



The Holy See

VESPERS LITURGY ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 40th ANNIVERSARY OF THE PROMULGATION
OF THE CONCILIAR DECREE "UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO"

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 13 November 2004

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace" (Eph 2: 13ff.).¹ With these words from his Letter to the Ephesians the Apostle proclaims that *Christ is our peace*. We are reconciled in him; we are no longer strangers but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (cf. Eph 2: 19ff.). We have listened to Paul's words on the occasion of this celebration that sees us gathered in the venerable Basilica built over the Apostle Peter's tomb. I cordially greet those taking part in the ecumenical conference organized for the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of the Second Vatican Council. I extend my greeting to the Cardinals, Patriarchs and Bishops taking part, to the Fraternal Delegates of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and to the Consultors, guests and collaborators of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. I thank you for having carefully examined the meaning of this important Decree and the actual and future prospects of the ecumenical movement. This evening we are gathered here to praise God from whom come *every good endowment and every perfect gift* (cf. Jas 1: 17), and to thank him for the rich fruit the Decree has yielded with the help of the Holy Spirit during these past 40 years.² The implementation of this Conciliar Decree desired by my Predecessor, Bl. Pope John XXIII, and promulgated by Pope Paul VI, has been one of the pastoral priorities of my Pontificate from the outset (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 99). Since ecumenical unity is not a secondary attribute of the community of Christ's disciples (cf. *ibid.*, n. 9), and ecumenical activity is not just some sort of appendix added to the Church's traditional activity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 20) but is based on God's saving plan to gather all [Christians] into unity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 5), it corresponds to the desire of our Lord Jesus Christ, who wanted only one Church and on the eve of his death prayed to the Father that they might all be one (cf. Jn 17: 21). Basically, to seek unity is to comply with Jesus' prayer. The Second Vatican Council, in making its own this desire of Our Lord, made no innovation. Guided and enlightened by the Spirit of God, it cast new light on the true, deep meaning of the Church's unity and universality. The way of ecumenism is the way of the Church (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 7); she is not a reality closed in on herself but permanently open to the missionary and ecumenical dynamic (cf. *ibid.*, n. 5). The commitment to re-establishing full and visible communion among all the baptized does not apply merely to a few ecumenical experts; it concerns every Christian, from every Diocese and parish and from every one of the Church's

communities. All are called to take on this commitment and no one can refuse to make his own the prayer of Jesus that all may be one; all are called to pray and work for the unity of Christ's disciples.³ Today, faced with a world moving towards unification, this ecumenical process is particularly necessary, and the Church must accept new challenges to her evangelizing mission. The Council noted that the division between Christians "scandalizes the world and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1). Ecumenical and missionary activity are therefore connected. They are the routes that the Church takes in carrying out her mission in the world and are a concrete expression of her catholicity. In our time we are observing the growth of an erroneous, Godless humanism, and we note with deep sorrow the conflicts that are staining the world with blood. The Church is called especially in this situation to be a sign and an instrument of unity and reconciliation between God and humankind (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). The Decree on Ecumenism was one of the practical ways in which the Church responded to this situation, taking heed of the Spirit of the Lord who teaches people to interpret carefully the signs of the times (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 3). Our epoch has a deep yearning for peace. The Church, a credible sign and instrument of Christ's peace, must always endeavour to overcome the divisions between Christians and thereby become increasingly a witness of the peace that Christ offers to the world. How is it possible in this sad situation not to remember the Apostle's moving words: "I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4: 1-3)?⁴ The many ecumenical meetings at all ecclesial levels, the theological dialogues and the rediscovery of common witnesses to the faith have strengthened, deepened and enriched the communion with other Christians which to a certain extent already exists, even if it is not yet full. We no longer consider other Christians as distant or strangers but see them as brothers and sisters. "The 'universal brotherhood' of Christians has become a firm ecumenical conviction.... Christians have been converted to a fraternal charity which embraces all Christ's disciples" (*Ut Unum Sint*, n. 42). We are grateful to God to see that in recent years many of the faithful across the world have been moved by an ardent desire for the unity of all Christians. I warmly thank those who have made themselves instruments of the Spirit and have worked and prayed for this process of rapprochement and reconciliation. However, we have not yet reached the goal of our ecumenical journey: full and visible communion in the same faith, the same sacraments and the same apostolic ministry. Thanks be to God, a certain number of differences and misunderstandings have been overcome, but many stumbling blocks still stand in our way. Sometimes it is not only misunderstandings and prejudices that persist, but also deplorable slowness and closed-heartedness (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 48), and above all, differences in faith that focus mainly on such topics as the Church, her nature and her ministries. Unfortunately, we have run up against new problems that hinder our common witness, especially in the area of ethics where further differences are surfacing.⁵ I know well, as I explained in the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (cf. n. 43-46), that our being prevented by all these reasons from immediately taking part in the sacrament of unity, sharing the Eucharistic Bread and drinking from the common Cup at the table of the Lord, causes much suffering and disappointment. None of this should lead to resignation; indeed, on the contrary, it must spur us to continue and to persevere in praying and working for unity. Even if in all probability the path that lies ahead is still long and arduous, it will be full of joy and hope. Indeed, every day we discover and experience the action and dynamism of the Spirit of God, whom we rejoice to see at work also in the Churches and Ecclesial Communities that are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. Let us recognize "the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4). Rather than complaining about what is not yet possible, we must be grateful for and cheered by what already exists and is possible. Doing what we can do now will cause us to grow in unity and will fire us with enthusiasm to overcome the difficulties. A Christian can never give up hope, lose heart or be drained

of enthusiasm. The unity of the one Church that already subsists in the Catholic Church and can never be lost is our guarantee that the full unity of all Christians will also one day be a reality (cf. *ibid.*, n. 4).⁶ How should we imagine the future of ecumenism? First of all, we must strengthen the foundations of ecumenical activity, that is, our common faith in all that is expressed in baptismal profession, in the Apostolic Creed and in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. These doctrinal foundations express the faith professed by the Church since the time of the Apostles. Then, on the basis of this faith we must develop the concept and *spirituality of communion*. "The communion of saints" and full communion do not mean abstract uniformity but a wealth of legitimate diversities in gifts shared and recognized by all, according to the well-known proverb: "*in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*".⁷ A *spirituality of communion* also means an ability to think of our Christian brothers or sisters, in the deep unity born from Baptism, "as "those who are a part of me". This makes us able to share... and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43). A *spirituality of communion* "implies also the ability 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". A *spirituality of communion* means, finally, to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6: 2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43). To sum up, therefore, a *spirituality of communion* means travelling together towards unity in the integral profession of faith, in the sacraments and in ecclesiastical ministry (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 14; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 2).⁸ To conclude, I would particularly like to refer to spiritual ecumenism which, according to the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, is the heart and soul of the entire ecumenical movement (cf. n. 8; *Ut Unum Sint*, nn. 15-17; 21-27). I am grateful to you all for having stressed at the conference the central aspect of ecumenism for the future. There is no true ecumenism without inner conversion and the purification of memory, without holiness of life in conformity with the Gospel, and above all, without intense and assiduous prayer that echoes the prayer of Jesus. In this regard, I am pleased to note the development of joint initiatives for prayer and the formation of study groups to share their reciprocal traditions of spirituality (cf. *Ecumenical Directory*, n. 114). We must act as the Apostles did with Mary, the Mother of God, after the Lord's Ascension; they gathered in the Upper Room and prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Acts 1: 12-14). He alone, who is the Spirit of communion and love, can give us the full communion that we so ardently desire. "*Veni creator Spiritus!*". Amen. © Copyright 2004 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana