

Fifth Pastoral Letter

“That they all may be one”

ECUMENISM

“That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” (John 17: 21)

Pascha 1999
4 April

INTRODUCTION

1. To our brother bishops, priests, monks, nuns and all the faithful of our Churches in our various eparchies and in the countries of the Expansion, “Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1: 2)

Comment [VC1]: Not 1 : 1, as per French

Christ is risen, yes, he is risen indeed! With paschal joy we are addressing to you this letter on ecumenism, asking the risen Lord to lift our gaze on high, where in the contemplation of his glory, we may also be able to contemplate the source of our unity. And so, filled with paschal joy, and hope revived in us through the Resurrection, may we move sincerely towards it.

We rejoice, moreover, and give thanks to God as we see that our faithful are realising ever more vividly the importance of Christian unity for our spiritual and pastoral life. This new openness and the firm commitment resulting from that appear as a precious gift granted by God, the Father of Lights, to his Church, which is called to pursue, in every one of our eparchies, the saving mission of his Son.

ECUMENISM TODAY

2. Unity becomes all the more pressing for our Churches due to the fact that all we Christians together, wherever we are, make up a “little flock” (cf. Luke 12: 32) in the region of the Middle East, where God the Father has sent us to continue the redemptive mission of his Son. If we want the witness that we give to this mission to be credible in the eyes of our believing brethren, the Muslims and Jews and all those amongst whom he wills us to live, our witness must be united. Similarly, our service in the human society in which we live, can only be fruitful to the extent that we manage to unite our poor and limited resources. Furthermore, our very presence and future in this part of the world will largely depend on our ability to unite our efforts, becoming “of one heart and one mind” (Acts 4: 32), in order to address together all issues raised nowadays, such as justice and peace, emigration of Christians, inter-religious relations, social and cultural integration into our societies, and all sorts of common issues with which our Arab world is confronted, and our Churches too.

Comment [VC2]: Not 2:44-45, which is incorrect. Not even 2:46, which is similar.

EFFORTS OF ALL TOWARDS UNITY

3. We all, hierarchy, clergy and lay faithful, share the same vision and feel the same urgent need for unity, although our approaches and priorities are sometimes different. In any case we hope that our stances are complementary, though different. By their tireless actions, some of our faithful oblige their bishops to take these commitments seriously, although some of their claims or methods may need to be informed, because they do not sufficiently take into consideration all the theological implications and the true relations between Churches. Their burning desire, for example, and their ongoing activity in favour of a common celebration of the Feast of Pascha by all Christians, is in itself something positive, although several obstacles prevent its realisation. Another example requiring serious action on the path to unity is the area of mixed marriages, which sometimes cause tension within many Christian families. We studied this question and adopted a common stance on it, during our meeting at Sharfeh in 1996 with some of our venerable brothers, the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches. Yet it is sure that Christian unity cannot be reduced to these problems only; it also comprises doctrinal issues on which agreement must be reached.

ECUMENICAL INITIATIVES TODAY

4. We noted the importance of Christian unity from the time of our first meetings, in 1991 and 1992. In our second joint pastoral letter, published for Pascha 1992, under the title, *The Christian presence in the East, witness and mission*, we dedicated several pages to dialogue and ecumenical collaboration. We said, "In the East, either we shall be Christian together or we shall not be." (no. 39) We have recommended taking timely initiatives in every country and eparchy. On the level of the whole Middle East, as early as 1988, we took the joint decision that the Catholic family should become a full member of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), a meeting place for all traditional Churches of the region and a means for exchange between them.

GENERAL GUIDE-LINES

5. Our Catholic Churches are thus striving to live out practically today the main ecumenical guide-lines of the second Vatican Council, as worked out finally in the Directory for the application of the principles and norms on ecumenism, of which a new edition was published in 1993. Recently Pope John Paul II decided to give a new impetus to ecumenical reflection and action in his encyclical letter *Ut unum sint*, of May 1995, which will serve as a constant source of inspiration for us, in addition to the witness of the Fathers of our Eastern Churches.

The universal Church is today getting ready to celebrate the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. Pope John Paul II invited in this regard a special effort aimed at unity, in his apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*. We too are calling, with the universal Church in communion with Pope John Paul II and in the spirit of the Eastern Fathers, for commitment and serious ecumenical action aimed at unity. The Pope said: "The approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an *examination of conscience* and the promotion of fitting ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, *at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium*. As everyone recognizes, an enormous effort is needed in this regard. It is essential not only to continue along the path of dialogue on doctrinal matters, but above all to be more committed to *prayer for Christian unity*." (no. 34)

It is good for us to listen, at the beginning of this letter, to the voice of our father St. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Christians of Philadelphia, warning the Christians to beware of divisions, “But be all joined together with an undivided heart...For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell... And I exhort you to do nothing out of strife, but according to the doctrine of Christ... Avoid divisions; be the followers of Jesus Christ, even as he is of his Father.”

In concentrating reflection on Church unity, we do not intend to retreat into ourselves. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II said in *Ut unum sint*: “Ecumenism is not only an internal question of the Christian Communities. It is a matter of the love which God has in Jesus Christ for all humanity; to stand in the way of this love is an offence against him and against his plan to gather all people in Christ.” (no. 99) In this sense we are profoundly convinced that the search for unity in Christ is an integral part of our Christian vocation and aims at authentic witness and a better service to our Middle Eastern human community, in which and for which God our Father has called us to live and of which he willed us to be an integral part.

PLAN OF THE LETTER

6. In our letter, we shall follow the following plan:
 1. The wealth of variety of our traditions and the tragedy of our divisions.
 2. The theological and spiritual foundations of ecumenism.
 3. Ecumenical dialogue.
 4. Spiritual ecumenism.
 5. Ecumenical pastoral care.
 6. Ecumenical ways and means.

Conclusion: Our ecumenical vocation in the Middle East.

CHAPTER I

THE WEALTH OF DIVERSITY OF OUR TRADITIONS

AND THE TRAGEDY OF OUR DIVISIONS

DIVERSITY AND UNITY

7. In our 4th. Pastoral Letter (Christmas1996), *The Mystery of the Church – I am the vine, ye are the branches*, we talked a lot about the theology and history of the Church in the Middle East. We said what communion with variety of traditions requires in the Catholic Church. In this letter, we wish to have a broader vision and to speak of communion and diversity in all the Churches of our region.

The Christian presence in the Middle East is remarkable, more than elsewhere, for the plurality and diversity of liturgical, theological, spiritual and canonical traditions. These traditions form part of their identity and constitute living links with the generations of faithful who succeeded each other down the centuries, and through them, today’s communities go back to the witness of the apostles. This diversity of traditions constitutes a source of great wealth for the whole Church. But we must also acknowledge that this diversity has often become a cause of introversion and thus a

source of divisions. If we wish to become involved in real ecumenical action, we have then to harmonise diversity with unity. They are two necessary dimensions of the Church's life: "legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendour and contributes greatly to the fulfilment of her mission." (Ut unum sint, no. 50)

I – DIVERSITY AND THE WEALTH OF TRADITIONS

UNITY DOES NOT SUPPRESS DIVERSITY

8. In the Eastern part of the Mediterranean basin, the proclamation of the Gospel encountered from the beginning peoples, languages and ancient civilisations of great variety: Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Greeks, Syrians and Armenians, etc. In those different languages and cultures, the apostles and their successors announced the mystery of Christ, and the faithful expressed their faith through them. In that way, Christian communities have taken on different cultural aspects and created, over succeeding generations, their own traditions. The faith became incarnate in the cultures and revived them with a new spirit, just as Christ became incarnate in our human nature in order to save it.

We mentioned that such diversity constitutes great wealth for the Church. The reason for it is simple: no language or culture can lay claim to grasping fully the mystery of God's love revealed in Christ, still less to giving it adequate expression. Each one of our Eastern cultures has endeavoured to approach that mystery from its own perspective and according to some particular affinity. If all these approaches and emphases are gathered harmoniously, then the Church in its catholicity may hope to reach a deeper understanding and a fuller expression of the ineffable mystery.

To achieve its full meaning, such diversity then presupposes unity and communion. Unity, in its turn, in no way requires the suppression of diversity, but just the contrary, for it makes possible a richer church life, a more beautiful liturgical celebration and more fruitful preaching, because it is more adapted to the variety of the human race.

II – THE HISTORY OF OUR DIVISIONS

9. Unfortunately, down the centuries this diversity often became division, for very many reasons. Some of these divisions, which still exist today, tragically weakened the Christian presence in our part of the world, to the point of sometimes endangering its future. We should like to review the most significant of these divisions and evaluate their consequences, in order the better to see the need and the possibilities for overcoming them. And this is achievable, if we want it.

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

10. Already during the early years of the Church, diversity sometimes brought tensions into the community of Jerusalem, as the Acts of the Apostles shows us. (Acts 6: 1-6; 15) But unity of heart and soul in the Spirit enabled them to overcome them. The assembly of Jerusalem, (cf. Acts 15) summoned to respond to the issues raised by the entry of many disciples of pagan origin into the Church, would become the model for other assemblies, synods or councils, at local, regional or universal level. In consultation, under the impulsion of the Spirit, the Christian community found the insight and strength to maintain and promote the growth of collegial communion.

THE COUNCILS OF THE FIFTH CENTURY

11. Most of the tensions that have left their mark on our Churches up to the present took place in the fifth century. At that time, fundamental truths of the faith were at stake, such as the divinity of Christ or the reality of the Incarnation. Some ecumenical councils, convoked to restore and strengthen unity, led to divisions. Often non-doctrinal causes - philosophical, cultural, political and social – contributed considerably to making reconciliation impossible. Two ecumenical councils in particular provoked the division between Churches which has lasted until today: the council of Ephesus in 431 and the council of Chalcedon in 451.

The council of Ephesus, in 431, defined the unity of the person of Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, in contradistinction to the teachings attributed to Nestorius. That council also affirmed that Jesus Christ is God and man in one single person. He is then simultaneously the son of God and the son of the Virgin Mary. That is why the council designated the title “Theotokos” or “Mother of God” to Mary. For complex reasons, the Church of Persia was not able to take part in that council and only acquired a partial and tardy knowledge of it. Consequently, it did not accept it and hence found itself separated from the other Churches. That is why this Church was for a long time called “Nestorian,” although it did not accept that name and now calls itself “the Assyrian Church of the East.”

The Council of Chalcedon, of 451, had even more tragic consequences for the Churches of the Middle East. It defined that, in Christ, there are two natures, human nature and divine nature, in one single person, the Word of God, second person of the Trinity. However, the term “nature” did not have the same meaning for all the theological schools of the period. The nuances between the Greek terms (*physis* for “nature,” *prosopon* and *hypostasis* for “person”) were not the same in the corresponding terms in Syriac (*kyana*, “nature” and *knoma* and *farsofa*, “person.”) All that caused confusion and many misunderstandings which led to division when several apostolic Churches, including the Armenian, Syriac, Coptic and Ethiopian, refused to accept this council’s edicts. They were then termed “monophysite,” because they wanted to keep the expression “one nature,” namely “the incarnate nature of the Word of God is one.” However, those Churches refuse that label and are called today “Oriental Orthodox Churches.”

THE SCHISM BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

12. In the eleventh century there took place the great schism between the two Churches of Constantinople and Rome (in 1054.) This was the culmination of a long process of reciprocal estrangement and growing mutual ignorance. Christian East and West had become strangers to one another and were part of two different cultural and political worlds. In the East, the empire of Byzantium or Constantinople with its Greek culture replaced the former Roman empire, while in the West a new Roman empire based on Latin culture was formed. Following that, different ecclesial traditions formed in the East and in the West. They might have been accepted reciprocally as complementary, but cultural conditions made that impossible. The differences between these traditions were considered irreconcilable, so becoming the cause of division.

THE REFORMATION

13. In the sixteenth century, the great Reformation in the West with Martin Luther divided the West into Catholicism and the Protestant movement which in turn gave birth to Churches with different structures: Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, etc. The Church in the Middle East remained unaffected by this movement until the nineteenth century.

OTHER ATTEMPTS TO RE-ESTABLISH UNITY

14. At the end of the thirteenth century and up until the fifteenth century, there were attempts to re-establish unity between the divided Churches. The main ones were the Councils of Lyon II (1274) and of Florence (1439) aimed at re-establishing unity between both Catholic and Orthodox Churches. But they did not lead to the expected results.

From the Catholic point of view, the birth of the Eastern Catholic Churches is to be placed in the line of those attempts, aiming to bring the viewpoints together and to act seriously to re-establish the unity willed by Jesus Christ for his Church. So, facing each Orthodox Church, there exists today an Eastern Catholic Church of the same rite, in communion with the Church of Rome. We are well aware that the Eastern Catholic existence has been the cause of new difficulties in inter-Church relations. That is why, we continue to act and to pray humbly for the will of God to be fulfilled in us, on the various paths on which he has placed us. Only the Maronite Church has remained completely Catholic and never broke communion with Rome. The Latin Church has been present in the Middle East for many centuries, primarily through the sending of priests, monks and nuns. Then gradually communities and a local Church of Latin rite were formed, especially in the Holy Land.

THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

15. It was principally from the nineteenth century onwards that the Churches and Communities resulting from the Reformation undertook mission to the Middle East, recruiting their faithful from among those of the Eastern Churches, thus multiplying Eastern Churches and divisions. These Churches are also taking part today in ecumenical action through various individual or joint initiatives.

CONCLUSION OF THE HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

16. So that is how the Churches as we know them today in the Middle East came to be formed. This quick survey of history is necessary to help us know how the Churches came to be formed, and to understand the nature of the relations which exist between them. The ecumenical spirit requires us to look today at our past with courage, frankness and humility in order to open the door to reconciliation and brotherly solidarity now and in future, in the hope of one day bringing about complete communion among us, according to Jesus' prayer, "That they all may be one." (John 17: 21)

III - THE GRAVE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR DIVISIONS

DOWN THE AGES

17. The divisions which followed the council of Ephesus (431) and especially that of Chalcedon (451) had a profound, far-reaching influence on the history of Christians in

the Middle East. Muslim Arab historians also noted that the divisions among Christians facilitated the Muslim conquest of the region.

Seeing in these divisions a danger for the unity of their empire, the Byzantine emperors tried to impose, by force if necessary, the Chalcedonian dogma on the Christians of Syria and Egypt who had rejected it. Hence, aversion to Byzantium only increased in both those countries, to the point that a majority of the population was ready to receive the Muslim armies favourably: they hoped that they would free them from the periodic imperial persecutions. Besides, after conquest, Muslim governors tended to treat these non-Chalcedonian communities favourably in comparison with the communities which acknowledged the same doctrine as the emperor of Byzantium and were therefore suspected of conniving with the enemy.

DECLINE IN THE NUMBERS OF FAITHFUL

18. During the succeeding centuries, division and lack of understanding between the Churches doubtless played a significant role in the slow process that led Christians to become increasingly in the minority in the Muslim Arab world. Later still, especially at the time of the Ottoman empire, the division and isolation of the various communities prevented them from adopting an attitude of solidarity towards the authorities to make them respect their dignity and rights. Their situation became increasingly weak and vulnerable as a result. The Christian presence disappeared almost completely from certain regions and a significant emigration movement started, especially from the latter half of the nineteenth century.

LACK OF UNITY AN OBSTACLE TO WITNESS

19. The Christian presence today depends on this eventful and often painful story. It is only too obvious that the lack of unity among Christians has always been a very heavy impediment in the effort to give a new vitality to that presence. Often the different Churches co-exist in the same towns and villages. Each Church, wishing to serve its communities as well as possible in all areas, seeks to have its own school, youth clubs, clinics, social centres, etc. These very institutions or services thus multiply, while the population and clergymen themselves continually diminish in number. Expenditure is increased to no avail, and, due to lack of resources and manpower, the quality of the work cannot always meet legitimate demands. Practical collaboration in these areas would offer undeniable advantages.

UNITY OF HEART AND WORD

20. In another area too, the need for solidarity can be felt: in the face of our common problems, we need to co-ordinate our hearts and voices. The whole Church (i.e. all the Churches) would thereby become stronger, more respected and more effectual in our societies, and it would even facilitate the task for our various civil authorities when they have to deal with the requests and rights of the Churches.

All our Churches, fortunately, are starting to become aware of this painful reality. We would all honestly like to remedy this, so as to strengthen fellowship and unity among us. We must admit that some measure of solidarity already exists today, although the task remains problematic. The road to unity and solidarity is long and difficult. But we have started to make progress on it and the grace of God will be able to guide our steps and confirm the sincerity of our intentions.

Let us then listen to St. Basil the Great exhorting us to unity: “I need hardly tell the sons of peace how great is the blessing of peace. But now this blessing, great, marvellous, and worthy as it is of being most strenuously sought by all that love the Lord, is in peril of being reduced to the bare name, because iniquity abounds, and the love of most men has waxed cold.¹ I think then that the one great end of all who are really and truly serving the Lord ought to be to bring back to union the Churches now “at sundry times and in divers manners,”² divided from one another. In attempting myself to effect this, I cannot fairly be blamed as a busybody, for nothing is so characteristically Christian as the being a peacemaker, and for this reason our Lord has promised us peacemakers a very high reward.” (Letter 114, *To Cyriacus*)

CHRISTIAN EMIGRATION

21. The tendency of Christians to emigrate, which began some time ago and has continued ever since, for similar political, economic and social reasons in each of our countries, also requires that efforts to deal with it be effectively unified. Isolated initiatives are often inadequate and sometimes even counter-productive. All the Churches of the Middle East, and the Churches all over the world, are in agreement to proclaim loud and clear how regrettable it would be to see Christians vanish from this part of the world, which gave birth to the Church and was the departure point for its world-wide expansion. Despite that, it should be recognized, that the aims and efforts expended in this domain to deal with this danger remain inadequate. It should be added that Muslims themselves see the historic existence of Christians and their presence among them in a positive way. They are sure that this presence strengthens Christians’ and Muslims’ life together and is beneficial to all, both them and us, in our Arab countries.

COLLABORATION IN THE PASTORAL DOMAIN

22. Moreover, even in the pastoral domain we increasingly feel the need for ecumenical collaboration. As a result of emigration or of migration to the cities, the presence of Christians in some regions of the Middle East has become so sparse that it is practically impossible for each Church to ensure a regular ministry to its faithful, given the lack of priests and the great distances. This state of affairs risks hastening still further the movement for leaving among the remaining Christian families. We see that circumstances themselves, the need to safeguard the Church of Christ and ministering to our faithful demand greater pastoral collaboration, in order to meet the different needs of the faithful. This requires of us new provisions and a common commitment in order to begin theological and pastoral reflection. It also presupposes mutual recognition of the ordained ministry and the sacraments celebrated. There we are really at the heart of ecumenism.

¹ Cf. Matthew 24 :12

² Cf. Hebrews 1: 1

CHAPTER II
THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
OF ECUMENISM

RECOGNITION OF OUR FAULTS REVIVES THE SENSE OF DUTY

23. So far, we have been speaking of our past history. Our story, our roots should be known, and the serious divisions that resulted from them among our Churches in the East. Yet it is not allowed to stop at that. Recognition of mistakes and the unmasking of the scandal and counter-witness inherent in these divisions must revive in us a sense of duty to work for re-establishing unity in Christ and seeking the most appropriate ways to bring it about, bearing in mind the historic, geographic and social circumstances in which our Churches are called to live. We must revitalise theological reflection in order to reach a new vision in our ecclesial action and our way of understanding inter-Church relations. Ecumenism is just as much a requirement for theology as for spirituality and pastoral care.

I - DIVISION, A SCANDAL AND A COUNTER-WITNESS

24. Division among Christians is contrary both to the nature and mission of the Church. Indeed, the Church is the sign and privileged instrument in the saving service of God, who wishes to gather together in one all his children scattered abroad (cf. John 11: 52) and gather together in one all things under a single head, Christ Jesus. (cf. Ephesians 1: 10) We meditated at length on this theme in our pastoral letter *The Mystery of the Church*. So the Church is itself called to be and to live out first that which it is its mission to proclaim and convey.

DIVISION IS CONTRARY TO THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

25. The very nature of the Church is communion (*koinonia*), i.e. a common spiritual life among several persons. That communion is not a simple matter of merely human agreement or affection, but is really based on what Christ requested of his Father on behalf of his disciples, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” (John 17: 21) The mysterious communion of the Father with the Son, in the Spirit, is the pattern and source of the Church’s communion. Participating in the divine life, which, by its very nature is communion, Christians together constitute a communion which is in the image of the divine Trinity.

In Saint Paul’s theology, everything is ordered towards this unity. “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Ephesians 4: 4-6) That is why he exhorts the Christians of Ephesus, and through them the Christians of every place and all time, to lead a life worthy of their calling, “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4: 2-3)

Comment [MSOffice3]: Not Ephesians 4: 1-3, as per French

Every division, consequently, is in contradiction with the Christian vocation to unity and with the communion which the Church is called to be, with Trinitarian unity as its source and pattern.

DIVISION IS CONTRARY TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

26. Division is moreover contrary to the mission of the Church, called to continue the work of Christ. The Church is not a communion for itself. Its communion in Christ is for the glory of the Father and the service of the Kingdom. The dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council expresses this truth in these terms, “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” (Lumen Gentium 1) How can it fulfil this mission, if it is itself divided? The sign loses its meaning and the witness of the Church its credibility.

How could the Church proclaim communion which is “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ,” (cf. 1 John 1: 3) if its members or the pastors of the local Churches are not united on the truth of that communion or in agreement concerning the way in which it should be lived? If their unity ought to be a sign of the truth of the Son’s mission, their division is an obstacle to the faith of those to whom it was directed. (cf. John 17: 21-23)

How may the Church be a sign and instrument for unity of the human race with God and within itself, if Christians are incapable of overcoming differences among them of nationalities, cultures and languages in the proclamation of the Good News and in building a more brotherly and just human society in peace? The salt risks losing its savour. (cf. Matthew 5: 13)

The voice of St. John Chrysostom invites us to go beyond human interpretations of the divine realities that we bear within, “‘For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.’ (I Corinthians 12: 13) Now his meaning is this: that which established us to become one body and regenerated us, is one Spirit: for not in one Spirit was one baptized, and another another. And not only is that which has baptized us one, but also that unto which he baptized us, i.e., for which he baptized us, is one. For we were baptized not that so many several bodies might be formed, but that we might all preserve one with another the perfect nature of one body: i.e., that we might all be one body, into the same were we baptized.... If now one Spirit both formed us and gathered us all together into one body... why, I pray, are you continually tossing to and fro their difference? But if you say, ‘Because there are many members and diverse,’ know that this very thing is the wonder and the peculiar excellency of the body, when the things which are many and diverse make one.” (Homily 30 on 1 Corinthians)

II – ALREADY EXISTING COMMUNION

A GROWING DESIRE FOR UNITY

27. We may consider the ardent desire for the restoration of unity among all the disciples of Christ that is evident in our Churches, as a “divine call” and special “grace.” That is how the Second Vatican Council puts it in the Introduction to the Decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. It grounds ecumenical commitment on “a clear ecclesiological vision, open to all the ecclesial values present among other Christians.” (Ut Unum Sint no. 10)

ELEMENTS OF TRUTH AND HEALTH

28. In the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the Council firstly affirms that the Catholic Church believes itself to have been preserved in faithfulness and unity, despite the often severe crises which rocked it and the lack of fidelity of some of its ministers or members, “This...one Church of Christ, which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic,... subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him...” But at the same time, the Council is open to other Christians, recognizing that, “.. many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.” (Lumen gentium no. 8)

The Decree on Ecumenism deduces from that, “It follows that these separated Churches and Communities, though we believe that they suffer from defects, have by no means been deprived of significance and value in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.” (Unitatis redintegratio no. 3)

REAL COMMUNION, THOUGH IMPERFECT

29. It is on these common elements of holiness and truth, that Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, bases the idea of real, already existing communion, though still imperfect, “Indeed, the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church. To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them. For this reason the Second Vatican Council speaks of a certain, though imperfect communion.” (no. 11)

EXISTING COMMUNION SOURCE OF NEW LIFE

30. It is good to be aware of the wealth that is present and active beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: “For there are many who honour Sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and a pattern of life, and who show a sincere zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and Saviour. They are consecrated by baptism, in which they are united with Christ. They also recognize and accept other sacraments within their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities. Many of them rejoice in the episcopate, celebrate the Holy Eucharist and cultivate devotion toward the Virgin Mother of God. They also share with us in prayer and other spiritual benefits. Likewise we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them too he gives his gifts and graces whereby he is operative among them with his sanctifying power. Some indeed he has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood. In all of Christ's disciples the Spirit arouses the desire to be peacefully united, in the manner determined by Christ as one flock under one shepherd, and he prompts them to pursue this end.” (Lumen Gentium no. 15)

These links of communion are particularly close and strong with the Orthodox Churches, “These Churches, although separated from us, yet possess true sacraments and above all, by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are linked with us in closest intimacy.” (Unitatis redintegratio no. 15) So, the Council

could declare about them, “Hence, through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in each of these churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature.” (ibid.)

III – GROWTH IN PARTIALLY EXISTING COMMUNION

BELONGING TOGETHER TO CHRIST

31. It is from this recognition of the degree of already existing communion that ecumenical dialogues start, so as to broaden the bases of encounter and to make communion grow to full stature. Since the Second Vatican Council, relations between the Churches and ecclesial communities have made possible remarkable progress, whence ecclesial communion has been deeply enriched. “There is an increased awareness that we all belong to Christ... The universal brotherhood of Christians has become a firm ecumenical conviction.” (Ut Unum Sint no. 42)

FROM PARTIAL TO PERFECT COMMUNION

32. With Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, it is then possible to observe, “The greater mutual understanding and the doctrinal convergences already achieved between us, which have resulted in an affective and effective growth of communion, cannot suffice for the conscience of Christians who profess that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement is to re-establish full visible unity among all the baptized.” (no. 77)

“From this basic but partial unity it is now necessary to advance towards the visible unity which is required and sufficient and which is manifested in a real and concrete way, so that the Churches may truly become a sign of that full communion in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church which will be expressed in the common celebration of the Eucharist.” (no. 78)

CHAPTER III

ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

DIALOGUE OF TRUTH AND CHARITY

33. Dialogue, in all its forms, occupies a privileged place in the great ecumenical task. In relations between Catholics and Orthodox, it has become customary to distinguish between the dialogue of charity and the dialogue of truth. Both are necessary. The dialogue of charity was an indispensable condition for preparing the dialogue of truth. Yet it is just as indispensable for the dialogue of charity to accompany the dialogue of truth, in order to sustain and feed it, giving it life and enabling it to overcome our all too human limitations and reticence.

DIALOGUE OF TRUTH

34. The dialogue of truth in the strict sense, or theological dialogue, commonly refers to the systematic review, conducted jointly by delegates of various Churches, of revealed truth and of its various forms of expression and practical implementation. Its aim is to overcome prejudices and misunderstandings inherited from the past and to reach, if possible, a common understanding of the Christian mystery, beyond the differences that can at first sight seem irreconcilable.

DIALOGUE OF CONSCIENCES

35. But, according to expressions used by Pope John Paul II in *Ut unum sint*, dialogue is not limited to an “exchange of ideas;” it is also an “exchange of gifts” (no. 28) and is called to become a “dialogue of consciences,” (no. 34) to be transformed into a “dialogue of conversion.” (no. 35) Dialogue is then, basically, a form of life, which “engages the whole person; it is also a dialogue of love.” (no. 47)

I - NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

36. Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14: 6) He reveals to us the mystery of God’s love for humanity. Theological dialogue, whose goal is to disclose to us this sublime truth, plays a fundamental and irreplaceable role in the search for Christian unity.

In theological dialogue, we position ourselves together to confront the real differences which involve faith. This joint search requires of us, in the first place, to dispense with judgments, words and attitudes inherited from the past, which do not correspond in truth and justice to what the Churches believe and experience. Dialogue will then strive to increase trust, openness and mutual acceptance, in confronting the different viewpoints, in order to overcome differences that make an obstacle to full communion. Special attention is given to the various formulae used in the respective traditions since certain apparently opposing terms could actually cover the same content. For that dialogue will always have to take place with all due respect for the greatness of the mystery of God revealed in Christ, a mystery that human understanding will never be able to grasp completely and that no human language will ever be able adequately to express. Consequently, apparently contradictory human expressions can sometimes be two faithful and acceptable attempts at trying to express an always ineffable mystery.

BETTER ACQUAINTANCE WITH OTHERS

37. Theological dialogue animated by such a spirit may then lead to unexpected discoveries of great wealth. Not only will it allow “a truer knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both Communions.” (Unitatis redintegratio no. 4) but it will furthermore open the way to deeper insights into revealed truth itself. Pope John Paul II explained it this way, “In this regard, ecumenical dialogue, which prompts the parties involved to question each other, to understand each other and to explain their positions to each other, makes surprising discoveries possible. Intolerant polemics and controversies have made incompatible assertions out of what was really the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality. Nowadays we need to find the formula which, by capturing the reality in its entirety, will enable us to move beyond partial readings and eliminate false interpretations.” (Ut Unum Sint, no. 38)

DIALOGUE OF EXPERTS AND OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

38. This dialogue is primarily work for experts, theologians well anchored in their own tradition and open to others’ ways of thinking, but it is fitting for the whole ecclesial community, pastors and faithful, to be informed about the programme, method

and results of dialogue. Indeed, all true ecumenical dialogue should be carried out in the name of the Church.

II – MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

39. Our ecumenical commitment to the service of full unity is strongly encouraged and consolidated by the considerable progress achieved in relations between Churches over the last half-century. That is why it is important to be acquainted with the most promising fruits of the efforts undertaken in this field, both at the level of the universal Church and at the level of our region of the Middle East in particular.

WITH THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

40. Great figures such as Popes John XXIII and Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras were able to open up new ways to reunion and mutual recognition between Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The unforgettable, historic meeting between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem, in January 1964, really marks a new starting point and will forever remain the living image of the ideal sought, the anticipated icon of the full communion sought.

The lifting of the anathemas of 1054, which had become the symbol of the schism between Rome and Constantinople, that took place during the final days of the Second Vatican Council, on 7 December 1965, solemnly expressed this profound change. This ecclesial act was “at once a healing of historical memories, a mutual forgiveness, and a firm commitment to strive for communion.” (Ut Unum Sint no. 53)

The many exchanges of visits between popes and patriarchs, the various meetings between bishops, theologians, priests and faithful in the framework of what is customarily called the dialogue of charity, have gradually changed the view that the two Churches have of each other. Thus Pope Paul VI was able to declare, during his visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul on 25 July, 1967, “Now, after a long period of division and reciprocal incomprehension, the Lord grants us that we rediscover ourselves as sister Churches, despite the obstacles which were then raised between us.”³

SISTER CHURCHES

41. This vision of sister Churches inspired the whole course of theological dialogue, announced in 1979. The work of the mixed international Commission for dialogue has proved fruitful, to the point that Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew could make a joint declaration at the end of the latter’s visit to Rome in 1995: “[Dialogue] has given birth to a common sacramental conception of the Church, sustained and transmitted through time by the apostolic succession. In our Churches, apostolic succession is fundamental for the sanctification and unity of the people of God. Considering that in each local Church the ministry of divine love is realised and that thus the Church of Christ shows its effectual presence in each of them, the mixed Commission was able to declare that our Churches recognize each other as sister

Comment [MSOffice4]: No text of this declaration available in any language either on the Vatican or the Patriarchate’s websites.

³ Message of Pope Paul VI to Patriarch Athenagoras I on July 25, 1967. *Information Service*, The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, 1967/3, pp. 12 f.; AAS 59, 1967, pp. 852-854.

Churches, together responsible for the protection of the one Church of God, in faithfulness to the divine plan, especially so with regard to unity.”

WITH THE ANCIENT CHURCHES OF THE EAST

42. In very different ways, the Catholic Church has also resumed brotherly relations with the ancient Churches of the East, who had not accepted the dogmatic formulae of the Councils of Ephesus (431) or Chalcedon (451), in the realm of Christology.

During the visits to Rome of several patriarchs of Oriental Orthodox, also called non-Chalcedonian, Churches, the Pope signed several common declarations with them, affirming the common faith of their Churches in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. The Christological disagreements, which had been at the origin of the ancient divisions, are recognized as having different causes, of which the principal was the difference between linguistic expressions. Thus was ended fifteen centuries of misunderstanding and incomprehension.

A similar joint Christological statement was signed by Pope John Paul II and Mar Denkha IV, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, in November 1994.

WITH THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE ANCIENT CHURCHES OF THE EAST

43. A Christological agreement was also reached between the (Chalcedonian) Greek Orthodox Church and the (non-Chalcedonian) Oriental Orthodox Churches, that is, the Armenian, Copt, Ethiopian and Syriac Orthodox, thanks to the work of the theological commissions of both traditions, which worked first unofficially, from 1964 to 1971, then in an officially sanctioned way, from 1985 to 1993. However, this agreement has not yet been officially adopted by the competent authorities of all those Churches.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF OUR CHURCHES

44. We Churches of the Middle East now see that it is our duty to study particularly attentively the texts and content of those Christological agreements, given that we co-exist in the same region, and that we are all called to bear common witness to Christ amidst Muslim and Jewish believers.

WITH THE CHURCHES AND ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES OF THE WEST

45. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has also increased its contacts with various Churches and communities born of the reform. Official bilateral dialogues have been established with Anglicans, Lutherans, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, etc. Especially with the Anglicans and Lutherans joint theological texts of great wealth have been published on the mystery of the Church, authority, Eucharist, justification, etc.

WITH THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

46. The Catholic Church has at the same time developed a close collaboration with the World Council of Churches, especially through the mixed working Group and thanks to its participation in the work of the Faith and Constitution Commission. The text on Baptism, the Eucharist and the Ministry, published in 1982, is on this point certainly the richest fruit, marking impressive convergence among all the great Christian confessions.

III - RECEPTION OF THE RESULTS OF THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

PARTICIPATION OF EVERY CHURCH IN DIALOGUE

47. We have already said that the results of the theological dialogues cannot be kept merely for specialist committees and that they must be transmitted to the Church and become a “common heritage.” These results must be the subject “of a serious examination which should involve the people of God as a whole, in various ways and in view of their different capacities. Bishops, priests, lay faithful, having all received the anointing of the Holy Spirit must be incorporated into this reception, each according to his charism and particular place in the Church, so as to reach a *consensus fidelium*.”

Comment [VC5]: I cannot find the source quoted, so suppose that it refers to another letter of their Beatitudes.

The reception of these results is not a single event, nor is it limited to a final decision of the highest authority. It is a long process of discernment and assimilation, a common growth in mutual recognition and communion, carried out by the whole Church, under the responsibility of the hierarchy and with the aid of the Holy Spirit. It will require ecumenical openness to become a constant aspect of the Churches’ whole life, especially its whole pastoral care.

IV – CHURCHES OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

CHURCHES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

48. Our Churches of the Middle East see that theological dialogue in the strict sense is their responsibility and duty. We suffer sometimes from lack of people and resources. That is why our contribution in this field remains modest. But we must mention here the initiatives undertaken by both Melkite Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches of Antioch, and both Churches of Babylon, the Chaldean Catholic and the Assyrian Church of the East.

We know that the practical way in which certain truths or theological or canonical demands are experienced by our Churches has profound repercussions on theological dialogue about these same truths: for example, the question of primacy in the Church and communion with the successor of Peter in the See of Rome. Pope John Paul II launched an urgent appeal in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, in order to help him, through a “patient and fraternal dialogue,” find “a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.” (Ut Unum Sint nos. 96, 95) He renewed this appeal, during his meeting with the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs on 29 September, 1998.

Comment [VC6]: Here, the French text emailed to me breaks off and only resumes at the point indicated below. I have found the missing sections in the text published on line by opus libani and reinserted them in this translation.

TRADITIONS OF PARTICULAR CHURCHES

49. How can we reconcile the diversity of our ancient traditions and particular rights with that communion? What are the best ways to integrate synodality and primacy? A continuous search for the meaning of the Church in our Eastern and Western traditions together, and in the content of our patriarchal traditions, can open new doors in the framework of the Catholic communion: that is our real contribution in theological dialogue. We exhort our children to become involved in that search, in order to help the Catholic Church in the East and in the world to breathe with both its lungs, Eastern and Western, as Pope John Paul II asks.

Comment [VC7]: Fr. *Peuvent* should be *peut* if the subject is, as appears *Une recherche continue...*

It is evident that these aspects are already part of the dialogue of charity, as it is not possible to draw a clear boundary between that and the dialogue of truth. St. John says: “But he that doeth truth cometh to the light.” (John 3: 21)

V- RECEPTION IN THE CHURCHES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

RECEPTION IN THE CHURCHES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

50. We said that dialogue must “involve the people of God as a whole.” That is why our Churches of the Middle East must fully assume that responsibility, at all levels and in all aspects of their life. The texts and agreements which are the fruit of theological dialogue and which must be the object of such a process of reflection are many and varied in their origin and nature.

Comment [VC8]: Here the emailed French text resumes.

OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

51. In first place come the official texts of the Catholic Church, beginning with the texts of the Second Vatican Council which opened a new era for Catholic ecumenism. The Directory for the application of the principles and norms on ecumenism, published in a revised edition in 1993, is its direct extension, as best guide in the effort of ownership. The encyclical *Ut unum sint*, of Pope John Paul II (May 1995) has confirmed the reception of the ecumenical policy of Vatican II, while at the same time acknowledging the achievements of the various dialogues which have been broached since then. Many other texts of the pope or Catholic authorities put forward again those same guidelines adapted to new circumstances; let us think, for example, of the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation, “A new hope for Lebanon.” (May 1997)

BILATERAL AGREEMENTS

52. On the other hand, during the same decades, many texts of ecumenical agreement or convergence were produced, both in bilateral dialogues, that is, between the Catholic Church and another Church or tradition – with Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, etc. – and in multilateral dialogues, in which several Churches or traditions were involved together, for example, within the framework of the World Council of Churches, at global level, or of the Middle East Council of Churches, at regional level.

OTHER IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

53. Practically speaking, in the Middle East, it is obvious that the texts concerning relations between Catholics and Orthodox will have to be taken particularly into consideration. The main issues discussed in the texts and agreements to do with theological dialogue with the Orthodox Church of Byzantine tradition are the following: firstly, we are sister Churches. This vision must be an integral part of our ecclesiology. Secondly, the sacraments are the same and we share the “sacramental conception of the Church.” Thirdly, the practical guidance of the international Commission for dialogue contained in the final document of the Balamand meeting in 1993 deserve to be known and put into practice. It is essential also to understand that these points have to do not merely or chiefly with practical rules of action, but basic theological and ecclesiological principles.

APPLICATION OF THE AGREEMENTS

54. The Christological agreements between the Catholic Church and the Syriac, Coptic and Armenian Churches have profound implications for our Churches. It means the principal reasons for the separation in the fifth century no longer exist. Today Catholic and Orthodox Churches must start to work together to pursue these agreements and put them into practice. It would require the creation of joint working committees.

CHAPTER IV

SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM

SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM

55. The concern and search for unity are part of the very being of the Christian and of the Church. Pope John Paul II returns repeatedly to the topic: "This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community." (Ut Unum Sint, no. 9) So the Church is called to be ecumenical in its innermost being and will have to let itself be converted to it and shaped through relations with other baptised people and their communities. We recall again what Pope John Paul II said: ecumenical dialogue must go beyond the dialogue of ideas, to become a dialogue of exchange of gifts, a dialogue of conscience, and then a dialogue leading to conversion. (Ut Unum Sint, nos. 28, 35)

The Second Vatican Council's Decree on ecumenism uses the expression "spiritual ecumenism" to mean the renovation of the Church, conversion of the heart, holiness of life, prayer and mutual understanding. (Unitatis redintegratio no. 8)

CONVERSION AND RENEWAL

56. The Second Vatican Council calls principally for inner conversion without which there can be no real ecumenism. In terms of persons, this means renewal of heart, renouncement of self, humility and gentleness in service, brotherly generosity with regard to others. Each person is called to become more radically re-converted to the Gospel: "All the faithful should remember that the more effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice." (Unitatis redintegratio no. 7)

CONVERSION OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND OF THE COMMUNITY

57. It is not only the Christian who must be converted personally: the Second Vatican Council call also for a communal conversion. The encyclical *Ut unum sint* powerfully reaffirms this: "Not only personal sins must be forgiven and left behind, but also social sins, which is to say the sinful structures' themselves which have contributed and can still contribute to division and to the reinforcing of division." (Ut Unum Sint, no. 34)

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE SINNED

58. This conversion has to do especially with sins against unity: “Even after the many sins which have contributed to our historical divisions, *Christian unity is possible*, provided that we are humbly conscious of having sinned against unity and are convinced of our need for conversion.” (Ibid.) It will bring in its wake a complete change of our attitudes with regard to others: “There is an increased sense of the need for repentance: an awareness of certain exclusions which seriously harm fraternal charity, of certain refusals to forgive, of a certain pride, of an unevangelical insistence on condemning the other side, of a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption.” (Ut Unum Sint, no. 15) Each Church or community will have to discern how its sins may have played a role of division in its history, and to what Church it may have caused damage by its sin. Then it must strive, with divine grace, to attain forgiveness and reconciliation.

CONVERSION IN ALL AREAS OF LIFE

59. Personal and communal conversion should translate into renewal of the life of our Churches, which is “undoubtedly ... the basis of the movement toward unity.” (Unitatis redintegratio no. 6) And this renewal effort will cover all spheres of the Church’s life and apostolate: “the Biblical and liturgical movements, the preaching of the word of God and catechetics, the apostolate of the laity, new forms of religious life and the spirituality of married life, and the Church’s social teaching and activity.” (ibid.) In this sense, all the efforts of our Eastern Catholic Churches will have an ecumenical scope, especially our efforts in the fields of theology, liturgy and spirituality.

PRAYER

60. Being also part of spiritual ecumenism, prayer deserves a special mention, because in it the Christian and the ecclesial community are more directly under God’s eye, submitting to his will and beseeching his light and power. The Second Vatican Council describes prayer as “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (Unitatis redintegratio no. 8) and “an effective means of obtaining the grace of unity.” (Ibid.)

That is true even for personal prayer: “In the deep personal dialogue which each of us must carry on with the Lord in prayer, concern for unity cannot be absent. Only in this way, in fact, will that concern fully become part of the reality of our life and of the commitments we have taken on in the Church.” (Ut Unum Sint, no. 27)

All our ecclesial traditions possess prayers for unity in their liturgies, which proves that our Churches have never stopped praying for unity and have brought this concern daily even into the Eucharist. We invite the meaning of these prayers to be restored to full value, as an expression of the ecumenical aspect of the liturgy, and so that this spirit may remain alive in us and bring us to the re-establishment of unity with our brethren.

ECUMENICAL COMMON PRAYER

61. “Along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to *common prayer*” of brothers and sisters who are not in perfect communion. It is “a genuine expression of the ties which even now bind Catholics to their ... brethren” **in the whole Church**, “an expression and confirmation of unity.” (Ut unum sint, nos. 22, 21) Indeed, “if Christians, despite their divisions, can grow ever more united in common prayer

Comment [VC9]: The quotation marks are not correctly placed in the French.

around Christ, they will grow in the awareness of how little divides them in comparison to what unites them.” (Ibid.) We will therefore ensure that the many ecumenical meetings include prayer as often as possible and that it should somehow be their highpoint. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, celebrated every year in January, or around Pentecost, is a privileged expression of this duty of ecumenical prayer, as well as being a favourable opportunity to develop the ecumenical awareness of the faithful.

MUTUAL ACQUAINTANCE AND EXPERIENCE OF SOLIDARITY

62. “Fellowship in prayer leads people to look at the Church and Christianity in a new way.” (Ut unum sint, no. 23) This change of optic is part of conversion to the Gospel: “It is necessary to pass from antagonism and conflict to a situation where each party recognizes the other as a *partner*.” (Ut unum sint, no. 29) It promotes a new discovery of the riches present in other Churches and Communion: “the knowledge that the Spirit is at work in other Christian Communities, the discovery of examples of holiness, the experience of the immense riches present in the communion of saints, and contact with unexpected dimensions of Christian commitment.” (Ut unum sint, no. 15)

63. We invite our priests and faithful to wish to be better acquainted with and love the theological, liturgical and spiritual traditions of other Churches, in order to be able to feed on them. It requires a long education to be able to feel sentiments and reactions in ourselves and in others. Basing ourselves on the already existing communion and being continuously enriched through encounters, we must awaken an ever-present concern for solidarity. We must strive to feel concerned by the joys and sorrows, successes and failures of others and “bear one another’s burdens.” (Galatians 6: 2) This should result in very concrete actions: taking part in feasts and in mourning, being interested in everything that is happening in the other communities, being ready to offer our services whenever they are desired, etc. So the partial communion will grow step by step and will help overcome old animosities, preconceptions and painful memories of the past. Pope John Paul II well describes this dynamic when he says: “Thus, the entire life of Christians is marked by a concern for ecumenism; and they are called to let themselves be shaped, as it were, by that concern.” (Ut unum sint, no. 15)

CHAPTER V

ECUMENICAL PASTORAL CARE

64. If dialogue is a tool par excellence of ecumenism and prayer, with conversion of the heart, its soul, yet it is in pastoral care that it must be embodied in order to transfigure the agents and renew their methods. As early as December 1979, on his return from his visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, Pope John Paul II said that fraternal dialogue “must in a sense become an integral component of the pastoral programmes on both sides.”⁴ He repeated this in *Ut unum sint*: “Thus it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of “*appendix*” which is added to the Church’s traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and

⁴ General Audience of 5 December, 1979

does; it must be like the fruit borne by a healthy and flourishing tree which grows to its full stature.” (Ut unum sint, no. 20)

NEW VISION

65. All our pastoral work will have to be based on the principle that the Church is a communion in faith, sacraments and the service of charity. It will aim to lead to its fulfilment the real, but still imperfect communion which already exists between the Catholic Church and the other Churches and ecclesial Communities.

This applies primarily to the Orthodox Churches, since we recognize them as sister Churches, given that they have “profession of apostolic faith, participation in the same sacraments, above all the one priesthood celebrating the one sacrifice of Christ, the apostolic succession of bishops.”⁵ (Uniatism no. 13) Already Pope Paul VI had concluded from that that the heads of Catholic and Orthodox Churches must “mutually recognize each other and respect each other as shepherds of the part of the flock of Christ which is confided to **them**.”

Comment [VC10]: I cannot identify this quotation.

As for Churches and ecclesial communities born of the protestant Reform, there remain between us greater differences to do with faith. But there is also between us common ground which invites us to mutual respect, and joint action in religious and social spheres.

NEW ATTITUDES BASED ON NEW VISION

66. Broad guidelines for ecumenical pastoral work with the Orthodox Churches are given to us in the various joint agreements which the Catholic Church has reached with them: in particular, the pastoral agreement between the Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church of 1984, the various texts published in the framework of the theological dialogues with the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, the joint document signed during the Sharfeh meeting in 1996 by the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East and the Greek and Syriac Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch. That is why it is important for us to understand these texts and study their practical implications.

CO-ORDINATION BETWEEN CHURCH LEADERS

67. That is why we call upon all our pastors and faithful to strive to promote mutual consultation and collaboration wherever possible. In particular, as soon as our pastoral activity touches faithful belonging to other Churches, we must take care to inform the leaders of those Churches and, if possible, work in co-ordination with them. Thus a brotherly spirit and reciprocal trust will grow and be strengthened. The fundamental guiding principle, besides our deepest desire, will be to act together while remaining faithful to the doctrine of faith and laws of the Church.

THE PROBLEM OF PROSELYTISM

68. It is evident that ecumenism’s goal is to restore visible unity between existing Churches, without wishing to absorb the other Christians and communities into one another. The representatives of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches affirmed that in a joint agreement at their Balamand meeting in 1993: “In the search for re-establishing

⁵ *Uniatism, method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion* June 23, 1993 Original translation available on the website of the Centro pro Unione

unity there is no question of conversion of people from one Church to the other in order to ensure their salvation. There is a question of achieving together the will of Christ for his own and the design of God for his Church by means of a common quest by the Churches for a full accord on the content of the faith and its implications.” (Uniatism no. 15)

That is why, in our pastoral work, we must respect Christians’ membership of their Churches, without striving to make them switch from one Church to another. They must rather be helped to discover and promote their mission in their own Church.

The problem of the movement of the faithful from one Church to another is a problem from which most Churches today are suffering. It is an issue that remains unclear, a source of mutual suspicion and cause of tensions and lack of trust between Churches, especially in the Middle East, where Churches live side by side and where their faithful are together in various spheres of day to day living.

JOINT STUDY TO THROW LIGHT ON THIS ISSUE

69. We are all in agreement on rejecting proselytism, i.e. people switching from one Church to another, for an offer of material, social or cultural advantages. Yet the question has two important aspects. On the one hand, freedom of conscience must be respected at any price – one of the most fundamental rights of the human person – which also includes freedom of ecclesial membership and freedom to move from one Church to another, if a person freely reaches such a choice in his search for God and truth. But though the freedom of conscience of the faithful must be respected, it is not allowed to exploit their ignorance or the simplicity of their faith, or their weakness or any other circumstance, and to say that it is a case of freedom of conscience. Such behaviour would be a violation of that freedom.

On the other hand, the second aspect concerns Churches who have many institutions such as schools, hospitals, homes for orphans or the elderly, etc. Our principle of action is clear and precise here: we do not refuse our material and spiritual services to anyone, whenever we can serve and help. But we also refuse exploitation of believers’ needs by putting pressure on their religious belief. It is not allowed to exploit proffered services to incite people to leave their Churches. All possible help will be given in every sphere, spiritual or material; and this help will have attained its true goal when it leads the faithful to discover their mission and to grow in the Church where God has called them to be and given them his grace.

In any case, a joint dialogue in this field will have to specify the individual cases as well as the general principles which the Churches must follow.

TOWARDS REAL COLLABORATION

70. We shall always allow ourselves to be guided by the guidelines given by Pope John Paul II in his letter *Ut unum sint*. For him, relations among Christians “from now on call for every possible form of practical co-operation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message.” (*Ut unum sint*, no. 40) Collaboration among Christians is of double worth: on the one hand, it expresses in lively fashion the already existing union among them and is rich in brotherly communion and, on the other hand, it is “a true school of ecumenism, a dynamic road to unity. Unity of action leads to the full unity of faith...Cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness” and “before the world, proclamation,

since it reveals the face of Christ.” (ibid and no. 75) And that is very important for our presence and vocation in the Middle East.

GUIDANCE FROM THE ECUMENICAL DIRECTORY

71. The ecumenical Directory describes the different fields in which collaboration is possible: in translating and reading the Bible, the unification of liturgical texts, catechesis, higher education at the level of seminaries and universities, dialogue with other religions, the media, social and cultural life, etc. So, for example, in our patriarchal agreement of Sharfeh (1996) we have already proposed the drafting of a common text for religious education in state schools. Other possibilities of collaboration are being implemented in the context of the Middle East Council of Churches – such as the common Arabic translation of the Our Father and the Symbol of Faith (Creed) of Nicaea-Constantinople – or any other initiative between the different Churches of the region.

IN THE FIELD OF THE LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS

72. In the field of liturgical collaboration or participation in the sacraments, the absence of perfect communion remains a central factor that continues to divide our Churches. It is of primordial importance always to respect the theological vision of each Church in this domain, until the time comes when the divine will decides to unite us, to serve together a single Eucharist. The Churches see today that the absence of unity in the faith is preventing sacramental communion. All communion is between two persons or two communities and presupposes then the free agreement of both parties. And when it concerns sacramental communion, it never has to do with a single person: each baptised person is a member of an ecclesiastical communion. Therefore, as Pope John Paul II says: “There must never be a loss of appreciation for the ecclesiological implication of sharing in the sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist.” (Ut unum sint, no. 58)

In the Sharfeh agreement, we envisaged new possibilities for the celebration of mixed marriages between Catholics and Orthodox, just as we sketched out together the broad outlines for resolving the sensitive issues raised by celebrations of solemn communion in Catholic schools. The pastoral agreement signed in 1984 by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka (Iwas) makes possible reciprocal reception of the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick in the case of the absence of a priest of one or other of the two communities. These directives should be observed, in order for them to be applied with mutual respect and necessary prudence. Other possibilities may develop in the not too distant future, but we still need further reflection and joint studies.

As for the Feast of Pascha, to meet the desires of all Catholic and Orthodox Churches, we have studied this issue with our venerable brother Patriarchs of the different Churches in our region. Serious problems, difficult to overcome, have arisen in some Churches. That is why freedom has been given to those who can unify the feast to do so, according to the circumstances that they experience in their country, as a sign of reconciliation and preparation for the longed-for unity. However, in doing so, the identity, heritage and tradition of each Church should be respected.

Comment [VC11]: Not Passover as per the French

OTHER FIELDS OF COLLABORATION

73. Meanwhile, a broad field of collaboration remains open in various services, such as building and utilisation of churches, building schools or hospitals, wherever the need makes itself felt, projects for social development or help for the needy, housing, use of the press or other media, etc. It is crucial to face the problem of emigration together, with all means at our disposal. Together we must work for justice and peace, for active and fair participation of Christians in the public life of their country. Together we must discuss our Church issues with the competent authorities. Together at last we must study our relations with our Muslim and Jewish brethren.

CHAPTER VI

ECUMENICAL MEANS AND INSTRUMENTS

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74. All that requires mixed working committees. But above all, we need a new spirit capable of assimilating and putting into practice the guidance and agreements proposed by the various global and local dialogue agencies.

THE COUNCIL OF EASTERN CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS

75. Since its creation in 1991, our Council has examined the issues with which our Catholic Churches are faced in the Middle East. At the same time, in our annual congresses, we have touched on the most significant problems concerning our presence as Christians in general and Catholics in particular. We have addressed to you, dear faithful, several pastoral letters, in which we have informed you of the result of our reflections in all these areas.

We have always taken to heart the development of relations with our brothers, the Orthodox Patriarchs. So, for four years now, the first day of our meetings has been dedicated to a meeting between Catholics and Orthodox. We are very keen on continuing this common brotherly reflection with the sister Orthodox Churches and summon our bishops also to follow the same route of encounter and joint reflection, with the aim of implementing in concrete fashion in the eparchies, all the principles and all the agreements which we have mentioned in this letter.

THE COUNCILS OF CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS AND BISHOPS, IN EACH COUNTRY

76. Circumstances and ecumenical possibilities are very different from one country to another. That is why it is the duty of the Councils of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in each country to continue this ecumenical mission and to take the initiatives that they deem appropriate. We ask that committees be established to that end, where they do not yet exist, or that they be reactivated where they do exist, so that the Church may faithfully discharge its testimony which is required of it in this field.

THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

77. This Council was founded in 1974, at the instigation of Christians who wanted at all costs to respond to the call and prayer of Christ for the unity of his Church. (John 17:

21) It comprised at that time the Orthodox and Protestant Churches and was the culmination of lengthy efforts dating back to 1925. The Catholic Church with its seven Patriarchates became a full member of it in 1988-1989.

As Patriarchs, we have all personally participated in the work of that Council. We believe that our mission and duty are to be present there in a brotherly relationship with all the region's Churches. It is a privileged place where we can hear the voice of our brethren and learn to become better acquainted with each other's Churches. We contribute there with the other Churches to a common theological reflection to which the Council invites us and makes possible through its different sections and committees. The aim is to reach reconciliation among Churches and to confront together the same problems which face all Christians in this part of the world.

ECUMENICAL TRAINING

78. If we wish to fulfil our ecumenical duties with regard to our local Churches and the universal Church, we need to initiate a whole programme of training and preparation of priests, monks, nuns and faithful. The importance of this formation is confirmed by the ecumenical Directory, which gives priority to all those who are working in the parish ministry.

In this spirit, we ask firstly that our seminaries offer an ecumenical preparation to future generations of our priests, not only by introducing them to the texts and ecumenical agreements, but especially by filling them with a new spirit that may open them up to other Churches. The aim is for them to know their traditions and try to love them sincerely. It is necessary to put an end to all confessional rivalry and closed community mentality, which looks at the other as a stranger, an unknown, coming in second place for services and inferior in value and dignity. We are all equal before the grace of God poured out into our hearts. We are all called to look for the best ways to free ourselves from the baneful consequences of our divisions and spiteful attitudes which they foster in each of us.

It is the same for all our educational work. We want to educate our children to love their Churches, in which they have received the grace of baptism, to be acquainted with their traditions and remain faithful to them. But at the same time we want to teach them to be open to others and to love them. Community and confessional susceptibilities must cease. All together we must recognise ourselves as disciples of Christ and as his witnesses in our human society, bearing a common witness to God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

That is why the Christian education programme must also be marked by the Spirit and ecumenical openness. Every time that we present information to our children about other Churches, the approach must be very positive, without confusion and without sacrificing the truth, of a kind calculated to make the true spirit of Christian brotherhood grow in them.

Conclusion

OUR ECUMENICAL VOCATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

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79. As Churches implanted in the region where Jesus proclaimed the Gospel and from where the apostles left to carry the message of salvation to the whole world, we believe that we have received a specific mission from God, both in the Middle East and in the universal Church.

In a Middle East which, for many years, has been in search of stability and real peace, amidst very contrasting internal tensions and rival external interventions, we believe ourselves called to be a sign of hope. The plurality of our communities' cultural and religious traditions is a reflection of the human societies among which the Father has placed us. To the extent to which, with God's grace, we shall be able really to accept each other in our difference and unite our speech, witness and service, we shall be able to provide additional inspiration and brotherly understanding. The service that we offer is disinterested service for the salvation of mankind. But our word and our witness will only resonate profoundly to the extent that we are capable of overcoming the divisions between us; otherwise we are simply adding to the general confusion.

Our unity will then be able to become a sign of the eternal love of the Father, who wishes to gather all his scattered children into his Son Jesus. United in thought and heart, we shall be, in the power of the Holy Spirit, equal to the task of renewing our presence in this part of the world and of giving to our faithful and to our countries a new vision and a new confidence with regard to the future.

80. In conclusion let us listen to the voice of Saint Cyril of Alexandria: "Christ brings forward the essential unity which the Father has with Himself, and Himself also with the Father, as an Image and Type of the inseparable fellowship, and concord, and unity that exists in kindred souls, He desires us in some sort to be blended with one another in the power that is of the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity; so that the whole body of the Church may be in fact one, ascending in Christ through the fusion and concurrence of two peoples into one perfect whole... (cf. Ephesians 2: 14)⁶

"In order, then, that we ourselves also may join together, and be blended into unity with God and with each other, although, through the actual difference which exists in each one of us, we have a distinct individuality of soul and body, the Only-begotten has contrived a means which his own due wisdom and the counsel of the Father have sought out. For by one Body, that is, his own, blessing through the mystery of the Eucharist those who believe on him, he makes us of the same Body with himself and with each other. For who could sunder or divide from their natural union with one another those who are knit together through his holy Body, which is one in union with Christ?

"And if we are all of us of the same Body with one another in Christ, and not only with one another, but also of course with him who is in us through his Flesh, are we not then all of us clearly one both with one another and with Christ? For Christ is the bond of union, being at once God and Man...

"We are all, therefore, one in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; one, I mean, both in identity of mental condition and also in conformity to the life of

Comment [VC12]: The quotation continues from the same book and chapter for the next four paragraphs. Therefore the quotation marks should be kept open until the end of the final paragraph, not closed after every paragraph as per the French. The source is not cited in the French, so I have supplied it in the footnote.

⁶ St. Cyril of Alexandria Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 11, Chapter 11, 20-21

righteousness, and in the fellowship of the holy Body of Christ, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Which is One.⁷”

81. On the eve of the second millennium since the birth of Jesus, the eyes and the hearts of a great many Christians throughout the world will turn towards our region of the Middle East, the cradle of the Church. If the Christian communities living near the places where the Christian mysteries took place know how to live in unity, in the image of the first Christian community in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, pilgrims, coming from the four corners of the earth in search of the sources of their faith, will be able to return home from here, confirmed and refreshed in their faithfulness and commitment.

The search for unity in Christ is an essential dimension of our Christian existence and a primordial condition of our mission in the Church and in the world, so that all “might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10: 10) We ask God to help us on the road towards unity, and to fill us with his Spirit in order to renew our hearts and strengthen our unity. We ask him to bless you in your progress towards him and in your love of your brothers and sisters, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ *Stefanos II GHATTAS*, Patriarch of Alexandria for Coptic Catholics.

+ *Maximos V HAKIM*, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for Melkite Greek Catholics.

+ *Nasrallah Pierre Cardinal SFEIR*, Patriarch of Antioch for Maronites.

+ *Ignace Moussa DAOUD*, Patriarch of Antioch for Syrian Catholics.

+ *Rafael BIDAVID*, Patriarch of Babylon for Chaldeans.

+ *Jean-Pierre XVIII KASPARIAN*, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics.

+ *Michel SABBAAH*, Patriarch of Jerusalem for Latins.

Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs

Pascha 1999

⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on John, LFC 43, 48 (1874/1885). Book 11. Vol. 2 pp. 453-588, translated by T. Randell