



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 23 January 2008*

### ***Week of Prayer for Christian Unity***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which will be ending this Friday, 25 January, the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul. In these days, Christians of various Churches and Ecclesial Communities are joining in a unanimous chorus of entreaty to ask the Lord Jesus to re-establish full unity among all his disciples. It is a plea made with one accord by one soul and one heart in response to the desire of the Redeemer himself, who prayed to the Father at the Last Supper with these words: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, 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: 20-21). In asking for the grace of unity Christians join in Christ's own prayer and engage to work actively so that all humanity may accept and recognize him as the one Pastor and one Lord, and thus experience the joy of his love.

This year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity acquires special value and significance because it is celebrating its 100th anniversary. Indeed, when it was introduced, it proved a truly fruitful intuition. Fr Paul Wattson was an American Anglican who later entered the communion of the Catholic Church and founded the *Society of the Atonement* (Community of Brothers and Sisters of the Atonement); in 1908, with another Episcopalian, Fr Spencer Jones, he launched the prophetic idea of an octave of prayer for Christian unity. The idea found favour with the Archbishop of New York and with the Apostolic Nuncio. Later, in 1916, the appeal to pray for unity was extended to

the entire Catholic Church, thanks to the intervention of my venerable Predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, with the Brief *Romanorum Pontificum*. The initiative, which had given rise to much interest in the meantime, gradually continued to put down roots and, with time, increasingly perfected its structure. Its celebration developed thanks to Abbé Couturier's contribution (1936). Then, when the prophetic wind of the Second Vatican Council began to blow, the urgent need for unity was felt even more deeply. The patient journey of the search for full communion between all Christians continued after the Council; it was a patient ecumenical journey which from one year to the next found the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to be precisely one of its most appropriate and fruitful events. A hundred years after the first appeal to pray together for unity, this Week of Prayer has now become a solid tradition which preserves the spirit and dates chosen at the outset by Fr Wattson. Indeed, he chose them for their symbolic character. In the calendar at that time, the Feast of the Chair of St Peter, who is the firm foundation and sure guarantee of the unity of the entire People of God, was celebrated on 18 January, while on 25 January, then as today, the liturgy celebrates the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul. As we thank the Lord for these 100 years of prayer and common commitment among so many disciples of Christ, let us remember with gratitude Fr Wattson, the initiator of this providential spiritual initiative, and with him, those who promoted and enriched it with their contributions and made it the common patrimony of all Christians.

I mentioned just now that the Second Vatican Council paid great attention to the topic of Christian unity, especially in the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), in which, among other things, the role and importance of prayer for unity is forcefully emphasized. Prayer, the Council observed, is at the very heart of the entire ecumenical process. "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8). Thanks precisely to this spiritual ecumenism - holiness of life, conversion of heart, private and public prayer - the common search for unity has in recent decades recorded considerable development. This has been diversified in multiple initiatives: from mutual knowledge to brotherly contact between the members of different Churches and Ecclesial Communities, from ever more friendly conversations to collaboration in various fields, from theological dialogue to the search for concrete forms of communion and collaboration. What has enlivened and continues to enliven this journey towards the full communion of all Christians is first and foremost prayer. "Pray without ceasing" (I Thes 5: 17) is the theme of the Week this year; at the same time, it is an invitation that never ceases to ring out in our communities to make prayer the light, strength and orientation of our footsteps, in an attitude of humble and docile listening to our common Lord.

Secondly, the Council places the emphasis on prayer in common, prayer raised jointly to the one Heavenly Father by Catholics and by other Christians. The *Decree on Ecumenism* says in this regard: "Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8). And this is because, in praying together, Christian communities place themselves before the Lord and, becoming aware of the contradictions to

which division has given rise, manifest their desire to obey the Lord's will with trusting recourse to his almighty assistance. The Decree then adds that such prayers "are a genuine expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to their separated (*seiuncti*) brethren" (*ibid.*). Prayer in common is not, therefore, a voluntaristic or purely sociological act, but rather an expression of faith that unites all Christ's disciples. In the course of the years, fertile collaboration has been established in this field, and since 1968, the then Secretariat for Christian Unity, which subsequently became the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the World Council of Churches prepare jointly these booklets for the Week of Prayer for Unity; they then distribute them throughout the world, covering areas that they never would have managed to reach on their own.

The [conciliar Decree on Ecumenism](#) refers to prayer for unity when, at the very end, it states that the Council realizes that "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" ([n. 24](#)). It is the consciousness of our human limitations that impels us to trusting abandonment in the hands of the Lord. Clearly, the profound meaning of this Week of Prayer is precisely that of relying entirely on the prayer of Christ, who continues to pray in his Church that "they may all be one... so that the world may believe..." (Jn 17: 21). Today, we feel the weight of these words strongly. The world is suffering from the absence of God, from inaccessibility to God; it longs to know God's Face. But how could and can people today recognize this Face of God in the Face of Jesus Christ if we Christians are separated, if one contradicts the other, if one is against the other? Only in unity can we truly show to this world - which needs it - God's Face, Christ's Face. It is also obvious that it is not with our own policies, with dialogue and all that we do - which is nevertheless so necessary - that we shall be able to obtain this unity. What we can obtain is our willingness and ability to welcome this unity when the Lord gives it to us. This is the meaning of prayer: to open our hearts, to create within us this willingness that paves the way to Christ. In the liturgy of the ancient Church, after the homily the Bishop or the one who presided at the celebration, the principal celebrant, would say: "*Conversi ad Dominum*". Then he and everyone would rise and turn to the East. They all wanted to look towards Christ. Only if we are converted, only in this conversion to Christ, in this common gaze at Christ, will we be able to find the gift of unity.

We can say that it was the prayer for unity which enlivened and accompanied the various stages of the ecumenical movement, especially after the [Second Vatican Council](#). In this period, the Catholic Church came into contact with the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities of East and West with different forms of dialogue, and with each one tackled the theological and historical problems that had emerged down the centuries and had taken root as elements of separation. The Lord has ensured that these friendly relations have improved our reciprocal knowledge and intensified communion, while at the same time sharpening the perception of the problems that are still open-ended and foment division. Today, during this Week, let us thank God who has sustained and illuminated us on the journey we have made thus far, a fruitful journey which the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism described as "fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit" and which

"increases from day to day" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us accept the invitation to "pray without ceasing", which the Apostle Paul addressed to the first Christians of Thessalonica, a community which he himself had founded.

And precisely because he heard that disagreements had arisen, he counselled them to be patient with everyone, abstain from returning evil for evil and on the contrary to always seek good among themselves and with everyone, joyful in every circumstance, joyful because the Lord is near. The advice that St Paul gave to the Thessalonians can still inspire the behaviour of Christians in the context of ecumenical relations today. Above all he said: "Be at peace among yourselves", and then, "pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances" (I Thes 5: 13, 18). Let us also accept the Apostle's pressing exhortation, both to thank the Lord for the progress achieved and to implore full unity. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, obtain for all disciples of her divine Son that they may be able to live in peace and reciprocal charity as soon as possible, so as to bear a convincing witness of reconciliation before the whole world, in order to make accessible the Face of God in the Face of Christ, who is God-with-us, the God of peace and unity.

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I extend a cordial welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's audience, including students and staff from Saint Mary's High School in Sydney, and members of a delegation from the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders. May God bestow abundant blessings upon all of you!

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