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Audience with participants in the 26th Pauline Ecumenical Colloquium

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 26th Pauline Ecumenical Colloquium, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Very Reverend Father Abbot, distinguished professors, dear scholars, good morning to all of you!

I thank you for your visit, which is taking place during your gathering here in Rome, in the beautiful setting of the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, for the *Pauline Ecumenical Colloquium*.

This initiative, begun shortly after the Second Vatican Council by a group of scholars from a dozen countries and different Christian traditions, is now in its twenty-sixth year. It can therefore boast of an intense journey of study and research that, thanks to your expertise and enthusiasm, has contributed to the biblical and spiritual understanding of the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles. This is all the more important since the discussions take place between different Christian denominations, and you yourselves, who are impassioned Pauline scholars, come from various nations, bringing with you not only the specific character of your studies, but also the distinctiveness of your culture of origin and the life of faith of the Christian communities to which you belong.

This, I would say, is the great contribution of the *Colloquium*: the encounter between Christians who are diverse among themselves, yet united by the wisdom of Pauline teaching; a dialogue between different starting points that look for common ground, beginning from Scripture. Then, too, there is a rigorous and scholarly exegetical exchange, which finds its vital centre in a context of prayer and spirituality, so that the beauty of the Apostle's letters and their importance for Christian and ecclesial life can emerge.

So there is something *courageous* and *prophetic* in your initiative. There is the *courage* to overcome barriers of defensiveness, which often arise when we are called to encounter others. This is even more the case when others have a tradition different from our own. And then there is ecumenical *prophecy*, that healthy "impatience

of the Spirit” to which all of us Christians are summoned, so that the journey toward the fullness of unity may progress and the commitment to bear witness may not weaken. If throughout history divisions have been a source of suffering, today we must commit ourselves to reversing course, moving forward on the paths of unity and fraternity, which begin precisely by praying, studying and working together.

Your desire to explore the Letters of the Apostle, the insight from your studies, the value of the contributions that you are exchanging and that you will subsequently publish all focus this year on chapters 9-11 of the Letter to the Romans.

Here we find an extraordinary exposition of the mystery of salvation that places the gifts and call of God to Israel, which the Apostle describes as “irrevocable” (*Rom 11:29*), in relationship, and thus in dialogue, with the hope of the Gospel. The Apostle hands on to us a message of fundamental importance, which still represents that foundation on which not only to deepen biblical studies but also to continue to foster ecumenical dialogue: God does not fail in his promises of salvation and patiently carries them out, even through unexpected and surprising ways. Yet the underlying certainty is that “believers can rely on the mercy and promises of God. In spite of their own weakness and the manifold threats to their faith, on the strength of Christ’s death and resurrection they can build on the effective promise of God’s grace” (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation*, n. 34).

Dear friends, it is on this foundation of hope that I want to support your valuable work. It is good that you continue on in academic, biblical, spiritual and fraternal dialogue and that you publish the creative riches that each of you brings. Please continue your biblical research with rigour and expertise, but also and above all else, let yourselves be amazed by the countless spiritual resources contained in the Pauline letters, in order to offer Christian communities “new words”, able to communicate the Father’s merciful goodness, Christ’s newness of salvation and the Spirit’s renewing hope. Through your often laborious and hidden work, may the ecumenical spirit grow among believers, a spirit of dialogue and fraternity which aids our common journey of seeking the Lord.

The ecumenical journey. Once a great orthodox theologian was asked the following question: “What do you think about the unity of Christians; how is it going; when will we reach full unity?” And this fine theologian, who died a few months ago, said: “I know when we will reach full unity: the day after the final judgment!” This should not take away our hope. In the meantime, we have to walk together, pray together and work together. True ecumenism is realized on a journey. We should not fear walking with others and trusting them. When it comes to service: serve the poor, help Christian and non-Christian communities. Walking and service: move forward in this manner.

Thank you for all that you are doing and for the work of these days. I will remember you in my prayers and I ask you, please, to pray for me. And now I invite everyone to pray together the Our Father, each in their own language.
