

Obstacles on the way to full communion
and proposals to overcome them

Mr. President,

Your Eminence, your Graces, Reverend Fathers, ladies and gentlemen,

It honors me today to join you in attending this conference of Pro-Oriente for the first time. H.H. Pope Tawadros II Pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the See of St. Mark has assigned me to be with you today, sending his prayers and regards for the success of this meeting.

His Holiness had shared in this conference almost two years ago, right after his ascension to the See of St. Mark. He made some proposals on how to unify the date of celebrating Easter. He also expressed his sincere desire for Church unity to His Holiness Pope Francis in Rome on his very first visit out of Egypt.

His Holiness had done many efforts towards rapprochement among different Christian Churches in Egypt, during his early few days as Pope, by establishing the Council of All Egyptian Churches. And for the first time in our Church history, the Coptic Pope shared in the ordination of the new Coptic Catholic Patriarch in Egypt, His Beatitude Ibrahim Ishaq.

Today we remember the late Pope Shenouda III Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Coptic Church, who took part in this meeting here in Pro-Oriente in September 1971. Thanks to his elucidation of the

Christological dogma he helped remove lots of misunderstanding concerning this issue. Moreover he met Pope Paul VI on May 1973 and underscored the results of their first agreement on the same matter. During their prelacy a common agreement was signed by both sides; it was the first Christological agreement to take place between both Churches for a long time. It opened the door for more talks between both of Eastern and Western Churches. In the year 1988 at the monastery of Anba Bishoy, Egypt, a common agreement on the nature of Christ was signed by delegates of the Roman Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church.

I also carry with me the prayers and regards of His Grace Metropolitan Bishoy of Damietta, the official delegate of our Coptic Orthodox Church among the oriental orthodox Churches in dialogues with other Churches including the Catholic Church.

So the subject of this meeting is: Obstacles on the way to full communion and proposals to overcome them.

First of all I would like to praise the great efforts exerted by Pro-Oriente organization toward proximity in the views of sister Churches. For I think that one of the main impediments which stood between Churches is distance; not only physical but also intellectual and cultural. This resulted in the difficulty of common understanding and recognition one for the other. However, thanks to Pro-Oriente organization, much of the misunderstanding between our different

Churches has been removed. We should never forget that because of our dislocation one from the other for many centuries in which were added many rituals and doctrines that lacked agreement between different Churches, the gulf which separated us became greater. Here is the beginning of many problems which did not exist at the time when the schism took place. Such newly invented problems need solution. As for the old problems which were the original reasons for alienation, conferences and quiet discussion between astute theologians on each side have proved the lack of real cause for the schism in which we now live. Here are some steps which may perhaps help get rid of some obstacles in the way of complete unity among Churches.

First: lifting all kinds of anathemas between our different Churches, for without lifting them you are still heretics in our own eyes and we also are heretics in yours. I myself feel that there is less difficulty in meeting with people having different viewpoints than meeting with heretics. Based on such conviction, an agreement was reached in Chambésy in 1990 between the two Orthodox families, which goes as follows:

The Orthodox should lift all anathemas and condemnations against all Oriental Orthodox Councils and Fathers whom they have anathematized or condemned in the past. The Oriental

Orthodox should at the same time lift all anathemas and condemnations against all Orthodox Councils and Fathers whom they have anathematized or condemned in the past.¹

Second: Common respect of each Church for the saints of the other and accepting their common veneration and stopping mutual aggression against them; for each Church holds dear to herself her own saints, and no Church can suffer the loss of her heritage to which it stuck for fifteen centuries. If we adopt an impartial point of view toward those saints we would find that each one of them was faithful to the teachings of the Church understood in his own time; none of them aimed at creating a schism between Churches, neither did any of them wish to relinquish the faith handed down by the apostles.

Third: Accepting and revering new saints on which Church history has been built after the schism between us, or at least if I can't recognize them as common saints between us, I should at least call them the saints of the Coptic, Ethiopian, Byzantine or Catholic Churches and so on, without in the least defaming or minimizing their sanctity until the time comes for accepting all of them completely in all Churches.

Fourth: To consider seriously the recognition of Baptism among the different Churches on the basis that all the Churches involved are

¹ Conciliar decisions during the papacy of Pope Shenouda III (117) 3rd edition 2011, page 269;302

traditional ones having a priestly hierarchy since apostolic times and in which Baptism is practiced in the name of the Holy Trinity, and in which the Holy Spirit is given through Confirmation or Chrismation in the steps of laying on of hands by the apostles.

Fifth: Having mutually recognized Baptism each Church by the other, we have to consider accepting the participation of the faithful in the Eucharist between the different traditional Churches especially in the countries which lack Churches of all denominations, so as to make easy for Christians to partake of the Eucharist which represents the core of the Christian life in all Churches. As for myself I believe that in order for total unity to take place between all Churches we need power to bring us together, and there is no power greater than that of the Eucharistic sacrament which is the only means to make us one.

Sixth: Working for the unification of times of celebrating the major Church festivals through which the Christian people can feel that real unity has materialized among the Churches. This should be done with an effort to bring together the different viewpoints concerning the tradition of each Church in pointing out the date of celebrating such festivals.

After agreeing on these main points, wider steps should be taken to remove the many obstacles which resulted from adding new material by all Churches to the text of their faith and their beliefs, which causes

the rest of the Churches to refuse these additions, particularly because the cultural and social climate in which every Church lives differs greatly in many respects one from the other. Such additions need explanation and discussion before being accepted by the different Churches.

For example:

First: The faith of some Churches concerning the salvation of non-Christians needs explanation and clarification for the other Churches, especially the Churches whose members are a minority in non-Christian societies where the followers of other religions carry out continuous propaganda for giving up the Christian faith in such a way that these new doctrines are offered as a pretext for proximity between religions as if they were all one and the same, and as if those who hold different religions were to face one fate, and so simpletons and naïve are deceived.

Second: Certain dogmatic statements which have intruded into our Churches in later periods and have become part and parcel of our daily rituals and which demand revision accompanied by explanation and clarification of their meaning to other Churches so as not to become obstacles toward unity (like the Immaculate Conception, the Filioque, the primacy of Peter and what it entails as regards the authority of the pope of Rome, etc.)

Third: the expansion of some Churches in forming private entities in the dioceses of other ancient traditional Churches which creates a feeling of sway over the followers of those Churches, especially if those dioceses are limited in economic means.

However, in my point of view I think the major obstacle towards unity among Churches is the lack of willingness for unity by some persons who are involved in the dialogue. This may be due to the fear of such people from the dominance of some powerful Churches over less powerful ones; for history is replete with conflicts which are unjustifiable and logically inexplicable until now, except if considered in the scope of “Who is the greatest?” (Mk 9:34).

We pray that God may grant grace to those responsible for the dialogue between Churches; for upon their shoulders is a historical responsibility. Christendom looks forward to seeing such unity, which the Lord Jesus has asked for, becoming a reality. The Christian world feels that Church officials are the main obstacle toward this unity. We hope that such notion would change and that we may gladden the heart of Christ by the unity he asked for in the near future and not after lengthy generations.
