

Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Joint Committee for the Theological Dialogue between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Old Catholic Church of the Union of Utrecht

Reverend Presidents of the Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Old Catholic Church of the Union of Utrecht, Esteemed Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Christ is Risen!

It is with great pleasure that we are present today, to participate in this Conference, at your kind invitation, together with our dearly beloved brother His Eminence Archbishop Joris Vercammen of Utrecht.

In 2003, the Ecumenical Patriarchate established the Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue with the Old Catholic Church of Utrecht for two reasons: to investigate the possibilities of a more constructive relationship between Orthodoxy and Old Catholicism especially on the basis of the new circumstances that have since emerged, as well as to promote communication and cooperation between us on matters of common interest and concern. This Committee has since been re-established in 2008.

As is well known, the official theological dialogue of the Orthodox Church with the Old Catholics, a project of eminent significance among the ecumenical priorities of the Church of Constantinople, has been constructively concluded thanks to the efforts of the preceding Joint Orthodox Old-Catholic Theological Committee, having achieved the signing of 26 basic common theological texts. Sadly, the dialogue has not yet managed to make an observable impact in regard to broader Church life and on the path toward visible unity.

Nevertheless, we are happy in learning from the detailed accounts of our delegates, of the significant progress made in the ongoing dialogue, which includes mutual exchange and enrichment, the impact on the laity of our Churches, and the numerous efforts for closer contact and cooperation among our parishes, as well as supporting joint participation in celebrations, and so on.

Accordingly, the standing Committee has demonstrated an impressive activity and a wealth of fruitful initiatives. These include such events as the two meetings that took place at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Geneva, the two conferences held in Bern, the meeting in Constantinople and the Halki Theological School, the organization of a one-day theological congress at the Orthodox Centre in Geneva with the participation of young theologians from both Churches, the visit of a group of Old Catholic faithful to the Holy Archdiocese of Crete, in the context of a conference held at the Orthodox Academy of Crete. Mention must also be

made of the generous granting of a scholarship to a student of the Institute of Post-Graduate Studies in Orthodox Theology of Chambésy for studies at the Theological Faculty in Bern, as well as the appointment of Orthodox professors there, including Prof. Konstantinos Delikostantis, also a member of the Joint Committee. In addition, the Committee accompanied His Eminence Archbishop Joris Vercammen of Utrecht on his official visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Halki, where he participated in the Committee's conference.

We wish to express our appreciation to the Presidents and members of both delegations. Our Churches have entrusted you with a remarkably difficult and demanding task at a critical juncture in Orthodox-Old Catholic relations, a juncture marked by the following question, as was urgently posed by Prof. Anastasios Kallis: "Have we finally reached the Pillars of Hercules as far as Orthodox-Old Catholic relations are concerned? Is there no further point that we can venture into and hope to attain?"

You, as members of the Committee, have demonstrated that dialogue is not and should not be a technical affair managed by experts, or just a mere academic exercise. You must be credited for having raised into prominence the importance of the "dialogue of life." Prof. Urs von Arx has perceptively accounted for a key aspect of your agenda as an effort "to find new ways of exchanges for the faithful of both Churches who now live in the same society and are often confronted with challenges for the faith (orthodoxia, orthopraxia)."

There is no doubt that anthropological and moral questions, which nowadays stand at the forefront of global attention and concern, have made their way in the heart of theology and in lives of the Churches, from where they have further insinuated themselves into ecumenical dialogues. Perhaps a paradigm shift is imminent in ecumenical dialogue as a result of such an influx of contemporary challenges, which are marked by an unprecedented magnitude for debate, even inside the context of distinct Christian Churches and confessions. If anything, pressing modern questions and problems can afford Churches an opportunity for fresh dialogue and, if heeded carefully and with an open mind, may put Christendom in the spotlight as a champion of person-centered culture and a promoter of dignity and freedom, a topic on which modern Orthodox theology has done considerable groundbreaking work.

The "dialogue of life" signifies a common itinerary, wherein mutual trust is cultivated and strengthened, prejudices are overcome, common values are rediscovered and the significance of pluralism in expression (and its limits) becomes increasingly evident.

We wholeheartedly support this dialogue, which richly contributes to the strengthening of ties between the two Churches. We believe that the future of ecumenical dialogue may well depend on if, and to what extent, the theological dialogue fosters the "dialogue of life" and its actual reception in the Church, where the existential content, vital significance of doctrine and unity in faith is recognized in all dimensions of ecclesiastical life.

In view of these observations, our primary responsibility is to infuse younger Church members with an understanding that demonstrates the significance of ecumenical dialogue, and the benefits gained through its active participation.

Far from diminishing one's identity, dialogue forges and strengthens it. There can be no identity without communication. What constitutes a threat for our being is not dialogue, but the withdrawal into fruitless introversion – the very denial of dialogue.

In conclusion, we express our gratitude to all "women and men of dialogue" on both sides, who labored throughout the long road of dialogical contact between the two Churches. We shall continue to carry on this blessed path, to cooperate and assume common tasks and projects, as well as to emphasize the importance of participation in these proceedings and affairs for faithful, having our faith and trust in the Holy Spirit, "the spirit of wisdom and understanding," "the light and giver of light," the Paraclete who "welds together the whole institution of the Church."

Thanking you once again for your most kind invitation, kindly accept our warmest and sincerest wishes for the fruition of your efforts, to the benefit of the Church of Christ.