



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY MEETING OF  
THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH**

*Clementine Hall  
Friday, 27 January 2012*

*Your Eminences,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

It is a cause of joy to me to meet with you on the occasion of the Plenary Assembly and to express to you my appreciation of the service you carry out for the Church and, in a special way, for the Successor of Peter in his ministry of strengthening the brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32). I thank Cardinal William Levada for his cordial greeting, in which he recalled several important tasks that the Dicastery has carried out in recent years. And I am particularly grateful to the Congregation which, in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, is preparing for the Year of Faith, seeing it as a favourable moment to repropose to all the gift of faith in the Risen Christ, through the enlightened teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the precious doctrinal synthesis offered by the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

As we know, in vast areas of the earth faith risks being extinguished, like a flame that is no longer fed. We are facing a profound crisis of faith, a loss of the religious sense that constitutes the greatest challenge to the Church today. The renewal of faith must therefore take priority in the commitment of the entire Church in our time. I hope that the Year of Faith will contribute, with the cordial cooperation of all the members of the People of God, to making God present in this world once again and to giving men and women access to the faith to entrust themselves to the God who loved us to the very end (cf. Jn 13:1), in Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen.

The theme of Christian unity is closely linked to this task. I would therefore like to reflect on several doctrinal aspects concerning the ecumenical path of the Church, which has been the object of deep reflection at this Plenary Meeting, which coincides with the conclusion of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In fact, the impetus of the ecumenical endeavour must spring from “spiritual ecumenism”, the “soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8), which is found in the spirit of the prayer that “they may all be one” (Jn 17:21).

The coherence of the ecumenical endeavour with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and with the entire Tradition, has been one of the areas to which the Congregation has always paid attention, in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Today we can note the many good fruit yielded by ecumenical dialogue. However, we must also recognize that the risk of a false irenism and of indifferentism — totally foreign to the thinking of the Second Vatican Council — demands our vigilance.

This indifferentism is caused by the increasingly widespread opinion that truth is not accessible to man; hence it is necessary to limit oneself to finding rules for a praxis that can better the world. And like this, faith becomes substituted by a moralism without deep foundations. The centre of true ecumenism is, on the contrary, the faith in which the human being finds the truth which is revealed in the Word of God. Without faith the entire ecumenical movement would be reduced to a form of “social contract” to which to adhere out of common interest, a “praxeology”, in order to create a better world. The logic of the Second Vatican Council is quite different: the sincere search for the full unity of all Christians is a dynamic inspired by the Word of God, by the divine Truth who speaks to us in this word.

The crucial problem which marks ecumenical dialogue transversally is therefore the question of the structure of revelation — the relationship between Sacred Scripture, the living Tradition in Holy Church and the Ministry of the Successors of the Apostles as a witness of true faith. And in this case the problem of ecclesiology which is part of this problem is implicit: how God’s truth reaches us.

Fundamental here is the discernment between Tradition with a capital “T” and traditions. I do not want to go into detail but merely to make an observation. An important step in this discernment was made in the preparation and application of the provisions for groups of the Anglican Communion who wish to enter into full communion with the Church, in the unity of our common and essential divine Tradition, maintaining their own spiritual, liturgical and pastoral traditions which are in conformity with the Catholic faith (cf. Constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, art. III). Indeed, a spiritual richness exists in the different Christian denominations which is an expression of the one faith and a gift to share and to seek together in the Tradition of the Church.

Today, moreover, one of the fundamental questions is the problem of the methods adopted in the various ecumenical dialogues. These too must reflect the priority of faith. Knowing the truth is a

right of the conversation partner in every true dialogue. It is a requirement of love for one's brother or sister. In this sense, it is necessary to face controversial issues courageously, always in a spirit of brotherhood and in reciprocal respect. It is also important to offer a correct interpretation of that order or "hierarchy" which exists in Catholic doctrine, observed in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (n. 11), which in no way means reducing the deposit of the faith but rather bringing out its internal structure, the organic nature of this unique structure. The study documents produced by the various ecumenical dialogues are very important. These texts cannot be ignored because they are an important, if temporary, fruit of our common reflection developed over the years. Nevertheless their proper significance should be recognized as a contribution offered to the competent Authority of the Church, which alone is called to judge them definitively. To ascribe to these texts a binding or as it were definitive solution to the thorny questions of the dialogues without the proper evaluation of the ecclesial Authority, would ultimately hinder the journey toward full unity in faith.

Finally, I would like to mention one last matter: the moral problem, which is a new challenge to the ecumenical process. In the dialogue we cannot ignore the great moral questions regarding human life, the family, sexuality, bioethics, freedom, justice and peace. It will be important to speak about these topics with one voice, drawing from the foundations in Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church. This Tradition helps us to decipher the language of the Creator in his creation. In defending the fundamental values of the Church's great Tradition, we defend the human being, we defend creation.

At the end of these reflections, my hope is that a close and fraternal collaboration of the Congregation with the competent Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, may effectively further the reestablishment of full unity among all Christians. Indeed, the division among Christians, "openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature" (Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1).

Unity is therefore not only the fruit of faith but also a means and as it were a presupposition for proclaiming the faith ever more credibly to those who do not yet know the Saviour. Jesus prayed: "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 17:21).

As I once again express to you my gratitude for your service, I assure you of my constant spiritual closeness and cordially impart to all of you the Apostolic Blessing. Many Thanks.