

Greeting by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council

St. Peter's Square, 11 October 2012

On the occasion of the celebration in Rome of the 50th anniversary since the opening of Vatican II, His All-Holiness delivered the following address at the invitation of Pope Benedict XVI:

Beloved brother in the Lord, Your Holiness Pope Benedict;

Brothers and Sisters;

As Christ prepared for His Gethsemane experience, He prayed a prayer for unity which is recorded in the Gospel of Saint John Chapter 17 verse 11: “. . . keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are”.^[1] Through the centuries we have, indeed, been kept in the power and love of Christ, and in the proper moment in history the Holy Spirit moved upon us and we began the long journey towards the visible unity that Christ desires. This has been confirmed in *Unitatis Redintegratio* §1:

Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians.

Fifty years ago in this very square, a powerful and pivotal celebration captured the heart and mind of the Roman Catholic Church, transporting it across the centuries into the contemporary world. This transforming milestone, the opening of the Second Vatican Council, was inspired by the fundamental reality that the Son and incarnate Logos of God is "...where two or three are gathered in his name" (Matt.18.20) and that the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, "...will guide us into the whole truth." (John 16.13).

In the 50 years that have intervened, we recall with vividness and tenderness, but also with elation and enthusiasm, our personal discussions with episcopal members and theological *periti* during our formative time – then as a young student – at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, as well as our personal attendance at some special sessions of the Council. We witnessed firsthand how the bishops experienced a renewed awareness of the validity – and a reinforced sense of the continuity – of the tradition and faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1.3). It was a period of promise and hope for your Church both internally and externally.

For the Orthodox Church, we have observed a time of exchange and expectation. For example, the convocation of the first Pan-Orthodox Conferences in Rhodes led to the Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conferences in preparation for the Great Council of the Orthodox Churches. These exchanges will demonstrate the unified witness of the Orthodox Church in the modern world. Moreover, it coincided with the “dialogue of love” and heralded the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church, which was established by our venerable predecessors Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios.

Over the last five decades, the achievements of this assembly have been diverse as evidenced through the series of important and influential constitutions, declarations, and decrees. We have contemplated the renewal of the spirit and “return to the sources” through liturgical study, biblical research, and patristic scholarship. We have appreciated the struggle toward gradual liberation from the limitation of rigid scholasticism to the openness of ecumenical encounter, which has led to the

mutual rescinding of the excommunications of the year 1054, the exchange of greetings, returning of relics, entering into important dialogues, and visiting each other in our respective Sees.

Our journey has not always been easy or without pain and challenge, for as we know “narrow is the gate and difficult is the way” (Matthew 7.14). The essential theology and principal themes of the Second Vatican Council – the mystery of the Church, the sacredness of the liturgy, and the authority of the bishop – are difficult to apply in earnest practice, and constitute a life-long and church-wide labor to assimilate. The door, then, must remain open for deeper reception, pastoral engagement, and ecclesial interpretation of the Second Vatican Council.

As we move forward together, we offer thanks and glory to the living God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – that the same assembly of bishops has recognised the importance of reflection and sincere dialogue between our “sister churches”. We join in the “. . . hope that the barrier dividing the Eastern Church and the Western Church will be removed, and that – at last – there may be but the one dwelling, firmly established on Christ Jesus, the cornerstone, who will make both one” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §18).

With Christ as our cornerstone and the tradition we share, we shall be able – or, rather, we shall be enabled by the gift and grace of God – to reach a better appreciation and fuller expression of the Body of Christ. With our continued efforts in accordance with the spirit of the tradition of the early Church, and in the light of the Church of the Councils of the first millennium, we will experience the visible unity that lies just beyond us today.

The Church always excels in its uniquely prophetic and pastoral dimension, embraces its characteristic meekness and spirituality, and serves with humble sensitivity the “least of these My brethren” (Matt. 25.40).

Beloved brother, our presence here signifies and seals our commitment to witness together to the Gospel message of salvation and healing for the least of our brethren: the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten in God’s world. Let us begin with prayers for peace and healing for our Christian brothers and sisters living in the Middle East. In the current turmoil of violence, separation, and brokenness that is escalating between peoples and nations, may the love and desire for harmony we profess here, and the understanding we seek through dialogue and mutual respect, serve as a model for our world. Indeed, may all humanity reach out to ‘the other’ and work together to overcome the suffering of people everywhere, particularly in the face of famine, natural disasters, disease, and war that ultimately touches all of our lives.

In light of all that has yet to be accomplished by the Church on earth, and with great appreciation for all the progress we have shared, we are, therefore, honoured to be invited to attend – and humbled to be called to address – this solemn and festive commemoration of the Second Vatican Council. It is fitting that this occasion also marks for your Church the formal inauguration of the “Year of Faith”, as it is faith that provides a visible sign of the journey we have travelled together along the path of reconciliation and visible unity.

In closing, Your Holiness, Beloved Brother, we wholeheartedly congratulate you – together with the blessed multitude assembled here today – and we fraternally embrace you on the joyous occasion of this anniversary celebration. May God bless you all.

^[i] All scriptural citations from the New King James Version, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982.