



The Holy See

***GREETING OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO A DELEGATION OF THE OLD CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
OF THE UNION OF UTRECHT***

Thursday, 30 October 2014

*Your Grace,
Eminence,
Your Excellencies,*

I am pleased to welcome you, the members of the Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht, as your visit offers us a valuable opportunity to reflect on our shared ecumenical journey.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which inaugurated a new era of ecumenical dialogue and expressed the enduring commitment of the Catholic Church to seek the unity of Christ's disciples. For all of us, the International Roman Catholic/Old Catholic Dialogue Commission plays a significant role in seeking ever greater fidelity to the Lord's prayer, "that all may be one" (cf. *Jn* 17:21). It has been possible to build new bridges of a more profound mutual understanding and practical co-operation. Convergences and consensus have been found, and differences have been better identified and set in new contexts.

While we rejoice whenever we take steps towards a stronger communion in faith and life, we are also saddened when we recognize that in the course of time new disagreements between us have emerged. The theological and ecclesiological questions that arose during our separation are now more difficult to overcome due to the increasing distance between us on matters of ministry and ethical discernment.

The challenge for Catholics and Old Catholics, then, is to persevere in substantive theological

dialogue and to walk together, to pray together and to work together in a deeper spirit of conversion towards all that Christ intends for his Church. In this separation there have been, on the part of both sides, grave sins and human faults. In a spirit of mutual forgiveness and humble repentance, we need now to strengthen our desire for reconciliation and peace. The path towards unity begins with a change of heart, an interior conversion (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4). It is a spiritual journey from encounter to friendship, from friendship to brotherhood, from brotherhood to communion. Along the way, change is inevitable. We must always be willing to listen to and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13).

In the meantime, in the heart of Europe, which is so confused about its own identity and vocation, there are many areas in which Catholics and Old Catholics can collaborate in meeting the profound spiritual crisis affecting individuals and societies. There is a thirst for God. There is a profound desire to recover a sense of purpose in life. There is an urgent need for a convincing witness to the truth and values of the Gospel. In this we can support and encourage one another, especially at the level of parishes and local communities. In fact, the soul of ecumenism lies in a “change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8). In prayer for and with one another our differences are taken up and overcome in fidelity to the Lord and his Gospel.

I am always aware that “the holy task of reconciling all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human energies and abilities” (*Ibid*, 24). Our hope is rooted in the prayer of Christ himself for the Church. Let us immerse ourselves evermore in that prayer so that our efforts may always be sustained and guided by divine grace.