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Audience with His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, accompanied by a delegation.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Holiness,

I thank you for your kind words and for your visit to the City of the Apostles Peter and Paul, where you once lived and studied and where you now come as *Catholicos* of the venerable Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. May I say, Your Holiness, that here you are at home, as a beloved and long-awaited Brother.

Together with you, I would first like to give thanks to the Lord for the bonds we have forged in recent decades. The rapprochement of our Churches, after centuries of separation, began with the Second Vatican Council, to which the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church sent some observers. At that time, Saint Paul VI met the *Catholicos* Baselios Augen I in Bombay in 1964. Your arrival now coincides with the fortieth anniversary of the first visit to Rome of a *Catholicos* of your beloved Church, made in 1983 by His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews I, whom Saint John Paul II visited three years later in the Cathedral of Mar Elia in Kottayam. This year also marks the tenth anniversary of my fraternal embrace with your immediate Predecessor, His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, of blessed memory, whom I had the joy of receiving at the beginning of my Pontificate, in September 2013.

Today, in welcoming Your Holiness and the members of your distinguished delegation, I fraternally greet the bishops, clergy and faithful of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the origins of which go back to the preaching of the Apostle Thomas, who, in the presence of the Risen One, exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!"

(Jn 20:28). In prayer and awe, this profession, which proclaims the saving lordship and divinity of Christ, undergirds our common faith. It is this same faith that I hope we will celebrate together on the occasion of the 1,700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council, that of Nicaea. I would like for all of us to celebrate it together.

The faith of Saint Thomas was inseparable from his experience of the wounds of the Body of Christ (cf. Jn 20:27). The divisions that have occurred throughout history between us Christians have been painful wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ that is the Church. We ourselves continue to witness their effects. Yet if we touch these wounds *together*, if, like the Apostle, we proclaim *together* that Jesus is our Lord and our God; and if, with a humble heart, we entrust ourselves to his amazing grace, we can hasten the much-anticipated day when, with his help, we will celebrate the Paschal Mystery at the same altar. May this day arrive soon!

In the meantime, dear Brother, let us advance together in the prayer that purifies us, in the charity that unites us, and in the dialogue that brings us closer to one another. I think in a special way of the establishment of the Joint International Commission for dialogue between our Churches, which led to an historic Christological agreement, published on Pentecost 1990. This was the Joint Declaration affirming that the content of our faith in the mystery of the Incarnate Word is the same, even though differences in terminology and emphasis have arisen in its formulation throughout history. The Declaration admirably states that, “these differences are such as can coexist in the same communion and therefore need not and should not divide us, especially when we proclaim Christ to our brothers and sisters around the world in terms that they can more easily understand”. Proclaiming Christ unites rather than divides; the shared proclamation of our Lord evangelizes the ecumenical journey itself.

Following the Joint Declaration, the Commission has met in Kerala almost every year and has borne fruit, fostering pastoral cooperation for the spiritual benefit of God’s People. I recall with gratitude especially the 2010 agreements on the common use of places of worship and cemeteries, and on the possibility that, in certain circumstances, the faithful of either Church may receive the anointing of the sick. These are wonderful agreements. I bless God for the work of this Commission, focused above all on pastoral life, since *pastoral ecumenism is the natural way to full unity*. As I had occasion to say to the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, of which your Church has been a member since its inception in 2003, “ecumenism always has a pastoral character”. It is by moving forward fraternally in the preaching of the Gospel and the concrete care of the faithful that we acknowledge ourselves to be a single pilgrim flock of Christ. In this regard, it is my hope that pastoral agreements between our Churches, which share the same apostolic heritage, may spread and develop, especially in areas where the faithful are in a minority or in diaspora. I am also gratified by your active participation in the study visits for young priests and monks organized annually by the Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, visits that contribute to better understanding among pastors. This is very important.

On our journey towards full unity, another important path is that of synodality, which you referred to in your address. Ten years ago, in Rome, your Predecessor declared: “The participation of representatives of the Malankara Orthodox Church in the conciliar process of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council, has been of fundamental importance for the growth of mutual understanding”. I am pleased that a fraternal delegate from your Church will participate in the next session of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. I am convinced that we can learn much from the age-old synodal experience of your Church. In a certain sense, the ecumenical movement is contributing to the ongoing synodal process of the Catholic Church, and it is my hope that the synodal process can, in turn, contribute to the ecumenical movement. Synodality and ecumenism are in fact two paths that proceed together, united by a common goal, that of communion, which means a more effective witness by Christians “so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). Let us not forget – and I say this to fellow Catholics – that the protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit, not ourselves.

It was precisely for this that the Lord prayed before Easter, and so it is proper that today’s meeting will continue with prayer. May Saint Thomas the Apostle intercede for our journey of unity and witness. His relics are kept in the Archdiocese of Lanciano-Ortona, represented here by Archbishop Emidio Cipollone. Thank you for your presence. When the Lord showed him his wounds, Saint Thomas passed from disbelief to belief by what he saw. May our shared contemplation of the crucified and risen Lord lead to the complete healing of our past wounds, so that, before our eyes, transcending all distance and misunderstanding, he may appear, “our Lord and our

God” (cf. *Jn* 20:28), who calls us to recognize and adore him at a single Eucharistic altar. Let us pray that this happens soon. Thank you!
