



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 20 January 2010*

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an ecumenical initiative which has now been making progress for more than a century. Every year it focuses attention on the theme of the visible unity of Christians, which involves the consciences and stimulates the commitment of all who believe in Christ. And it does so first of all with the invitation to pray, in imitation of Jesus who asks the Father on his disciples' behalf: "That they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21). The persistent call to prayer for full communion between the followers of the Lord expresses the most genuine and profound approach of the whole ecumenical search because, in the first place, unity is a gift of God. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council states: "this holy objective the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human powers" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 24). Hence, confident and harmonious prayer to the Lord is necessary, in addition to our effort to develop brotherly relations and to promote dialogue to clarify and to solve the divergences that separate the Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

This year's theme is taken from Luke's Gospel, from the last words of the Risen One to his disciples: "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24: 48). The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in agreement with the *Faith and Constitution Commission* of the *World Council of*

Churches asked a Scottish ecumenical group to propose the theme. A century ago the World Missionary Conference: *To Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World*, was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, from 13 to 24 June 1910. Among the problems discussed then was that of the practical difficulty of proposing in a credible way to the non-Christian world the Gospel proclamation by Christians who were divided among themselves. If Christians present themselves divided, or indeed often at odds, to a world that does not know Christ, that has distanced itself from him or that has shown itself to be indifferent to the Gospel, will the proclamation of Christ as the one Saviour of the world and our peace be credible? From that time the relationship between unity and mission has represented an essential dimension of all ecumenical action, as well as its starting point. And it is because of this specific contribution that the Edinburgh Conference remains a reference point for modern ecumenism. At the [Second Vatican Council](#), the Catholic Church took up and vigorously reaffirmed this aim, asserting that the division among Jesus' disciples not only "openly contradicts the will of Christ, but scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature" ([Unitatis Redintegratio](#), n. 1).

The theme proposed in this Week for meditation and prayer fits into this theological and spiritual context: the need for a common testimony to Christ. The brief text proposed as a theme, "You are witnesses of these things", must be interpreted in the context of the whole of chapter 24 of the Gospel according to Luke. Let us briefly recall the content of this chapter. First the women go to the tomb, they see the signs of Jesus' Resurrection and tell the Apostles and the other disciples what they have seen (v. 8); then the Risen One himself appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he appears to Simon Peter and subsequently to the "Eleven gathered together and those who were with them" (v. 33). He opens their minds to understand the Scriptures about his redeeming death and his Resurrection, saying that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations" (v. 47). To the disciples who were "gathered" together and who were witnesses of his mission, the Risen Lord promised the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 49), so that together they might bear witness to him to all the peoples. For us, from this imperative, "of all these things", of which you are witnesses (cf. Lk 24: 48) the theme of this Week for Christian Unity two questions arise. The first is: what are "all these things"? The second: how can we be witnesses of "all these things"?

If we look at the context of the chapter "all these things", means first and foremost the Cross and the Resurrection: the disciples have seen the Lord's crucifixion, they see the Risen One and thus begin to understand all the Scriptures that speak of the mystery of the Passion and the gift of the Resurrection. "All these things", therefore, refers to the mystery of Christ, to the Son of God made man, who died for us and rose, who lives for ever and thus guarantees our eternal life. However, by knowing Christ this is the essential point we know the Face of God. Christ is above all the revelation of God. In all epochs human beings have perceived the existence of God, one God, but a God who is distant and does not show himself. In Christ this God shows himself, the distant God becomes close. "All these things", therefore, especially with the mystery of Christ, God made

himself close to us. This implies another dimension: Christ is never alone; he came among us, he died alone but was raised to draw us all to him. Christ, as Scripture says, created a body for himself, he gathered all humanity in his reality of immortal life. Thus, in Christ who reunites humanity, we know humanity's future: eternal life.

All this, therefore, is very simple, in the last instance: we know God by knowing Christ, his Body, the Mystery of the Church and the promise of eternal life. We now come to the second question. How can we be witnesses of "all these things"? We can only be witnesses by knowing Christ, and in knowing Christ, also knowing God. However, knowing Christ implies, of course, an intellectual dimension learning what we know of Christ but it is always much more than an intellectual process: it is an existential process, a process of the opening of my ego, of my transformation by the presence and power of Christ. Thus it is also a process of openness to all the others who must be the Body of Christ. In this way, it is obvious that knowing Christ, as an intellectual and, especially, an existential process, is a process that makes us witnesses. In other words, we can only be witnesses if we know Christ personally and not solely through others from our own lives and from our own personal encounter with Christ. In truly meeting him in our life of faith we become witnesses and thus can contribute to the newness of the world, to eternal life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also gives us a clue to the content of "all these things". The Church has gathered together and summed up the essential of all that the Lord gave us in the Revelation in the "*Niceno-Constantinopolitan or Nicene Creed*", which "draws its great authority from the fact that it stems from the first two ecumenical Councils (in 325 and 381)" (n. 195). The Catechism explains that this Creed "remains common to all the great Churches of both East and West to this day" (*ibid.*). Consequently in this Creed the truths of faith are found that Christians can profess and witness to together, so that the world may believe, expressing, with their desire and commitment to overcome the existing divergences, the will to walk together towards full communion, the unity of the Body of Christ.

The celebration of the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#) brings us to consider other important aspects for ecumenism and first of all the great progress achieved in the relations between Churches and Ecclesial Communities since the Edinburgh Conference more than a century ago. The modern ecumenical movement has developed so significantly that over the past century it has become an important element in the life of the Church, recalling the problem of unity among all Christians and sustaining the growth of communion between them. Not only does it encourage fraternal relations between the Churches and Ecclesial Communities in response to the commandment of love, but it also encourages theological research. In addition, it involves the practical life of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities with topics that touch on pastoral and sacramental life, such as, for example, the mutual recognition of Baptism, questions concerning mixed marriages, the partial cases of *comunicatio in sacris* in specific, well-defined situations. Following the trajectory of this ecumenical spirit, contacts have continued to broaden so as to include Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic movements for greater reciprocal knowledge, despite the many serious problems in this sector.

Since the [Second Vatican Council](#) and thereafter the Catholic Church has entered into fraternal relations with all the Churches of the East and with the Ecclesial Communities of the West, in particular by organizing bilateral theological dialogues with most of them. These have led to finding convergences or even consensus on various points, thereby deepening the bonds of communion. In the year that has just ended the groups in dialogue have recorded some positive steps. At the 11th Plenary Session that was held in Paphos, Cyprus, in October 2009, the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue with the Orthodox Churches embarked on the examination of a crucial topic in the Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox: *The Role of the Bishop of Rome in the Communion of the Church in the First Millennium*, that is, during the time in which the Christians of East and West lived in full communion. This study will later be extended to the second millennium. I have several times asked Catholics to pray for this delicate and essential dialogue for the whole ecumenical movement. The same Joint Commission also met from 26 to 30 January last year with the Ancient Orthodox Churches of the East (Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, Armenian). These important initiatives testify that a profound dialogue full of hope is continuing with all the Churches of the East which are not in full communion with Rome, in their own specificity.

In the course of the past year, the results achieved by the various dialogues that have taken place in the past 40 years with the Western Ecclesial Communities were examined. Special thought was given to those with the Anglican Communion, with the Lutheran World Federation, with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and with the World Methodist Council. In this regard the [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity](#) made a survey to list the points of convergence which have been reached in the relative bilateral dialogues and at the same time to point out the problems that remain open on which it will be necessary to start a new phase of discussions.

Among the recent events I would like to mention the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#), celebrated by Catholics and Lutherans together on 31 October 2009 to encourage the pursuit of the dialogue, as well as the visit to Rome of Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, who also had meetings about the specific situation of the Anglican Communion at the present time. The common commitment to continue relations and dialogue are a positive sign that show the strong desire for unity despite all the problems that stand in its way. Thus we see that a dimension of our responsibility exists in doing everything possible to attain real unity, but there is the other dimension, that of divine action, because God alone can give unity to the Church. A "self-made" unity would be human but we want the Church of God, made by God, who will create unity when he wishes and when we are ready. We must also bear in mind how much real progress has been achieved in collaboration and brotherhood in all these years, in the past 50 years. At the same we must realize that ecumenical work is not a linear process. Indeed, old problems that arose in the context of another epoch lose their relevance while in today's context new problems and new difficulties arise. We must therefore always be open to a process of purification, in which the Lord will make us capable of being united.

Dear brothers and sisters, I ask everyone to pray for the complex ecumenical reality, for the promotion of dialogue, as well as in order that the Christians of our time may give a new common witness of faithfulness to Christ in the eyes of this world of ours, May the Lord hear our invocation and that of all Christians which we are raising to him with special intensity during this Week.

To special groups:

I extend warm greetings to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, especially to the groups from Sweden, South Korea and the United States of America. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity it is a particular joy to welcome the members of the *Continuation Committee of Ecumenism in the Twenty-first Century*. Upon all of you and your families I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

© Copyright 2010 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana