



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS 57th WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

Thursday, 25 January 2024

[Multimedia]

In the Gospel we have just heard, a lawyer calls Jesus “Teacher”. He does not want to learn anything from Jesus, but rather “to test him”. Even greater insincerity is evident in the question he asks: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 10:25). To do in order to inherit, to do in order to possess: these are the signs of a distorted religiosity based on getting rather than giving, in which God becomes a means to obtaining what I want, rather than an end to be loved with all our heart. Yet Jesus is patient; he asks the lawyer to find the answer in the Law itself, which commands: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10:27).

Then that man, seeking to justify himself, asks a second question: “And who is my neighbour?” (Lk 10:29). If the first question risked reducing God to our own needs, this question attempts to divide: to separate people into those we should love and those we should shun. This kind of division is never from God; it is from the devil, who divides. Jesus does not answer in the abstract, but tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, a pointed story that challenges us as well. Because, dear brothers and sisters, the people who failed to do good, who proved callous, were the priest and the Levite, who were more concerned with respecting their religious traditions than with coming to the aid of a suffering person. The one who demonstrates what it means to be a “neighbour” is instead a heretic, a Samaritan. He draws near, he feels compassion, he bends down and gently

tends the wounds of that brother. He is concerned for him, regardless of his past and his failings, and he puts himself wholly at his service (cf. *Lk* 10:33-35). Jesus can thus conclude that the right question is not: “*Who is my neighbour?*” but “*Do I act like a neighbour?*” Only a love that becomes gratuitous service, only the love that Jesus taught and embodied, will bring separated Christians closer to one another. Only that love, which does not appeal to the past in order to remain aloof or to point a finger, only that love which in God’s name puts our brothers and sisters before the ironclad defense of our own religious structures, only that love will unite us. First our brothers and sisters, then the structures.

Brothers and sisters, among ourselves, we should never have to ask: “*Who is my neighbour?*” For each baptized person is a member of the one Body of Christ; what is more, everyone in this world is my brother or my sister, and all together we compose that “symphony of humanity” of which Christ is the Firstborn and Redeemer. As Saint Irenaeus, whom I had the joy of proclaiming the “Doctor of Unity”, observed: “One who seeks the truth should not concentrate on the differences between one note and another, thinking as if each was created separately and apart from the others; instead, he should realize that one and the same person composed the entire melody” (*Adv. Haer.*, II, 25, 2). In other words, not “*Who is my neighbour?*” but “*Do I act like a neighbour?*” Do I, and then my community, my Church, my spirituality, act like a neighbour? Or are they barricaded in defense of their own interests, jealous of their autonomy, caught up in calculating what is in their own interest, building relationships with others only in order to gain something for themselves? If that were the case, it would not only be a matter of mistaken strategies, but of infidelity to the Gospel.

“*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” That is how the dialogue between the lawyer and Jesus began. Today, however, that initial question is reversed, thanks to the Apostle Paul, whose conversion we celebrate in this Basilica dedicated to him. When Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of Christians, encountered Jesus in the burst of light that enveloped him and changed his life, he immediately asks: “What am I to do, Lord?” (*Acts* 22:10). Not “*What must I do to inherit?*” but “*What am I to do, Lord?*” The Lord is the object of the question; he is the real “inheritance”, the supreme good. Paul’s life is not changed because he changes his goals in order better to achieve his aims. His conversion was the result of an existential reversal, in which his devotion to the Law gave way to docility to God and total openness to his will. It was not his devotion, but his docility: from devotion to docility. If God is our treasure, our ecclesial plan of action must surely consist in doing his will, in fulfilling his desires. On the night before he offered his life for us, he prayed fervently to the Father for all of us: “that they may be one” (*Jn* 17:21). That, we see, is his will.

All efforts to attain full unity are called to follow the same route as Paul, decentralizing our own ideas in order to hear the Lord’s voice and give him the space to take the initiative. This was clearly understood by yet another Paul, that great pioneer of the ecumenical movement, Abbé Paul Couturier, who was accustomed to pray for the unity of Christians “as Christ wills it and in accordance with the means he wills”. We need this reversal of perspective and above all this

conversion of heart, for, as the Second Vatican Council stated sixty years ago: “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7). As we pray together, may we acknowledge, each of us starting with himself or herself, our need for conversion, for letting the Lord change our hearts. This is the path before us: journeying together and serving together, giving priority of place to prayer. For when Christians grow in the service of God and neighbour, they also grow in reciprocal understanding. As the Council went on to say: “The closer their union with the Father, the Word and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual love” (*ibid.*).

That is why we are here tonight, coming as we do from different countries, cultures and traditions. I am grateful to His Grace Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to Metropolitan Polycarp, who represents the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and to all of you, who make present many Christian communities. I offer a special greeting to the members of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, as they celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the dialogue, and to the Catholic and Anglican bishops taking part in the meeting of the International Commission for Unity and Mission. It is nice that today, with my brother, Archbishop Justin, we can confer on these joint groups of bishops the mandate of continuing to testify to the unity willed by God for his Church in their respective regions, as they move forward together “to extend the mercy and peace of God to a world in need” (*Appeal from the IARCCUM Bishops*, Rome, 2016). I also greet the scholarship holders of the Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches at the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and the participants in the study visits organized for young priests and monks of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and those organized for the students of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches.

Together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray with Paul and say: “*What are we to do, Lord?*” In asking that question, we already have an answer, because the first answer is prayer. Prayer for unity is the primary responsibility in our journey together. And it is a sacred responsibility, because it means being in communion with the Lord, who prayed above all to the Father for unity. Let us also continue to pray for an end to wars, especially in Ukraine and in the Holy Land. Our hearts also reach out to the beloved people of Burkina Faso, and in particular to the communities that prepared the materials for this Week of Prayer for Unity: May love of neighbour replace the violence that assails their country.

“*What am I to do, Lord?*” The Lord, Paul tells us, said: “Get up and go” (*Acts 22:10*). *Get up*, Jesus says to each of us and to our efforts on behalf of unity. So let us get up in the name of Christ from our tired routine and set out anew, for he wills it, and he wills it “so that the world may believe” (*Jn 17:21*). Let us pray, then, and let us keep moving forward, for that is what God desires of us. This is what he wants from us.

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