



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 15 April 1998

The one Baptism of the Christian community

1. Today's General Audience takes place in the Octave of Easter. During this week and for the whole period which lasts until Pentecost, the Christian community perceives in a special way the living and active presence of the risen Christ. In this splendid setting of light and joy proper to the Easter season, we continue our reflections in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Today we consider again the sacrament of Baptism which, by immersing man in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, makes him a child of God and incorporates him into the Church.

Baptism is essential for the Christian community. In particular, the Letter to the Ephesians includes Baptism among the foundations of the communion which binds the disciples to Christ: "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, one God and Father of us all" (*Eph 4:4-6*).

The affirmation of one Baptism in the context of the other foundations of ecclesial unity has particular significance. In fact, it refers to the one Father, who in Baptism offers everyone divine sonship. It is intimately linked to Christ, the one Lord, who unites the baptized in his Mystical Body, and to the Holy Spirit, the principle of unity in the variety of his gifts. A sacrament of faith, Baptism transmits a life which gives access to eternity, and thus refers to the hope that waits with certainty for the fulfilment of God's promises.

The one Baptism therefore expresses the unity of the whole mystery of salvation.

2. When Paul wants to show the Church's unity, he compares her to a body, the Body of Christ, built up precisely through Baptism: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews

or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 *Cor* 12:13).

The Holy Spirit is the principle of the Body's unity, since he animates both Christ the Head and his members. In receiving the Spirit, all the baptized, despite their differences of origin, nationality, culture, sex and social status, are united in the Body of Christ, so that Paul can say: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Gal* 3:28).

3. On the basis of Baptism, the First Letter of Peter urges Christians to gather round Christ to help build the spiritual edifice founded by and on him: "Come to him [Christ], to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:4-5). Thus Baptism unites all the faithful in the one priesthood of Christ, enabling them to take part in the Church's worship and to make their lives a spiritual offering acceptable to God. In this way they grow in holiness and influence the development of the entire community.

Baptism is also a source of apostolic dynamism. The missionary task of the baptized, in conformity with their own vocation, is extensively considered by the Council which, in the Constitution *Lumen gentium*, teaches: "Each disciple of Christ has the obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his ability" (n. 17). In the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, I stressed that by virtue of Baptism all lay people are missionaries (cf. n. 71).

4. Baptism is also a fundamental point of departure for ecumenical dialogue.

Concerning our separated brethren, the Decree on Ecumenism says: "For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3). In reality, validly conferred Baptism brings about an effective incorporation into Christ and makes all the baptized truly brothers and sisters in the Lord, regardless of their denomination. This is what the Council teaches: "Baptism, therefore, constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn" (*ibid.*, n. 22).

It is an initial communion which needs to be developed in the direction of full unity, as the Council itself urges: "But Baptism, of itself, is only a beginning, a point of departure, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus ordained toward a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and finally, toward a complete integration into Eucharistic communion" (*ibid.*).

5. In the perspective of the Jubilee, this ecumenical aspect of Baptism deserves to be given special emphasis (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 41).

Two thousand years after Christ's coming, Christians unfortunately present themselves to the world without the full unity he desired and for which he prayed. But at the same time we must not forget everything that already unites us. Doctrinal dialogue must be promoted at all levels, as well as mutual openness, co-operation and, above all, the spiritual ecumenism of prayer and the commitment to holiness. The grace of Baptism itself is the foundation on which to build that full unity to which the Spirit continually spurs us.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I cordially greet the new deacons of the Pontifical Irish College and the Pontifical Scots College, and the priests from the Institute for Continuing Education at the Pontifical North American College: may your love of Christ and his Church be a continual source of strength and joy in your ministry. I extend a special welcome to the "Voices of the World" choir, made up mostly of choirs from Ireland, North and South, from Italy and from Poland. Your commitment to sing for peace and to hold hands across all divisions is a great sign of hope. Your presence is an occasion for us to thank God once more for the important steps recently taken in bringing lasting peace to Northern Ireland. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Scotland, Gibraltar, Sweden and the United States of America, I invoke the love and grace of the risen Saviour. Happy Easter!