



# The Holy See

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LITURGY OF VESPERS

ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL

FOR THE CONCLUSION OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

**HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI**

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

Friday, 25 January 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Feast of the Conversion of St Paul brings us once again into the presence of this great Apostle, chosen by God to be a "witness for him to all men" (Acts 22: 15). For Saul of Tarsus, the moment of his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus marked a decisive turning point in his life. His total transformation, a true and proper spiritual conversion, was brought about at that very moment. By divine intervention, the relentless persecutor of God's Church suddenly found himself blind and groping in the dark, but henceforth with a great light in his heart, which was to bring him a little later to be an ardent Apostle of the Gospel. The awareness that divine grace alone could bring about such a conversion never left Paul. When he had already given the best of himself, devoting himself tirelessly to preaching the Gospel, he wrote with renewed fervour: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor 15: 10). Tirelessly, as though the work of the mission depended entirely upon his own efforts, St Paul was nevertheless always motivated by the profound conviction that all his energy came from God's grace at work in him.

The Apostle's words on the relationship between human effort and divine grace resound this evening with a very special meaning. At the end of the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#), we are even more conscious that the task of restoring unity, which demands all our energy and efforts, is infinitely above our own possibilities. Unity with God and our brothers and sisters is a gift that comes from on high, which flows from the communion of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in which it is increased and perfected. It is not in our power to decide when or how this unity will be

fully achieved. Only God can do it! Like St Paul, let us also place our hope and trust "in the grace of God which is with us". Dear brothers and sisters, this is what the prayer that together we are raising to the Lord desires to implore: that it may be he who enlightens and sustains us in our ongoing quest for unity.

And it is here that Paul's exhortation to the Christians of Thessalonica acquires its fullest value: "Pray without ceasing" (I Thes 5: 17), which has been chosen as the theme for the Week of Prayer this year. The Apostle was well acquainted with that community, which had been born from his missionary activity, and nourished great hopes for it. He knew both its merits and its weaknesses. Indeed, there was no lack of behaviour, attitudes and arguments among its members that were likely to create tension and conflict, and Paul intervened to help the community walk in unity and peace. At the end of his Letter, with as it were fatherly goodness, he added a series of very concrete exhortations, inviting Christians to encourage the participation of all, to sustain the weak, to be patient and not to repay evil for evil to anyone but to always seek good, to rejoice and to give thanks on every occasion (cf. I Thes 5: 12-22). Paul puts the imperative "pray without ceasing" in the midst of these exhortations. In fact, the other recommendations would lose their power and coherence were they not sustained by prayer. Unity with God and with others is built first of all through a life of prayer, in the constant search for "the will of God in Christ Jesus for us" (cf. I Thes 5: 18).

The invitation St Paul addressed to the Thessalonians is still timely. In the face of the shortcomings and sins that still prevent the full communion of Christians, each one of these exhortations has retained its relevance, but this is particularly true of the order "pray without ceasing". What would the ecumenical movement become without the personal or communal prayer that "they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (Jn 17: 21)? Where would we find the "extra impetus" of faith, hope and charity, of which our search for unity has a special need today? Our desire for unity must not be limited to isolated occasions; it must become an integral part of our whole prayer life. Men and women formed in the Word of God and in prayer have been artisans of reconciliation and unity in every historical period. It was the way of prayer that opened the path for the ecumenical movement as we know it today. Indeed, from the middle of the 18th century various movements of spiritual renewal came into being, eager to contribute through prayer to the promotion of Christian unity. Groups of Catholics, enlivened by outstanding religious figures, played an active role in such initiatives from the outset. Prayer for unity was also supported by my Venerable Predecessors, such as Pope Leo XIII, who in 1895 was already recommending the introduction of a Novena of Prayer for Christian unity. These endeavours, made in accordance with the possibilities of the Church of that time, intended to put into practice the prayer spoken by Jesus himself in the Upper Room "that they may all be one" (Jn 17: 21). There is thus no genuine ecumenism whose roots are not implanted in prayer.

This year we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the "Church Unity Octave" which subsequently became the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". One hundred years ago, while he

was still an Episcopalian minister, Fr Paul Wattson conceived of an octave of prayer for unity that was celebrated for the first time at Graymoor, New York, from 18 to 25 January 1908. This evening, with great joy I address my greeting to the Minister General and the international delegation of the Franciscan Brothers and Sisters of the *Atonement*, the Congregation founded by Fr Paul Wattson and an advocate of his spiritual legacy. In the 1930s, the Octave of Prayer underwent important adaptations subsequent to the impulse given to it in particular by Fr Paul Couturier of Lyons, another great champion of spiritual ecumenism. His invitation "to pray for the unity of the Church as Christ wills it and in accordance with the means he wills" enables Christians of all traditions to join in one prayer for unity. Let us thank God for the great prayer movement which for 100 years has accompanied and sustained believers in Christ in their quest for unity. The ship of ecumenism would never have put out to sea had she not been lifted by this broad current of prayer and wafted by the breath of the Holy Spirit.

To coincide with the Week of Prayer, many religious and monastic communities have invited and helped their members to "pray without ceasing" for Christian unity. On this occasion for which we have gathered here, let us remember in particular the life and witness of Sr Maria Gabriella of Unity (1914-36), a Trappist Sister of the convent in Grottaferrata (today in Vitorchiano), [Italy]. When her superior, encouraged by Fr Paul Couturier, asked the Sisters to pray and make a gift of themselves for Christian unity, Sr Maria Gabriella became immediately involved and did not hesitate to dedicate her young life to this great cause. This very day is the 25th anniversary of her Beatification by my Predecessor, Pope John Paul II. The event was celebrated in this Basilica precisely on 25 January 1983, during the celebration for the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Unity. In his Homily, the Servant of God emphasized the three elements on which the search for unity is built: conversion, the Cross and prayer. Sr Maria Gabriella's life and witness were also based on these three elements. Today, as in the past, ecumenism stands in great need of the immense "invisible monastery" of which Fr Paul Couturier spoke, of that vast community of Christians of all traditions who quietly pray and offer their lives so that unity may be achieved.

Furthermore, for exactly 40 years Christian communities worldwide have received meditations and prayers for this Week prepared jointly by the World Council of Churches' "Faith and Order" Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This felicitous collaboration has made it possible to broaden the vast circle of prayer and to prepare better its content. This evening I cordially greet the Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, who has come to Rome to join us on the centenary of the Week of Prayer. I am pleased that members of the "Joint Working Group" are present and I greet them with affection. The Joint Group is the means of cooperation between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches in our common search for unity. As I do every year, I also address my fraternal greeting to the Bishops, priests and pastors of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities who have their representatives here in Rome. Your participation in this prayer is a tangible expression of the bonds that unite us in Christ Jesus: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt 18: 20).

The Year dedicated to the Apostle Paul's witness and teaching will be inaugurated in this historic Basilica this 28 June. May his tireless zeal in building the Body of Christ in unity help us to pray without ceasing for the full unity of all Christians. Amen!

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