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Audience with the Catholic Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Catholic Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the institution.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I greet Cardinal Koch and the Secretary of the Dicastery, and all of you, and I offer you a warm welcome. I am pleased that we can meet in these days leading up to the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and at the beginning of this new year, which marks the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the Catholic Committee for Cultural Collaboration.

Thanks to the constant and generous support of its benefactors, whom I thank most heartily, your Committee provides students from the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches the opportunity to complete their formation at Catholic academic institutes, in order then to return to their own communities and to share the knowledge and experience they have gained. In this way, in the name of the whole Catholic Church, you offer a concrete and impartial service that benefits the sister Churches of the East and contributes to the preparation of clergy and laity who, thanks to their studies, will serve the mission of the one Body of Christ.

For this reason, I am most grateful to all those involved in this project grounded in love for the Church, and particularly to the superiors and officials of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, which guides the Committee in its activity. I also thank the Rectors of the Ecclesiastical Colleges that house the scholarship holders, for the spirit of openness and the care with which they welcome and accompany them.

In this way, the visiting students can follow personally not only the academic courses, but also the formational, spiritual and liturgical growth of the Catholic students and, above all, share with them the experience of community life in the Ecclesiastical Colleges. This vital and direct contact with concrete communities, in which all share the same desire to follow the one Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to serve his Church, helps not only the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox students, but the Catholic ones as well, to overcome prejudices, to break down walls and to build bridges of dialogue and friendship.

This is so important! It makes me think of the early Christian communities, those first disciples who became apostles, and to whom our traditions trace their origins. If we look closely at them, we see that they were quite diverse: disciples of the Baptist, zealots, fishers and tax collectors; vastly different in background, character and sympathies! Yet it is hard to think of a group that was more united. They found their cohesiveness in Jesus. Walking in his footsteps, they journeyed alongside one another. Their unity in charity was cemented by the Holy Spirit, who sent them far and wide, thus binding them all the more closely to one another.

Dear friends, this is also the path that you should follow, as you journey together in the footsteps of Jesus, guided by the same Spirit. Studying here in Rome, you have a great opportunity to share with one another who Christ is *for you*, where you encountered him, how he won your hearts and laid hold of your lives, and the variety of traditions by which you offer him praise and acknowledge him as your Lord. On the basis of your fraternal sharing of this experience, I believe that our past histories, marred by mistakes and misunderstanding, sins and stereotypes, can gradually be healed, in as much as they are considered anew as part of a much greater story, that of fidelity to Christ, who “loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (*Eph 5:25*). It is my hope that, to the praise and glory of the Lord, these years may prove to be, through mutual acceptance and fraternal respect, dialogue and sharing, *a prophecy of charity and a seedbed of unity*. This will be a great boon for Christians throughout the world, and for the world itself, which greatly needs to see a blossoming of new seeds of peace and communion.

I thank you for your visit and I encourage you to pursue your studies fruitfully, without ever neglecting their spiritual and pastoral aspects, which are essential for formation. I bless you from the heart, I assure you of my prayers and I ask you, please, to remember me in your own. I now invite you to join, all together, in praying, each in his own tongue, the prayer that the Lord taught us.
