APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO PORTUGAL II, COSTA RICA, NICARAGUA I, PANAMA, EL SALVADOR I, GUATEMALA I, HONDURAS, BELIZE AND HAITI

EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION IN BELIZE WITH ECUMENICAL PRESENCE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Belize
Wednesday, 9 March 1983

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. It is a great joy for me to be able to spend some time together with you, in Belize, at the end of my apostolic journey to Central America, before I go on to Haiti. I am pleased that my visit takes place on a day that is particularly significant for you.

It is my privilege, but also my duty, as Successor of the Apostle Peter and Pastor of the universal Church, to “impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you . . . that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (*Rm* 1, 11-12). This is indeed *an hour of faith* for all of us. As I greet the authorities of this land, I wish to express my closeness to all of you. I embrace, in the charity of Christ, the young and the old, the Christian families, and all those who work and suffer and pray for the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth. To my brother Bishops and priests and to all the Religious I offer the expression of my special gratitude for your partnership in the Gospel.

My dearly beloved faithful of Belize, it is truly a great joy for me not only to be with you today but to be able to offer in this noble house the eternal sacrifice of Christ on the cross to his heavenly Father. Calling upon each one of you the divine grace and blessing of the Lord, I therefore invite you to enter into the great mystery we are about to celebrate and to learn from today’s celebration that Jesus Christ calls each of you into intimate union with him so that not one of those whom he

has called may be lost. The call to the Christian is a call to an eternal commitment to Christ and we renew this commitment each time we share in his Body and Blood. This then is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Let us join, then, in praying to the Lord Jesus so that the mystical bride of Christ, the Church in this land of Belize, may always witness to its calling to intimate and vital union with him, and that it may contribute effectively to the building up of your young nation so that in the words of your national anthem it may be truly a land of the free with the freedom of the children of God.

2. You have perhaps heard that, in different places in Central America, during my mission, I have insisted on the *theme of unity*, the unity of the local Church, united with its Bishop, and with the other local Churches, in the unity of the universal Church. Today, I would like to consider with you and for you another aspect of the same major theme of unity, namely the unity to which the various Churches and ecclesial communities are called, in the supreme, organic unity of the one Church of Christ.

This, as you know, is what we call *ecumenism*, and you also know well that the Second Vatican Council made ecumenism and the ecumenical task one of its major concerns. Indeed, it has published a whole document on the subject of the restoration of unity. And I myself have repeated, since the time I was elected Pope, that one of the first. and major tasks of my pontificate is this restoration of unity among all Christians, For this reason, it has been, since the beginning, an important part of the programme of my journey as a pilgrim, to take up the subject of Christian unity and to meet with representatives of other Churches and ecclesial communities. So it was in Germany, the United States of America, Great Britain, and elsewhere. So it is now here in Belize.

I wish, therefore, to greet with brotherly affection in Christ Jesus all the leaders and members of the Christian Churches and ecclesial communities present in Belize, in particular the Anglican and Methodist communities here. All of you, dear brothers and sisters, together with the members of the Catholic Church must work and pray so that the unity which Christ desires for his followers will be fully realised *in truth and charity*. Meanwhile, fraternal and sincere collaboration in Christian service will be a sure sign of true discipleship.

3. We have all heard, in the reading of the Gospel just proclaimed, the repeated references to unity among his disciples, which our Lord wished to express in this solemn prayer to his Father, just before he faced condemnation and death on the Cross. Unity is not a passing reference: it is a *central concern* of Christ's prayer. It comes back again and again in the section we have read. This insistence is very revealing. It manifests to us how deeply and intensely the Lord felt about his disciples being one. The unity of all Christians is therefore not something marginal or indifferent which can be dispensed with. On the contrary, it is the will of Christ.

Secondly, the very fact that the Lord prays to his Father for the gift of unity in this decisive moment of his life should impress on us *the dangers* to such unity, on the part of short-sighted, self-seeking

and impassioned men and women, tempted moreover by the Devil, the father of division. It should also impress on us the great responsibility of us all to work for the restoration of unity when unity has been broken, as has sadly happened many times during the past two millennia.

The Lord then, as he approached his own sacrificial death, which he suffered "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Gv* 11, 52), foresaw the tragedy and scandal of division among Christians, and by the same token he taught us that unity is not to be dismissed as impossible or unnecessary, and that division is not to be accepted as a necessary evil. No, it is *his will* and the *content of his prayer* that we "be one", as he and the Father "are one" (*Gv* 17, 22; cf. 10, 30).

4. Thus, we have learned that, when we engage in *work for Christian unity*, we are accomplishing the will of our Lord. Moreover, we have learned that prayer through, with and in Christ is the *main source* of this unity. Since prayer for Christian unity, and, if possible, common prayer for Christian unity, is an essential element of our ecumenical work, let us then be faithful to this prayer.

Prayer cannot be what it should be without what the Second Vatican Council calls *a change of heart* (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7). Another name for this is "conversion", which as we know was the substance of our Lord's first preaching. All of us need conversion, or a change of heart, precisely in order to enter fully into Christ's thoughts and intentions when he prays for unity We need to be convinced of the importance of the cause of Christian unity, with all that this implies in the fields of fraternal relations, mutual esteem, collaboration, dialogue, and common witness, study and prayer.

5. This however is not all. The Decree on Ecumenism speaks also about *holiness of life* (*Ivi*, 8). And, indeed, if we pay careful attention to what our Lord, in his priestly prayer, presents as the ultimate model of Christian unity, we cannot but be convinced that unity depends on holiness. Because he prays "that they may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (*Gv* 17, 21). And again "That they may be one even as we are one" (*Gv* 17, 22). The reading from the Letter to the Ephesians also puts Christian unity at the same lofty level when it says "I . . . a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.. eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Ef* 4, 1-3).

Yes, dear brethren, nothing short of the unity of the Holy Trinity in itself and our unity with the Holy Trinity can bring about full unity among Christians. When we strive for this perfect communion among all Churches and ecclesial communities, this is what we mean: unity shaped, modelled on, and given to us by the Holy Trinity. Let us remember that *unity and holiness in the Church go together*. When we strive, then, to be good Christians, and true Christians, unity among us should be one of our main goals.

6. It is in such a context of Christian life and Christian commitment that *the whole ecumenical task*

should be placed. By this I understand what is called “growing together”, that is the set of relations which should exist and grow between Christians living together in the same neighbourhood, and facing together the same world, in which they are called to serve their fellowman and the good of society. By this I understand also the dialogue between our Church and other Churches and ecclesial communities, now being held at different levels.

But, again, all these means and instruments of the ecumenical task should flow from the deep source of our Christian vocation, which is founded *on the word of God and the Sacrament of Baptism*, and finds expression in the common profession of the ancient Creeds of the Church and in the Lord’s prayer to his Father for unity among his disciples. And this unity is indeed modelled on the unity of the Most Holy Trinity.

This is true ecumenism and these are the true marks of the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism is not meant to serve any merely human goals, including political aims of any kind. Ecumenism is not compatible with the blurring of confessional boundaries by the watering down of the content of the faith we have received from the Apostles, or by the indiscriminate admission of the faithful of another ecclesial community to the Eucharist of our own. It is certainly not compatible with an aggressive proselytism that disturbs and hurts - sometimes even with unworthy procedures - the degree of unity which an ecclesial community already possesses. Ecumenism is an *evangelical task* and it has to be understood and put into practice only with an evangelical inspiration and with means true to the Gospel that we have all received from Christ.

7. My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the message I am happy to leave to you in Belize. I know that you receive it with an open heart. I pray that you may be given from on high the gift of a still deeper commitment to the cause of holy unity. And I ask you to pray together with me that we may be finally blessed with the gift of perfect unity “so that the world may believe” (cf. *Gv* 17, 21). Let us ask this *for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity* - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - through Jesus Christ our one Mediator, our one Saviour, our one Lord. Amen.

Antes de concluir, quiero saludar con afecto y alentar en su fe cristiana a todos los hermanos de lengua española que han querido venir aquí para ver al Papa, procedentes de los Países cercanos.

Me es particularmente grata la presencia de los Obispos de la Región pastoral del Sudeste de México, acompañados de numerosos fieles. En vosotros, queridos hermanos, saludo también a todos los habitantes de vuestro País, cuya imborrable visita recuerdo siempre con tanto agrado.

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