it were, a favourable opportunity to intensify the pace of ecumenical progress.

3. The theme chosen for your plenary meeting sheds light on how the theological dialogues that are underway converge, at various levels and with different accents, around the central concept of "communion". This corresponds with the vision of the Second Vatican Council and calls attention to the fundamental core of its documents. Basically, to examine more closely the theological and sacramental meaning of the notion of "communion" is to reconfirm the Council's teachings as a compass to guide ecumenical commitment in the new millennium. By deepening research and debate on this topic, ecumenical theology will confront the most demanding acid test. Establishing a true ecclesial notion of "communion", gradually purified of anthropological, sociological or merely horizontal understandings, will permit greater reciprocal enrichment.

May each person live ecumenical dialogue as a pilgrimage towards the fullness of catholicity that Christ wants for his Church, harmonizing the many different voices in a single symphony of truth and love.

I am certain that with the exchange of gifts to which the ecumenical movement has accustomed us and with rigorous and serene theological research, constantly imploring the light of the Spirit, we will even be able to face the most difficult questions that have seemed insurmountable in many ecumenical dialogues such as, for example, that of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, which I mentioned in particular in my Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (cf. nn. 88-96).

4. Our journey is still long and hard. The Lord does not ask us to assess its difficulties in human terms. Today there are new horizons, profoundly different in comparison with the still recent past: we are grateful to God for this. May it imbue us with courage and induce everyone to banish from his ecumenical vocabulary such words as crisis, delay, slowness, rigidity, compromise! Although I am aware of the present problems, I invite you to take as key words for this new period: trust, patience, constancy, dialogue, hope. And to these I would also like to add: the impulse to act. I refer here to the enthusiasm inspired by a good cause that stimulates us to seek the means to support it, fostering creativity and sometimes even the courage to change. The awareness of serving a good cause acts as a driving force that impels us to involve others, so that they may know it too and join us in supporting it. The impulse to act will let us discover how many new things we can do to support our common aspiration to the full and visible communion of all Christians.

However, this said, I do not intend merely to propose the attitude of Martha, who - according to Christ's words - was anxious and fussed about many things, neglecting to listen to his teachings

(cf. Lk 10, 41). Indeed, prayer and constant listening to the Lord are indispensable, for it is He who, with the power of His Spirit, converts hearts and makes possible practical progress on the path of ecumenism.

As I hope that the plenary session of this Pontifical Council will offer important starting points for reflection on your future work, I commend all your projects to the Lord. I ask him, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, to help all Christians always to act in accordance with the commandment of unity which he himself left to us in the Upper Room: "*Ut unum sint*".

With these wishes, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to each one of those taking part in your important meeting.

From the Vatican, 10 November, 2001.

JOHN PAUL II