World Council of Churches

6th World Conference on Faith and Order

Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order

ADDRESS TO THE FAITH AND ORDER CONFERENCE

His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the see of St Mark

General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Moderator of the World Council of Churches Central Committee, Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, Director of the Faith and Order Commission, Distinguished Guests and Attendees,

I would like to welcome you all to Egypt and to the Logos Conference Center, in this holy place, at the Monastery of the Great Saint Anba Bishoy in the Holy Desert of Scetis in Wadi El Natrun, which has been a beacon and inspiration for monastic life since the fourth century AD.

The Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15), which discussed the issue of Judaization and conversion from Judaism to Christianity, was the basis for the idea of church councils. For every council convened, there was an issue or problem, dialogue and discussion, a leader and management, and the Holy Spirit was the spirit of strength, love, advice, and success for any church council.

The Council of Nicaea

Convened by Emperor Constantine the Great after Christianity had become a permitted religion in the Roman Empire, the Council aimed to achieve unity of faith after the emergence of sharp doctrinal divisions and to achieve peace throughout the empire.

The issue arose from Arius, a priest in Alexandria, who taught that:
"The Son is not equal to the Father in essence, but is created by God and has a beginning in time". This teaching threatened the unity of the Christian faith, and a great uproar arose within the church.

This reminds us of the danger of individual interpretation and teaching without returning to the roots represented by the Holy Gospels and the teachings of the Holy Fathers, the teachers of the church.

Here, the role of the leader became prominent. The council convened, attended by approximately 318 bishops from various regions of the Christian world, under the leadership of Pope Alexander, Patriarch of Alexandria, and his young deacon, Athanasius the Apostolic, who played a pivotal role in defending the theology of the Son.

The Council made several historic decisions, the most important of which were:

1- Condemning the teachings of Arius and excommunicating him from ecclesiastical communion.
2- Establishing the divinity of the Son as "begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father" (*homoousios tō Patri*).
3- Formulating the Nicene Creed, which became the fundamental reference for universal Christian doctrine.
4- The determination the date of Easter to be celebrated in all churches on one day, separate from the Jewish calendar.
5- Issuing several church canons related to priestly order and church discipline .

The Theological and Ecclesiastical Impact of the Council

The Council of Nicaea had a profound impact in consolidating the theological foundations of Christian doctrine, particularly regarding the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The Council affirmed the unity of the divine essence between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and put an end to heresies that diminished the divinity of Christ.

The Council also established a new model for ecumenical ecclesiastical dialogue, bringing together bishops from around the world and establishing the principle that faith is determined through universal councils, not individual opinions.

The Political Dimensions of the Council

From a political perspective, the Council of Nicaea represented the first formal cooperation between the Church and the Roman state, when Emperor Constantine intervened to ensure unity of faith to preserve the unity of the empire. From here, a new relationship began between temporal and spiritual authority, a relationship that would have a profound impact on the history of Christianity throughout the ages.

The Ecumenical Council of Nicaea was not merely a theological event; it was a historical moment that established the identity of the universal Church. In it, the orthodox faith was preserved from

deviations and heresies, and it laid the foundation for the Creed, which is still recited today in the liturgy of churches around the world.

Thus, it can be said that Nicaea was the true starting point for explaining the Orthodox Christian doctrine in its universal form, and a lasting example of the role of councils in preserving the one, holy, apostolic faith, which we received from the apostles and holy fathers and which has been preserved in the Church of God throughout the generations.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea is considered the cornerstone of the development of Christian theology in subsequent centuries. It laid out precise concepts of the relationship between the Father and the Son and established the principle of equality in divine essence. Through the Creed, the dimensions of the universal Christian doctrine were defined, touching the very core of the Holy Trinity. This Creed became the primary faith reference that preserved the unity of the Church and consolidated the foundation of the Orthodox faith, which has continued to enlighten believers' generation after generation.

Where We Stand Today: Nicaea and the Visible Unity

The meeting of the Faith and Order Committee coincides with the commemoration of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD), considered one of the most important pivotal events in the history of Christian thought and ecclesiastical theology. It marked a turning point in defining the contours of the orthodox faith and formulating the universal doctrine passed down by the Church over the centuries.

Recalling the Council of Nicaea is not merely a celebration of the past; it is a renewed call to remain steadfast in the apostolic faith and to be open to constructive dialogue that unites the churches on the path toward true unity, based on truth and love.

The Nicene Fathers' declaration of faith in the Son, "true God of true God, begotten, not created, one essence with the Father," remains the cornerstone upon which Christian doctrine is built in every time and place.

Thus, this gathering serves as an opportunity to reflect on the Church's faithfulness in preserving the Nicene faith and to reaffirm its mission in a world marked by intellectual and cultural pluralism. Within this context, the Faith and Order Commission bears the responsibility of continuing its pursuit to renew the witness to divine truth within the framework of the universal ecclesial unity.

The goal of Christian unity is indeed a noble one: to be truly one in Christ, members of one body in Christ. This is the very unity for which our gracious Lord prayed: “That they all may be one; as You, Father, are in me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that You sent me.” (John 17:21).

We believe that true unity is unity in faith, whose tangible reality is full communion in the divine mysteries: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

We believe that the path towards unity is not easy. The divisions that arose after Nicaea fragmented the Church and persisted for many years, even to this day. Such divisions can only be healed through theological dialogue.

The Fathers believed that preserving the oneness of the Body is both a divine calling and an ecclesial responsibility, to be carried out in a spirit of love, gentleness, and humility, coupled with a sound knowledge of the truth and right teaching. Hence, they did not hesitate to confront all who sought to tear apart this one Body, whether through heresies, schisms, doctrinal deviations, or false teachings not in harmony with the spirit of the Gospel and the teachings of Fathers. This vigilance was clearly manifested in the Ecumenical Councils, foremost among them the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), where the Fathers stood united in defense of the apostolic faith against the Heresy of Arius, affirming that the unity of faith is the sure foundation of the Church’s unity.

Among the theological and ecclesial issues of particular significance in the present time is the inter-church dialogue. Just as the Fathers at the Council of Nicaea gathered in a spirit of communion to articulate a shared expression of faith, the Church today is called to engage in dialogue grounded in mutual understanding and respect, within the context of the one faith.

A fundamental question arises in this context: Why do we engage in dialogue?

Our purpose and mission must be clear before engaging in any theological dialogue, lest it turn into a debate or a mere aimless exchange of opinions. The primary aim of dialogue is getting to know and understand the other as well as seeking to find out how each ecclesial tradition expresses the shared faith in its own distinctive way reflecting the richness of the heritage. True dialogue is not about imposing one’s views or defending oneself, but rather about mutual listening, allowing the other to express his faith freely and openly in the light of the revealed truth in Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In this sense, theological dialogue is a journey toward a shared understanding of faith. It is not an attempt to eliminate or dissolve differences, but rather to discover the profound faith uniting the Church. As one contemporary Father expressed: "*Dialogue is not a concession of faith, but a testimony to the truth in the spirit of love.*"

Theological dialogue begins first and foremost with the art of listening, for listening is the path to mutual understanding. When each side is given the space to freely and openly express its faith, new horizons of closeness and unity unfold before the Church. Thus, dialogue is not intended to eliminate differences or deny diversity, but rather to understand one another.

In light of this understanding, we affirm that dialogue is neither a concession of faith nor a relinquishment of doctrine. It is a testimony to truth in the spirit of love and a constant striving towards achieving the unity for which Christ Himself prayed: "*That they all may be one; as You, Father, are in me, and I in You*" (John 17:21).

Distinguished guests,

Your visit to Egypt, hosted by the Coptic Orthodox Church, in this place where the hermits once lived and from which great saints of monastic life blossomed, is a profound source of inspiration for us all. Here we are reminded of the life and the holy bond that once united the saints. The spiritual discipleship and friendship that united St. Athanasius the Apostolic and St. Anthony the Great influenced the entire Church with the spirituality and prayer that marked St. Anthony's life and was reflected in the purity of St. Athanasius's teachings intertwined with the life of piety.

I warmly invite you, at this blessed time and while you are here among us, to get to know our Coptic Orthodox Church; this long-standing Church that has preserved its sound faith and profound patristic heritage, a faith watered by the blood of the martyrs through generations and faithfully safeguarded across the ages as a sacred deposit passed down from our early fathers.

I also invite you to discover our beloved Egypt, the land of the See of St. Mark, which embraced the Christian faith since the dawn of time. Here, monasticism was born; theology and spirituality flourished. Egypt, with its ancient history and civilization spanning thousands of years, continues to offer the world a living testimony of steadfast faith and unifying love.

It is, indeed, a great honor and pleasure to welcome you to our Coptic Church and to our homeland, Egypt, which today is privileged to host this significant event in the journey of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and in the history of faith and order commission. This meeting stands as a radiant sign affirming that Egypt, together with the Middle East and Africa, still serves

as a living bridge among the Churches, bearing to the world a message of hope and unity before the eyes of the entire Christian family.

Let us lift up our hearts in gratitude to God for bringing us together in this blessed gathering, asking Him to grant us the spirit of wisdom and understanding to continue the journey toward achieving the unity of faith in truth and love.

And let us pray together that this gathering bears new fruit on the path of dialogue and common edification among the Churches. Let us pray that our Coptic Church and our beloved Egypt will remain a beacon of faith and a witness to the unity of the one Church throughout the ages.