



The Holy See

LITURGY OF VESPERS
ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL
FOR THE CONCLUSION OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Feast of the Conversion of St Paul
Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Monday, 25 January 2010

(Video)

Images of the celebration

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Gathered together in this fraternal liturgical assembly, on the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, today we conclude the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I greet all of you warmly, in particular Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Archpriest of this Basilica, Archbishop Francesco Monterisi, along with the Abbot and the Community of monks whose guests we are. I also extend my cordial thoughts to the Cardinals here present, to the Bishops and to all who represent the Churches and ecclesial Communities of this City who are here today.

Only a few months have passed since the conclusion of the Year dedicated to St Paul, which gave us an opportunity to deepen our awareness of his extraordinary work as a preacher of the Gospel and also of our call to be missionaries of the Gospel, as the theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity reminds us "*You are witnesses of these things*" (Lk 24: 48). Paul, although he retained an intense memory of his own past as a persecutor of Christians, did not hesitate to call himself an Apostle. For him, the basis of that title lay in his encounter with the Risen One on the road to Damascus, which also became the beginning of his tireless missionary activity. In this he

was to spend every ounce of his energy, proclaiming to all the peoples the Christ whom he had met personally. Thus Paul, from being a persecutor of the Church, was in his turn to become a victim of persecution for the sake of the Gospel to which he witnessed: "Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned.... On frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11: 24-25, 26-28). Paul's witness reached its culmination in his martyrdom when, not so far from here, he was to give proof of his faith in Christ who conquers death.

The dynamic of Paul's experience is clearly expressed in the pages of the Gospel that we have just heard. The disciples of Emmaus, after having recognized the Risen Lord, return to Jerusalem and find the Eleven gathered together with the others. The Risen Christ appears to them, comforts them, overcomes their fear and doubts, and eats with them. Thus he opens their hearts to the intelligence of the Scriptures, recalling what had to happen, which would constitute the nucleus of the Christian proclamation. Jesus affirms: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24: 46-47). These are the events to which the disciples of the first hour were to bear witness, followed by believers in Christ of all times and places. It is important, however, to emphasize that this witness, then just as now, is born from the encounter with the Risen One, is fed by a constant relationship with him and animated by a profound love for him. One can only be his witness if one has had the experience of feeling Christ alive and present "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself" (Lk 24: 39) of sitting at table with him, of listening as he sets one's heart aflame! For this, Jesus promises his disciples and each of us a powerful aid from on high, a new presence, that of the Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen Christ, who guides us to the whole truth: "And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you" (Lk 24: 49). The Eleven were to spend their whole lives proclaiming the Good News of the death and Resurrection of the Lord. Almost all of them were to seal their witness with the blood of martyrdom, a fertile seed that has produced an abundant harvest.

The choice of the theme of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity the invitation, that is, to a common witness of the Risen Christ in accordance with the mandate he entrusted to his disciples is linked to the memory of the 100th anniversary of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference, in Scotland, widely considered a crucial event in the birth of the modern ecumenical movement. In the summer of 1910, in the Scottish capital, over 1,000 missionaries from diverse branches of Protestantism and Anglicanism, who were joined by one Orthodox guest, met to reflect together on the necessity of achieving unity in order to be credible in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is precisely this desire to proclaim Christ to others and to carry his message of reconciliation throughout the world that makes one realize the contradiction posed by division

among Christians. Indeed, how can non-believers accept the Gospel proclamation if Christians even if they all call on the same Christ are divided among themselves? Moreover, as we know, the same Teacher, at the end of the Last Supper, had prayed to the Father for his disciples: "That they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21). The communion and unity of Christ's disciples is therefore a particularly important condition to enhance the credibility and efficacy of their witness.

Now a century after the Edinburgh event, the intuition of those courageous precursors is still very timely. In a world marked by religious indifference, and even by a growing aversion to the Christian faith, it is necessary to discover a new, intense method of evangelization, not only among the peoples who have never known the Gospel but also among those where Christianity has spread and is part of their history. Unfortunately, the issues that separate us from each other are many, and we hope that they can be resolved through prayer and dialogue. There is, however, a core of the Christian message that we can all proclaim together: the fatherhood of God, the victory of Christ over sin and death with his Cross and Resurrection, and faith in the transforming action of the Spirit. While we journey toward full communion, we are called to offer a common witness in the face of the ever increasingly complex challenges of our time, such as secularization and indifference, relativism and hedonism, the delicate ethical issues concerning the beginning and end of life, the limits of science and technology, the dialogue with other religious traditions. There are also other areas in which we must from now on give a common witness: the safeguard of Creation, the promotion of the common good and of peace, the defense of the centrality of the human person, the commitment to overcome the shortcomings of our time, such as hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and the unequal distribution of goods.

The commitment to unity among Christians is not the work of a few only, nor is it an incidental undertaking for the life of the Church. Each one of us is called to make his or her contribution towards the completion of those steps that lead to full communion among the disciples of Christ, without ever forgetting that this unity is above all a gift from God to be constantly invoked. In fact, the force that supports both unity and the mission flows from the fruitful encounter with the Risen One, just as was the case for St Paul on the road to Damascus, and for the Eleven and the other disciples gathered at Jerusalem. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, grant that her Son's desire may be fulfilled as soon as possible: "That they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21).

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