

**LITURGY OF VESPERS
FOR THE CONCLUSION OF
THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Feast of the Conversion of St Paul
Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Tuesday, 25 January 2011

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the example of Jesus who on the eve of his Passion prayed the Father for his disciples “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21), Christians continue ceaselessly to invoke the gift of unity from God. Their request becomes more intense during the Week of Prayer, which ends today, when the Churches and Ecclesial Communities meditate and pray together for the unity of all Christians.

This year the theme offered for our meditation was suggested by the Christian Communities of Jerusalem, to which I would like to express my deep gratitude, together with the assurance of affection and prayers, on my part and on the part of the whole Church.

The Christians of the Holy City are asking us to renew and strengthen our commitment to the re-establishment of full unity, by meditating on the model of life of Christ’s first disciples, gathered in Jerusalem. “They,” we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

This is the portrait of the first community which came into being in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost itself, inspired by the preaching that the Apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed to all who had come to the Holy City for the feast. It was not a community closed in on itself but rather, catholic and universal since its birth, able to embrace peoples of different languages and cultures as the Book of the Acts of the Apostles itself attests.

It was not a community founded on an agreement between its members nor on merely sharing a project or an ideal but rather was founded on deep communion with God who revealed himself in his Son, in the encounter with Christ, dead and Risen.

In the brief synthesis which concludes the chapter that began with the account of the Holy Spirit’s descent on the Day of Pentecost, the Evangelist Luke sums up the life of this first community: when they had listened to the words preached by Peter and had been baptized, they listened to the word of God passed on by the Apostles; they willingly stayed together, taking on the necessary services and freely and generously sharing their material possessions; they celebrated the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the

mystery of his death and Resurrection, in the Eucharist, repeating his gesture of the breaking of the bread; they praised the Lord and gave him thanks constantly, calling on him for help in difficulty.

However, this description is not simply a memory of the past nor is it an example held up to imitate or an ideal objective to achieve. Rather, it is an affirmation of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. It is an attestation, full of truth, that by uniting all things in Christ the Holy Spirit is the principle of unity of the Church and makes believers one.

The Apostles' teaching, brotherly communion, the breaking of the bread and prayers are the practical forms of the life of Jerusalem's first Christian community, gathered together by the action of the Holy Spirit, but at the same time constitute the essential features of all Christian communities, of every epoch and of every place. In other words we could say that they also represent the fundamental dimensions of unity of the visible Body of the Church.

We must be grateful because in recent decades the ecumenical movement, "fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1), has taken significant steps forward, which have made it possible to reach an encouraging convergence and consensus on various points, developing relations of esteem and reciprocal respect between the Churches and the ecclesial Communities, as well as practical collaboration in facing the challenges of the contemporary world.

However we know well that we are still far from that unity for which Christ prayed and which we find reflected in that portrait of the first community of Jerusalem.

The unity to which Christ, through his Spirit, calls the Church is not only brought about at the level of organizational structures but at a far deeper level, acquires the form of unity expressed "in the confession of one faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God" (*ibid.*, n. 2).

The search for the re-establishment of unity among the divided Christians cannot therefore be reduced to recognition of the reciprocal differences and the achievement of a peaceful coexistence: what we yearn for is that unity for which Christ himself prayed and which, by its nature is expressed in the communion of faith, of the sacraments, of the ministry.

The journey towards this unity must be perceived as a moral imperative, the answer to a precise call of the Lord. For this reason it is necessary not to give in to the temptation of resignation or pessimism, which is lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is our duty to continue enthusiastically on our way towards this goal with a strict and serious dialogue in order to deepen the common theological, liturgical and spiritual patrimony; with reciprocal knowledge, with the ecumenical formation of the new generations and, especially, with conversion of heart and with prayer.

Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council declared, this "holy objective — the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ — transcends human powers and gifts. It therefore places its hope entirely in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*, n. 24).

The Apostle Paul goes with us and supports us on this journey in search of full and visible unity among all Christians. Today we are solemnly celebrating the Feast of his Conversion. Before the Risen One appeared to him on the road to Damascus saying to him: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!" (Acts 9:5), Saul was one of relentless adversaries of the early Christian communities. The Evangelist Luke describes Saul as one of those who approved the killing of Stephen in the days when a violent persecution broke out against the Christians of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8:1).

Saul departed from the Holy City to spread the persecution of Christians as far as Syria, and, after his conversion returned there to be introduced to the Apostles by Barnabas, who made himself the guarantor of the authenticity of his encounter with the Lord. From that time Paul was not only admitted to the Church as a member, but also as a preacher of the Gospel together with the other Apostles since, like them, the Risen Lord had appeared to him and he had received the special call to be "a chosen instrument" in order to carry his Name to the peoples (cf. Acts 9:15).

On his long missionary voyages, Paul, wandering as a pilgrim through different cities and regions, never forgot his bond of communion with the Church of Jerusalem.

The collection for the Christians of that community who were very soon in need of help (cf. 1 Cor 16:1), occupied an important place in the concerns of Paul who considered it not only a work of charity but the sign and guarantee of unity and communion among the Churches he had founded and the primitive Community of the Holy City, a sign of the unity of the one Church of Christ.

In this intensely prayerful atmosphere I would like to address my cordial welcome to everyone present: to Cardinal Francesco Monterisi, Archpriest of this Basilica, to Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and to the other Cardinals; to my Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, to the Abbot and to the Benedictine monks of this ancient community, to the men and women religious and to the lay people who represent the entire diocesan community of Rome.

I wish to greet the Brothers and Sisters of the other Churches and ecclesial Communities represented here this evening in a special way. Among them it gives me special pleasure to address my greeting to the members of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, whose meeting is being held here in Rome in these days. Let us entrust the success of your meeting to the Lord, so that it may be a step ahead towards the unity so deeply longed for.

I would like to offer a special greeting to the representatives of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Germany who have come to Rome led by the Evangelical-Lutheran Bishop of Bavaria.

Dear brothers and sisters, trusting in the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, let us therefore invoke the gift of unity. United with Mary, who was present with the Apostles in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, let us turn to God, Source of every gift, so that the miracle of Pentecost may be renewed for us today and, guided by the Holy Spirit, all Christians may re-establish full unity in Christ. Amen.