

GREETING

By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew On The Occasion Of The Bishops Conference Of The Union of Utrecht

Most reverend Members of the International
Bishops Conference of the Union of Utrecht,
Dear brothers and sisters,

Christ is Risen! Χριστός Ανέστη!

It is with heartfelt joy and pleasure that we have accepted your most kind invitation to attend your Conference today, in the presence of His Eminence Archbishop Joris Vercammen of Utrecht. We express to you our sincerest gratitude for this moment. Above all, we are grateful to God for the work He has done in the hearts and minds of our predecessors, those who courageously overcame obstacles and made the necessary steps for a closer rapprochement between our Churches.

The ongoing dialogue between our Churches has been a blessing from God in a multitude of ways. Dialogue and interpersonal exchange are not peripheral to the lives of Churches. They are an intrinsic aspect of Christendom, of what it means to be a Christian in the first place. For if anything, dialogical mutuality lies at the heart of the triune God that we worship: the Holy Trinity is a communion of distinct but co-substantial Persons, irreducibly and yet indivisibly sharing a glorious life. All the events of the divine economy, from the creation of the world up to and including God's syn-katavasis, the incarnation of the Logos and the foundation of His Church, have been distinctively enacted by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, respectively, but they have been collectively willed by all three divine Persons in full concert and agreement among them.

Dialogue is encouraged and set up as a model in Scripture: "Come, let us reason together," says the Lord (Isaiah 1:18). The very act of the Incarnation signifies God's supreme concern to descend to the level of His creaturely images, the human beings, and converse with them not in the abstract, from a heavenly distance, but face to face in the flesh. The Holy Spirit, furthermore, is the par excellence divine agent of conciliarity and mutual understanding in the face of cultural, linguistic, or other forms of fragmentation. His task in history is to reconcile and bring together the most disparate and opposed parties, to reassemble the estranged and scattered people of God around Christ and the Cup of life, the Holy Eucharist. Nowhere is this more evident than in Pentecost, the founding moment of the Church, in which the multitude of different languages ceased to be a source of division and confusion and began to facilitate comprehension and communion. In all these instances, we see that mutually respectful dialogue is an intrinsic personal attribute, divine as well as human.

Contrary to an easy pluralism that blurs questions about the truth, genuine dialogue, while respectful of the parties involved, does not seek a hasty, superficial convergence of beliefs. As Christians, what is at stake for us is always the deepest investment in the truth, as opposed to mere customs, ideologies, and popular beliefs, in keeping with the Lord's injunction to seek the truth, for nothing short of the truth alone sets us free (John 8:32). In the spirit, therefore, of being faithful to the truth of Scripture and Tradition, we must do our best to understand each other's viewpoints and seriously reflect on where we stand regarding truth: both the inherited truth handed down to us from the Church's cumulative

experience as well as the truth continually opened up before us by the Holy Spirit, Who ceaselessly enriches our Christian vision by the refreshment of history and the new forms of grace that He creates, as He guides the Church's vessel through uncharted waters toward the Kingdom.

It may be that we have not yet come to the point of theological overlap, and that further mutual work is required to that end. But sharing as we do a common Christian heritage, we can be reasonably hopeful that one day we can overcome our sad division and offer the world – a rapidly secularized global community – a unified Christian witness. We have already come a long way since the beginning of our mutual dialogue, and the present occasion is an unmistakable sign of the significant progress achieved thus far. Let us rejoice for the achieved progress, and let us continue to prayerfully meet and converse, as well as assume common initiatives, having our faith and trust in the Holy Spirit, Who sustains the institution of the Church and guides it in complete freedom from any compulsion and determinism toward the eschata.

It gives us great satisfaction to recognize the fruits of the official dialogue between our two Churches. The 26 basic common texts produced by the Joint Orthodox-Old Catholic Committee remain a milestone in the history of our relations and totally preserved their importance for the future of our bi-lateral relations. Since 2003, another Commission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Union of Utrecht has been working effectively on current subjects concerning the relations of our respective Churches and their common witness in response to the signs of the times. We can rightfully expect further amiable exchanges in the future, as we come to better appreciate one another's viewpoints, particular concerns, and sensitivities. We have long ceased to be strangers in large part thanks to the enlightenment and wisdom of those before us who set up the path of encounter, but above all, thanks to the guidance of the Paraclete, Who as we mentioned earlier graces history by bringing together what sin and human failings divided and kept separate.

The very fact of our common presence here, is evidence that the fallen state of humankind, marked by separation and division, can be healed. Such healing and restoration occurs every time that the Holy Eucharist is celebrated, at least on a local and temporal level, but with catholic and even cosmic repercussions. We Christians cannot promise the world a permanent fix, a utopia of earthly perfection based on human efforts – that would be just as unfeasible, as it would be disastrous despite appearances. For, the vision of a perfect world attained within history, devoid of pain, illness, inequalities, and suffering, can only result in totalitarianism and the infliction of more pain upon those lured by such a promise. Nevertheless, if Christ “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10: 38), we are also called to exercise healing in the form of resisting oppression in any conceivable form, and of doing our best to offer dignity, love, solidarity and unconditional compassion to the marginalized, the oppressed, the exploited and the persecuted. And we can give people worldwide a foretaste of God's world to come, by comprising a united Christian community – even if the unity in question is currently still in process – as a body bent on spreading light where ignorance, prejudice, violence, and bigotry reign.

Again, we sincerely thank you for gracing us with your present invitation, and we offer our thanks to the Lord for the wonderfully fresh venues and ways of genuine contact He has opened for us.