



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS FOR THE CONCLUSION OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Basilica of St Paul outside the Walls

Saturday, 25 January 2003

1. *"We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7).*

These words, taken from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, have been the guiding theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which concludes today. They shed light on our meditation during this evening liturgy of the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. The Apostle reminds us that we carry the "treasure" which Christ has given us in earthen vessels. All Christians are thus called to press forward on their earthly pilgrimage without letting themselves be overwhelmed by difficulties or afflictions (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8), in the certainty that they will overcome all obstacles thanks to the help and the power which come from on high.

With this conviction, I am happy to pray this evening together with you, beloved brothers and sisters of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities present in Rome, *united by the one Baptism* in the Lord Jesus Christ. I offer a heartfelt greeting to all of you.

It is my great desire that the Church of Rome, which Providence has entrusted with a unique "presidency in charity" (Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, Introduction), may increasingly become a model of fraternal ecumenical relations.

2. As Christians, we know that we are called to bear witness before the world to the "glorious Gospel" which Christ has given to us (cf. 2 Cor 4:4). In his name, let us unite our efforts in order to be at the service of peace and reconciliation, justice and solidarity, especially at the side of the poor and the least of the earth.

In this context, I would like to recall the Day of Prayer for World Peace held in Assisi *one year ago*, on 24 January. That interreligious event sent a powerful message to the world: every authentically religious person is obliged to ask God for the gift of peace, with renewed determination to promote and build peace together with other believers. The theme of peace remains as urgent as ever. It makes particular demands on the followers of Christ, the Prince of Peace, and it represents a challenge and a commitment for the ecumenical movement.

3. In response to the one Spirit who guides the Church, we wish this evening to offer thanks to God for the many abundant fruits which he, the giver of every good gift, has lavished upon the path of ecumenism. In addition to the Assisi meeting, which saw the participation of high-level representatives of almost all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of East and West, how can I fail to mention the visit to Rome last March of a Delegation from the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece? In June I joined Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in signing the Common Declaration on safeguarding the environment. In May I had the joy of visiting Patriarch Maxim of Bulgaria, and in October I was visited by Patriarch Teoctist of Romania, with whom I also signed a Common Declaration. Nor can I forget the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, at the conclusion of his mandate, my meetings with Ecumenical Delegations of Ecclesial Communities of the West, and the progress made by the various mixed Commissions of dialogue.

At the same time we cannot fail to acknowledge realistically the *difficulties*, the *problems* and at times the *disappointments* which we still encounter. At times we sense a certain weariness, a lack of fervour, while still experiencing the pain that we are not yet able to share the Eucharistic Banquet. But the Holy Spirit never ceases to surprise us and he continues to work extraordinary wonders.

4. In the present situation of ecumenism, it is important to realize that *only the Spirit of God is in a position to give us full visible unity*; only the Spirit of God can inspire new fervour and courage. This is why we need to stress the importance of *spiritual ecumenism*, which constitutes the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. (Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6-8).

This does not mean in any way lessening or downplaying *theological dialogue*, which has borne abundant fruits in recent decades. Such dialogue remains, as always, an indispensable task. In fact, unity between the followers of Christ can only be a *unity in truth* (cf. Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, 18-19). The Spirit guides us towards this goal also through theological dialogues, which represent a sure occasion of mutual enrichment.

Only *in the Holy Spirit*, however, is it possible to receive the truth of the Gospel, binding for everyone in its depth. Spiritual ecumenism opens our eyes and our hearts to the understanding of revealed truth, and enables us to recognize it and welcome it, thanks also to the insights of other Christians.

5. Spiritual ecumenism takes place above all through *prayer* raised up to God, in common whenever possible. Like Mary and the disciples after the Lord's Ascension, it is important that we continue to come together and call untiringly upon the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:12,14). To prayer we must also add *listening to the Word of God* in Sacred Scripture, the foundation and sustenance of our faith (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21-25). For there can be no ecumenical rapprochement without conversion of heart, personal sanctification and renewal of ecclesial life.

Communities of consecrated life and recent *spiritual movements* have a particular role in fostering an encounter with the ancient and venerable Churches of the East, imbued with the spirit of monasticism. There are encouraging signs of a promising revival of spiritual life in the Ecclesial Communities of the West too, and I am gladdened by the helpful exchanges taking place between all these diverse Christian groups.

Nor should we overlook the instances in which *the clergy of other Churches attend Catholic Universities*: guests at our seminaries, they take part in student life in accordance with the ecclesial discipline in force. Experience has shown that this leads to mutual enrichment.

6. The hope that we express together today is that *the spirituality of communion* will grow ever stronger! As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, may each of us be enabled more and more to look upon our brothers and sisters in faith, within the unity of the Mystical Body, as "those who are a part of me", in order to be "able to share their joys and sufferings".

May we come to see "what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'". Let there be no mistake: without an authentic spirituality of communion, external structures of communion "would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth" (No. 43).

Let us continue, then, with courage and patience along this path, trusting in the power of the Spirit! It is not for us to set time frames or deadlines; the Lord's promise is enough for us.

Strengthened by the word of Christ, we shall not give in to weariness, but rather shall intensify our efforts and our prayer for unity. May his invitation echo in our hearts tonight and bring us comfort: "*Duc in altum!*". Let us go forward, placing our trust always in him! Amen!

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