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Audience with the members of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

Today, the Holy Father received in audience the members of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, to whom he addressed the following discourse:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers!

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. With these words of the Apostle Paul, I too “give thanks to my God always for you” (1 Cor 1:3-4). Thank you for your presence, dear members of the Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and thank you for your valued work. I am happy to see you again, three years after our last encounter. And I am grateful to His Grace Bishop Kyrillos for his cordial words of greeting.

You are about to conclude an important study on the sacraments, a document that shows the existence of a broad consensus and one that, with the help of God, will be able to mark a new step forward towards full communion. This topic leads me to three brief considerations, which I would now like to share with you.

First, ecumenism is essentially *baptismal*. It is in baptism that we find the basis of the communion between Christians and our yearning for full visible unity. Thanks to this sacrament, we can say, together with the Apostle Paul: “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). Into one body. Advancing towards a mutual recognition of this fundamental sacrament seems to me essential for the aim of confessing, together with the Apostle, “one Lord, one faith one baptism” (Eph 4:5).

Secondly, ecumenism always has a *pastoral* character. Among our Churches that share apostolic succession, the broad consensus noted by your Commission, not only on baptism but also on the other sacraments, should

encourage us to develop more fully a *pastoral ecumenism*. In this regard, even without our being in full communion, pastoral agreements have already been signed with some Oriental Orthodox Churches, which permit the faithful to “share in the means of grace” (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8). I think in particular of the Common Declaration signed in 1984 by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, which in specific circumstances authorizes the faithful to receive the sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick in either community. I think too of the 1994 Agreement on Inter-Church Marriages between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. All this was made possible by looking to the concrete life of the members of the People of God and to their welfare, which is greater than ideas and historic divergences, and to the importance that no one be left without the means of grace. Now, on the basis of the theological consensus noted by your Commission, would it not be possible to extend and multiply such pastoral agreements, above all in those situations in which our faithful are a minority and in the diaspora? This question is a challenge. May the Holy Spirit inspire ways of moving forward on this path, which regards the good of persons, the good of souls, the good of the people of God, our people, not to moral, theological or ideological distinctions. People and the good; there it is. Jesus Christ was made incarnate, he became man, a member of the faithful people of God. He did not become an idea. No, he became man. And we must seek always the good of men and of the faithful people of God.

This brings us to a third reflection: ecumenism already exists as a primarily *local* reality. Many of the faithful – I think above all of those in the Middle East, but also of those who have emigrated to the West – already experience *the ecumenism of life* in the midst of their families, their work and their daily encounters. Frequently they also experience together *the ecumenism of suffering* in bearing common witness to the name of Christ, at times even at the cost of their lives. Theological ecumenism must therefore reflect not only on the dogmatic differences that emerged in the past, but also on the present experience of our faithful. In other words, the *dialogue of doctrine* must be theologically adapted to the *dialogue of life* that develops in the local, everyday relations between our Churches; these constitute a genuine *locus* or source of theology. For me, this counts to promote a way of thinking. In this regard, in order to increase a greater fraternal knowledge, I am pleased to know of your effort to promote study visits of young priests and monks of each Church. Three weeks ago, I had the joy of receiving a delegation that visited Rome, at the invitation of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, in order to learn more about the Catholic Church. This is the way forward: through fraternal encounters in order to listen and share with one another and to journey together. It is the ecumenism of journeying together, which takes place by walking, not only with ideas, but by walking. And it is a good thing, in this rapprochement of our Churches, to involve young people who are active in the local communities, so that the *dialogue of doctrine* may proceed together with the *dialogue of life*.

Three dimensions, then: *baptismal*, *pastoral* and *local*. Three ecumenical perspectives that strike me as important in the journey towards full communion. Dear brothers, I again express my gratitude for your visit, and through you I would like to extend my greetings to my venerable and dear Brothers, the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The next phase of your dialogue will concentrate on the Virgin Mary in the Church’s teaching and life. Even now, let us entrust your work to the intercession of the Mother of God. If you agree, we can call upon her aid by reciting together the words of the ancient prayer: “We fly to your protection, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin”.

Thank you very much, and let us pray for one another.
