



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 19 January 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

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

*Dear Brothers and Faithful,*

We are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in which all believers in Christ are asked to unite in prayer in order to witness to the deep bond that exists between them and to invoke the gift of full communion.

It is providential that in the process of building unity prayer is made central. This reminds us once again that unity cannot be a mere product of human endeavour; it is first and foremost a gift of God which entails growth in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Second Vatican Council says: “Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which still bond Catholics to their separated brethren. ‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Mt 18:20)” (Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8).

The path that leads to the visible unity of all Christians lies in prayer, because, fundamentally, it is not we who “build” unity but God who “builds” it, it comes from him, from the Trinitarian Mystery, from the unity of the Father with the Son in the dialogue of love, which is the Holy Spirit; and our ecumenical commitment must be open to divine action, it must become a daily invocation for

God's help. The Church is his and not ours.

The theme chosen for this Year's Week of Prayer refers to the experience of the first Christian Community in Jerusalem, as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles; we have listened to the text: "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

We must consider that in the past, at the very moment of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon people of different languages and cultures. This means that from the very first the Church has embraced people from different backgrounds and yet, it is that the Spirit creates one body precisely from these differences.

Pentecost, as the beginning of the Church, marks the expansion of God's Covenant to all creatures, all peoples and all epochs, so that the whole of creation may walk towards its true goal: to be a place of unity and love.

In the passage cited from the Acts of the Apostles, four characteristics define the first Christian community of Jerusalem as a place of unity and love. St Luke, moreover, does not only want to describe something from the past. He presents this community to us as a model, as a norm for the Church today, since these four characteristics must always constitute the Church's life.

The first characteristic is its unity, its devotion to listening to the Apostles' teaching, then to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. As I have said, still today these four elements are the pillars that support the life of every Christian community and constitute the one solid foundation on which to progress in the search for the visible unity of the Church.

We first have devotion to the teaching of the Apostles, that is, listening to their testimony to the mission, to the life, and to the death and Resurrection of the Lord. This is what Paul calls simply the "Gospel". The first Christians received the Gospel from the lips of the Apostles, they were united by listening to it and by its proclamation because, as St Paul says, "the Gospel... is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom 1:16).

Still today the community of believers recognizes the reference to the Apostles' teaching as the norm of its own faith. Hence every effort to build unity among all Christians passes through the deepening of our faithfulness to the *depositum fidei* passed on to us by the Apostles. A steadfast faith is the foundation of our communion, it is the foundation of Christian unity.

The second element is fraternal communion. At the time of the first Christian community, as it is in our day too, this is the most tangible expression especially for the external world, of unity among the Lord's disciples. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians had all things in common and those with possessions and goods sold them to share the proceeds with the needy

(cf. Acts 2:44-45).

This sharing of goods has found ever new forms of expression in the history of the Church. Distinctive among these are the brotherly relations and friendships established between Christians of different denominations.

The history of the ecumenical movement is marked by difficulties and uncertainties but it is also a history of brotherhood, of cooperation and of human and spiritual sharing, which has significantly changed relations between believers in the Lord Jesus: we are all working hard to continue on this path.

Thus the second element is thus communion. This is primarily communion with God through faith; but communion with God creates communion among ourselves and is necessarily expressed in that concrete communion of which the Acts of the Apostles speak, in other words sharing.

No one in the Christian community must be hungry or poor: this is a fundamental obligation. Communion with God, expressed as brotherly communion, is lived out in practice in social commitment, in Christian charity and in justice.

The third element: essential in the life of the first community of Jerusalem was the moment of the breaking of the bread in which the Lord makes himself present, with the unique sacrifice of the Cross, in his unreserved gift of self for the life of his friends: “this is my body which will be given up for you... this is the cup of my blood.... It will be shed for you”. “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 1). Communion in Christ’s sacrifice is the crowning point of our union with God and thus also represents the fullness of the unity of Christ’s disciples, full communion.

In this Week of Prayer for Unity our regret about the impossibility of sharing the same Eucharistic banquet — a sign that we are still far from achieving that unity for which Christ prayed — is particularly acute. This sorrowful experience, which also gives our prayers a penitential dimension, must become the reason for an even more generous dedication on the part of all so that, once the obstacles that stand in the way of full communion have been removed, the day will come when we can gather round the table of the Lord to break the Eucharistic bread together and to drink from the same cup.

Lastly, prayer — or as St Luke says prayers — is the fourth characteristic of the early Church of Jerusalem described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Prayer has always been a constant attitude of disciples of Christ, something that accompanies their daily life in obedience to God’s will, as the Apostle Paul’s words in his First Letter to the Thessalonians also attest: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus

for you (1 Thes 5:16-18; *cf.* Eph 6:18).

Christian prayer, participation in Jesus' prayer, is a filial experience par excellence as the words of the "Our Father" testify — the "we" of God's children, brothers and sisters — a family prayer that addresses our common Father. Therefore, adopting an attitude of prayer also means opening ourselves to brotherhood.

Only in the "we" can we say "Our Father"; so let us open ourselves to brotherhood which comes from being children of the one heavenly Father and from being disposed to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Dear brothers and sisters, as disciples of the Lord we have a common responsibility to the world. We must undertake a common service; like the first Christian community of Jerusalem, starting with what we already share, we must bear a powerful witness supported by reason and spiritually founded on the one God who revealed himself and speaks to us in Christ, in order to be heralds of a message that guides and illumines people today, who all too often lack clear and effective reference points.

It is therefore important to increase day by day in reciprocal love, striving to surmount those barriers between Christians that still exist; to feel that real inner unity exists among all those who follow the Lord; to collaborate as closely as possible, working together on the issues that are still unresolved; and above all, to be aware that on this journey we need the Lord's assistance, he will have to give us even more help for, on our own, unless we "abide in him", we can do nothing (*cf.* Jn 15:5).

Dear friends, we are once again gathered in prayer — particularly during this Week — together with all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God: let us persevere in prayer, let us be a people of prayer, entreating God to grant us the gift of unity so that his plan of salvation and reconciliation may be brought about for the whole world. Many thanks.

### **To special groups:**

I now greet the young people, the sick and the newlyweds. Dear friends, I invite you to pray for Christian unity. May all of you who with youthful freshness, with anguished self-giving or with joyful spousal love seek to love the Lord in the daily fulfilment of your duty contribute to the edification of the Church and to her evangelizing activity. Pray, therefore, that all Christians may accept the Lord's call to the unity of faith in his one Church.

I offer a warm welcome to the students and staff of the Bossey Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies. I thank the choir from Finland for their praise of God in song. To all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from Australia, Canada and the United States, I invoke an abundance of joy and peace in the Lord.

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