

LITURGY OF VESPERS
ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL
FOR THE CONCLUSION OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
Patriarchal Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Wednesday, 25 January 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On this day when we celebrate the Conversion of the Apostle Paul, we conclude the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity united in fraternal liturgical assembly. It is meaningful that the Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles coincides with the final day of this important Week, in which we are asking God with particular intensity for the precious gift of unity among all Christians, making ours the invocation that Jesus himself raised to the Father for his disciples: "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17: 21).

The desire for unity on the part of every Christian Community and every individual believer and the power to achieve it is a gift of the Holy Spirit and goes hand in hand with a more profound and radical fidelity to the Gospel (cf. Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 15).

We realize that at the base of the commitment to ecumenism there is the conversion of heart, as the Second Vatican Council clearly affirms: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way" (Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 7).

Deus caritas est (I Jn 4: 8, 16), God is love. The faith of the Church, in its entirety, is founded on this solid rock. In particular, the patient pursuit of full communion among all of Christ's disciples is based upon it: by fixing one's gaze on this truth, summit of divine revelation, it seems possible to overcome divisions and not to be discouraged, even though they continue to be gravely serious.

The Lord Jesus, who broke down the "dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2: 14) with the blood of his Passion, will not fail to grant to those who faithfully invoke him the strength to heal every wound. But it is always necessary to start anew from this point: "*Deus caritas est*".

It is to the theme of love that I wanted to dedicate my first Encyclical, which was published today; this happy coincidence with the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity invites us to consider, even more than our gathering together, the entire ecumenical journey in the light of God's love, of the Love that is God.

If, under the human profile, love manifests itself as an invincible force, what must we, who "*know and believe the love God has for us*" (I Jn 4: 16), say?

True love does not eliminate legitimate differences, but harmonizes them in a superior unity that is not ordered from the *outside* but gives form from *within*, so to speak, to the whole.

As the mystery of communion unites man and woman in that community of love and life known as matrimony, it too forms the Church into a community of love, uniting a multiform wealth of gifts and traditions. The Church of Rome is placed at the service of that unity of love which, according to a saying by St Ignatius of Antioch, "presides in charity" (*Ad Rom* 1, 1).

Before you, dear brothers and sisters, I wish to renew today the entrustment to God of my particular Petrine ministry, invoking upon it the light and power of the Holy Spirit so that it will always encourage fraternal communion among all Christians.

The theme of love profoundly links the two short biblical readings of today's Liturgy of Vespers.

In the first, divine charity is the strength that transforms the life of Saul of Tarsus and makes him the Apostle to the Gentiles. Writing to the Christians at Corinth, St Paul confesses that God's grace worked the extraordinary event of conversion in him: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (I Cor 15: 10).

On the one hand, he feels the weight of having hindered the spread of Christ's message; but on the other, he lives in the joy of having met the Risen Lord and having been enlightened and transformed by his light. He keeps a constant memory of that life-changing event, an event so important for the entire Church that in the Acts of the Apostles reference is made to it three times (cf. Acts 9: 3-9; 22: 6-11; 26: 12-18).

On the road to Damascus, Saul hears the disturbing question: "Why do you persecute me?". Falling to the ground and interiorly troubled, he asked: "Who are you, Lord?", receiving that answer which is the basis of his conversion: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9: 4-5). Paul understood in an instant what he would later express in his writings: that the Church forms a single body of which Christ is the Head. And so, from a persecutor of Christians he became the Apostle to the Gentiles.

In the Gospel passage of Matthew that we heard a little while ago, love acts as the principle that unites Christians and guarantees that their unanimous prayer is heard by the Heavenly Father. Jesus says: "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18: 19).

The word that the Evangelist uses for "agree" is *synphonesosin*: there is reference made to a "symphony" of hearts. This he took from the heart of God. Agreement in prayer is therefore important as it is welcomed by the Heavenly Father.

Asking together already marks a step towards unity between those who ask. This certainly does not mean that God's answer is in some way determined by our request. We know well: the hoped-for fulfilment of unity depends in the first place on the will of God, whose plan and generosity surpass the understanding of man and his own requests and expectations.

Relying precisely on divine goodness, let us intensify our common prayer for unity, which is more than ever a necessary and very effective means, as John Paul II reminded us in the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*: "Along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to common prayer, the prayerful union of those who gather together around Christ himself" (n. 22).

Analyzing these passages in greater depth, we understand better the reason why the Father responds positively to the request of the Christian Community: "For", Jesus says, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

It is the presence of Christ that makes the common prayer of those gathered in his Name effective. When Christians gather to pray together, Jesus himself is in their midst. They are one with Christ, who is the only mediator between God and man.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy refers precisely to this Gospel passage to indicate one of the ways that Christ is present: "He is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them' (Mt 18: 20)" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7).

Commenting on this text of the Evangelist Matthew, St John Chrysostom asks: "Well then, are there not two or three who gather in his name? There are", he responds, "but rarely" (*Homily on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 60, 3).

This evening I experience an immense joy in seeing such a large and prayerful assembly that implores the gift of unity in harmony.

To each and all I extend my cordial greeting. I greet with particular affection the brothers of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities of this City, united in the one Baptism that makes us members of the one Mystical Body of Christ.

Forty years have passed since, in this very Basilica on 5 December 1965, the Servant of God Paul VI, of happy memory, celebrated the first common prayer at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council with the solemn presence of the Council Fathers and the active participation of the Observers of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

Following this, beloved John Paul II persevered in the tradition of closing the Week of Prayer here. I am certain that this evening both of them are looking down from Heaven and joining in our prayer.

Among those who are taking in this assembly I would especially like to greet and thank the group of Delegates from Churches, Episcopal Conferences, Christian Communities and

Ecumenical Organizations that are beginning to prepare for the Third European Ecumenical Assembly to be held in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2007 on the theme: *"The light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe"*.

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, we Christians have the duty to be, in Europe and among all peoples, the "light of the world" (Mt 5: 14). May God grant us a quick arrival at the hoped-for full communion.

The reformation of our unity will make evangelization more effective. Unity is our common mission; it is the condition that enables the light of Christ to be spread better in every corner of the world, so that men and women convert and are saved.

The road stretches before us! And yet, we must not lose trust; instead, with greater vigour we must once more continue our journey together. Christ walks before us and accompanies us. We count on his unfailing presence and humbly and tirelessly implore from him the precious gift of unity and peace.