



The Holy See

LITURGY OF VESPERS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Church of Sts Andrew and Gregory on the Caelian Hill in Rome

Thursday, 5 December 1996

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3).

1. It is in this same spirit of profound thanksgiving that we are gathered for this evening prayer. For me this is a particularly happy moment, also because we are meeting in the very place from which Pope Gregory the Great sent the monk Augustine and his companions to Britain. Many centuries separate us from that event, centuries during which the Gospel seed sown in your land has put down solid roots and produced a rich harvest. Pope St Gregory the Great and St Augustine of Canterbury are both held in great veneration by Anglicans and Catholics alike. As I did seven years ago when meeting Archbishop Runcie in this same place, I invoke their intercession upon this gathering, for they were men who held dearly to the bond of unity between Christian England and the See of Rome.

In greeting Your Grace this evening, I cordially thank you for your visit, and I join you and your party in giving thanks for the seed that St Augustine of Canterbury planted in England, and for the manifold fruits which that seed is still producing at the threshold of the Third Millennium.

2. Ecumenical prayer such as this reveals *the reality of our brotherhood in Christ*, and impels us to entrust to his merciful love the future of our unity, the strengthening of the bonds which already unite us (cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 26). When we pray together, we do so with the longing "that there may be one visible Church of God, a Church truly universal and sent forth to the whole

world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1). In shared prayer we stand before our one Father, acknowledging and giving thanks for *our real though not yet full communion*. We become more aware of how much unites us, and we gain the courage to work ever more assiduously to overcome our remaining divisions (cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 22).

The Father's plan is to "unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (cf. Eph. 1:10). The lack of unity among Christians is clearly in contradiction to this divine plan. But by the Father's mercy, the Holy Spirit, especially in this century, has been bringing about a change of heart that has led many Christians to embark on the ecumenical venture, "not merely as individuals but also as members of the corporate groups in which they have heard the Gospel" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1).

The search for Christian unity has not been undertaken just for pragmatic reasons or practical convenience. Quite simply, we know it to be God's will, and we seek to give glory to his name by our obedience.

3. Thirty years ago, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, moved by the Holy Spirit, set out with determination along the path that would lead to the restoration of unity. It is a journey that is proving more difficult than was expected at its beginning. Sadly, we are faced with disagreements which have arisen since we entered into dialogue, including disagreement about conferring priestly ordination on women. This question puts into clear relief the need to reach an understanding of how the Church authoritatively discerns the teaching and practice which constitute the apostolic faith entrusted to us.

Moreover, if Christians cannot agree over the claims which the Gospel makes on their lives, far from giving common witness, they may actually contribute to society's moral confusion and loss of bearings. The recent statement of ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*, is a timely encouragement to Anglicans and Catholics to engage in further *theological reflection about the moral life*, so as to resolve existing divergences and ensure that new areas of divergence do not arise, and in order to establish a firmer basis for joint witness before the many moral dilemmas facing men and women today.

Ever since the time, 18 years ago, when Divine Providence entrusted me with the particular responsibility to be, in the words of Pope St Gregory, *servus servorum Dei*, I have been conscious that for many other Christians the ministry of Peter constitutes a difficulty, still overshadowed by painful memories. In my Encyclical Letter "*Ut Unum Sint*", I have appealed for a patient and fraternal dialogue on the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 88, 95-96). So I pray this evening, in the Church of St Gregory, for a hastening of the day when, without renouncing in any way what is essential to this ministry in accordance with Christ's will, we may together discover the forms in which it will be accepted by all Christians as a service of love.

4. Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is significant that our meeting is taking place during Advent. This holy season quickens our expectation of the Lord's coming in glory. We are a people whose gaze is ever drawn to the future and who look forward with confidence to the advent of our Saviour. In the words of St Paul, "we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:25). While we wait we must work to recover the unity that has been weakened and damaged down the centuries. For this reason we are praying here this evening that on the Day of Judgement the Lord will acknowledge our sincere efforts to restore that unity among his followers for which he prayed on the night before he died for us (cf. Jn. 17:21). We ask that the dawn of the Third Christian Millennium will find us, if not fully united, at least less divided, closer to each other, more faithful to the words of Christ's priestly prayer: *ut unum sint*.

May the Father of all mercies hear and answer the pleas which we Anglicans and Catholics are making to him in this holy place. Let us entrust our hopes to "him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. *To him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus; to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen*" (Eph. 3:20-21).

© Copyright 1996 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana