The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS
53rd WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Saturday, 25 January 2020

[Multimedia]

Three different groups were on board the ship that brought Saint Paul to Rome as a prisoner. The most powerful group was made up of soldiers under a centurion. Then there were the sailors, upon whom naturally everyone on board depended during the long voyage. Finally, there were the weakest and most vulnerable: the prisoners.

When the ship ran aground off the coast of Malta, after having been at the mercy of a storm for several days, the soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to ensure that no one would escape, but they were stopped by the centurion who wanted to save Paul. Although he was among the most vulnerable, Paul offered something important to his traveling companions. While everyone was losing all hope of survival, the Apostle brought an unexpected message of hope. An angel had reassured him, saying to him: "Do not be afraid, Paul; God has granted safety to all those who sail with you" (*Acts* 27:24). Paul's trust proved to be well founded, and in the end all the travellers were saved. Once they landed at Malta, they experienced the hospitality, kindness and humanity of the island's inhabitants. This important detail provided the theme of the Week of Prayer that concludes today.

Dear brothers and sisters: this account from the Acts of the Apostles also speaks to our ecumenical journey towards that unity which God ardently desires. In the first place, it tells us that those who are weak and vulnerable, those who have little to offer materially but find their wealth in

God, can present valuable messages for the good of all. Let us think of Christian communities: even the smallest and least significant in the eyes of the world, if they experience the Holy Spirit, if they are animated by love for God and neighbour, have a message to offer to the whole Christian family. Let us think of marginalized and persecuted Christian communities. As in the account of Paul's shipwreck, it is often the weakest who bring the most important message of salvation. This was what pleased God: to save us not with the power of this world, but with the weakness of the cross (cf. *1 Cor* 1:20-25). As disciples of Jesus, we must be careful not to be attracted by worldly logic, but rather to listen to the small and the weak, because God loves to send his messages through those who most resemble his Son made man.

The account in Acts reminds us of a second aspect: God's priority is *the salvation of all*. As the angel said to Paul: "God has granted safety to all those who sail with you". Paul insists on this point. We too need to repeat it: it is our duty to put into effect the paramount desire of God who, as Paul himself writes, "desires everyone to be saved" (*1 Tim* 2:4). This is an invitation not to devote ourselves exclusively to our own communities, but to open ourselves to the good of all, to the universal gaze of God who took flesh in order to embrace the whole human race and who died and rose for the salvation of all. If we, with his grace, can assimilate his way of seeing things, we can overcome our divisions. In Paul's shipwreck, each person contributed to the salvation of all: the centurion made important decisions, the sailors put to use their knowledge and abilities, the Apostle encouraged those without hope. Among Christians as well, each community has a gift to offer to the others. The more we look beyond partisan interests and overcome the legacies of the past in the desire to move forward towards a common landing place, the more readily we will recognize, welcome and share these gifts.

We thus arrive at a third aspect that was at the centre of this Week of Prayer: *hospitality*. In the last chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke says, with regard to the inhabitants of Malta, "The natives showed us unusual kindness" (v. 2). The fire kindled on the shore to warm the shipwrecked travellers is a fine symbol of the human warmth that unexpectedly surrounded them. Even the governor of the island showed himself welcoming and hospitable to Paul, who repaid him by healing his father and later many other sick people (cf. vv. 7-9). Finally, when the Apostle and those with him departed for Italy, the Maltese generously resupplied them with provisions (v. 10).

From this Week of Prayer we want to learn to be more hospitable, in the first place among ourselves as Christians and among our brothers and sisters of different confessions. Hospitality belongs to the tradition of Christian communities and families. Our elders taught us this by their example: there was always something extra on the table of a Christian home for a passing friend or a person in need who knocked on the door. In monasteries a guest is treated with great respect, as if he or she were Christ. Let us not lose, indeed let us revive, these customs that have the flavour of the Gospel!

Dear brothers and sisters, with these thoughts I offer my cordial and fraternal greetings to His

Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to His Grace Ian Ernest, the personal representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to all the representatives of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here to conclude together the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I greet the students of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, who are visiting Rome to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic Church. I welcome too the young people of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches who are studying on a scholarship from the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with the Orthodox Churches, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, to whose members I extend my greetings and gratitude. Together, without ever tiring, let us continue to pray and to beg from God the gift of full unity among ourselves.