



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 21 January 2009*

### ***Week of Prayer for Christian Unity***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" began last Sunday. It will end next Sunday, the Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle St Paul. The Week of Prayer is a particularly precious spiritual initiative that is becoming ever more widespread among Christians, in harmony with and, we might say, in response to the heartfelt entreaty that Jesus addressed to the Father in the Upper Room before his Passion: *"That they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me"* (Jn 17: 21). In this priestly prayer, the Lord asks at least four times that his disciples may be "one", in accordance with the image of the unity between the Father and the Son. This is a unity that can only grow by following the example of the Son's gift of himself to the Father, that is, by coming out of oneself and uniting oneself with Christ. Moreover in this prayer Jesus twice adds as the purpose of this unity: so that the world may believe. Thus, full unity concerns the Church's life and mission in the world. She must live a unity that can only derive from her unity with Christ, with his transcendence, as a sign that Christ is the truth. This is our responsibility: that the gift of unity by virtue of which our faith is made credible may be visible in the world. For this reason it is important that every Christian community become aware of the urgent need to work in every possible way to achieve this great objective. However, knowing that unity is first and foremost a "gift" of the Lord, it is necessary at the same time to implore it with tireless and trusting prayer. Only by coming out of ourselves and going towards Christ, only in our relationship with him, can we become truly united with one another. This is the invitation that this "Week" addresses to believers in Christ of every Church and Ecclesial Community; let us respond to it, dear brothers

and sisters, with prompt generosity.

This year the "Week of Prayer for Unity" presents to us for our meditation and prayers these words from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: "*That they may become one in your hand*" (37: 17). The theme was chosen by an ecumenical group from Korea and was then re-examined for international circulation by the *Joint Committee for Prayer*, comprised of representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The process of preparation itself was a fruitful and stimulating exercise of true ecumenism.

In the passage from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, from which the theme has been taken, the Lord orders the Prophet to take two sticks, one representing Judah and his tribes and the other Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him, and asks him "to join them together" into one stick, that they may become "one" in his hand. The parable of unity is transparent. To "[his] people" who ask for an explanation, Ezekiel, enlightened from on High, was to say that the Lord himself takes the two sticks and joins them together in such a way that the two kingdoms with their respective tribes, divided from one another, may become "one in his hand". The hand of the Prophet who brings the two sticks together is considered as the very hand of God who gathers together and unites his people and, in the end, the whole of humanity. We may apply the Prophet's words to Christians in the sense of an exhortation to pray and work, doing their utmost to bring about the unity of all Christ's disciples, to work so that our hand may become an instrument of the unifying hand of God. This exhortation becomes particularly moving and heartrending in Jesus' words after the Last Supper. The Lord desires the whole of his people to journey on and in this sees the Church of the future, of the centuries to come with patience and perseverance towards the goal of full unity. This is a commitment that entails humble adherence and docile obedience to the commandment of the Lord, who blesses it and makes it fruitful. The Prophet Ezekiel assures us that it will be he himself, our one Lord, the one God, who gathers us into "his hand".

In the second part of the biblical reading the significance and conditions of unity of the various tribes into a single kingdom are more deeply examined. In their dispersion among the Gentiles, the Israelites had become acquainted with erroneous forms of worship, they had developed mistaken concepts of life and had assumed customs alien to the divine law. The Lord now declares that they shall no longer defile themselves with the idols of pagan peoples, with their abominations and with all their transgressions (Ez 37: 23). He recalls their need to free themselves from sin, to purify their hearts. "I will deliver them from all their sins and will cleanse them", he says. And so "they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (*ibid.*). In this condition of inner renewal they "shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes". And the prophetic text concludes with the definitive and fully salvific promise: "I will make a covenant of peace with them... and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them" (Ez 37: 26).

Ezekiel's vision becomes particularly eloquent for the entire ecumenical movement because it sheds light on the indispensable need for authentic inner renewal in all the members of the people

of God which only the Lord can bring about. We too must be open to this renewal because we too, dispersed among the world's peoples, have learned customs that are very far from the Word of God. Since "every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling", as we read in the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, "undoubtedly this explains the dynamism of the movement toward unity" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 6), namely, the greatest fidelity to the vocation of God. The Decree then stresses the interior dimension of conversion of the heart. "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name", it adds, "without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinting love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way" (*ibid.*, n. 7). Thus for all of us the "Week of Prayer for Unity" becomes an incentive for sincere conversion, for listening ever more docilely to God's word and for increasingly deeper faith.

The "Week" is also a favourable opportunity to thank the Lord for what, with his help, has been done up to now to bring divided Christian and Ecclesial Communities closer to one another. This spirit has enlivened the Catholic Church which, in the year that has just ended, continued with firm conviction and well-founded hope to engage in respectful brotherly relations with all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the East and West. Within a variety of situations, at times more positive and at times with greater difficulty, we endeavoured never to fall short of our commitment to make every possible effort for the recomposition of full unity. Relations between the Churches and theological dialogues have continued to show encouraging signs of spiritual convergence. I myself have had the joy, both here at the Vatican and during my Apostolic Visits, of meeting Christians from all parts. I have received the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I three times with deep joy and, during what was an extraordinary event at the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, we heard him speak with fraternal ecclesial warmth and convinced trust in the future. I had the pleasure of receiving the two *Catholicoi* of the Armenian Apostolic Church: His Holiness Karekin II of Etchmiadzin and His Holiness Aram I of Antelias. And, lastly, I shared in the sorrow of the Patriarchate of Moscow at the departure of our Beloved Brother in Christ, His Holiness Patriarch Alexei II, and I continue to remain in communion through prayer with these brothers of ours who are preparing to elect the new Patriarch of their venerable and great Orthodox Church. Likewise I have been granted to meet representatives of the various Christian communions of the West, with whom exchanges are continuing, on the important witness that Christians must bear today in a harmonious manner, in a world that is ever more divided and placed before so many cultural, social, economical and ethical challenges. Let us joyfully give thanks to the Lord together for these and many other meetings, dialogues and gestures of brotherhood that the Lord has granted us to accomplish.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us take the opportunity that the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" offers us to ask the Lord for the commitment and the ecumenical dialogue to continue and, if possible, to be intensified. In the context of the Pauline Year commemorating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of St Paul, we cannot fail to also refer to what the Apostle Paul has bequeathed to us in writing concerning the Church's unity. Every Wednesday I continue to devote

my reflection to his Letters and to his invaluable teaching. Here I simply resume what he wrote when addressing the community of Ephesus: "There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4: 4-5). Let us make our own the yearning of St Paul who spent his whole life for the one Lord and for the unity of his Mystical Body, the Church, and with his martyrdom bearing a supreme witness of faithfulness and love for Christ.

By following his example and counting on his intercession, may every community grow in the commitment to unity, thanks to the various spiritual and pastoral initiatives and common prayer assemblies that usually become more numerous and intense in this "Week". These give us a foretaste, in a certain way, of the day of full unity. Let us pray that the dialogue of truth among the Churches and Ecclesial Communities and the dialogue of charity, which conditions the theological dialogue itself and helps us live together in order to bear a common witness, will continue. They are indispensable in order to settle differences. The desire that dwells in our hearts is to hasten the day of full communion, when all the disciples of our one Lord will at last be able to celebrate the Eucharist together, the divine sacrifice for the life and salvation of the world. Let us invoke the motherly intercession of Mary so that she may help all Christians to cultivate a more attentive listening to the word of God and more intense prayers for unity.

### To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience. My particular greeting goes to the pilgrimage group from Malta led by Archbishop Paul Cremona. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in the Lord.

Lastly, as usual I address my thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today we are celebrating the liturgical Memorial of St Agnes, Virgin and Martyr, who despite her very young age bravely faced death for love of the Lord and had within her "the same sentiments as Jesus Christ", the Lamb who was sacrificed and victorious. Dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newlyweds*, through the intercession of St Agnes may you too live your vocation and your actual state as authentic paths of holiness.

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