



**25
JAN**

ECUMENICAL CELEBRATION

The Holy Father Benedict XVI has presided at the traditional ecumenical Vespers celebrating the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for the unity of Christians. Vespers have been held at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on the memorial of the Conversion of the Apostle Paul.



**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS
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 ST. PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS
FRIDAY, 25 JANUARY 2013

[VIDEO]

PHOTO GALLERY

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is always a joy and a special grace to find ourselves gathered together around the tomb of the Apostle Paul for the conclusion the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I greet with affection the Cardinals present, in the first place Cardinal Harvey, Archpriest of this Basilica, and with him the Abbot and the Community of monks that are hosting us. I greet Cardinal Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and all the collaborators of that Dicastery. I address my cordial and brotherly greetings to His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch; Reverend Canon Richardson, personal representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury in Rome; and all representatives of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here this evening. Moreover, I am particularly pleased to greet the members of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, to whom I wish fruitful work at the Plenary Session that is taking place these days in Rome. I greet as well the students of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey on their visit to Rome for the purpose of deepening their knowledge of the Catholic Church, and to Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox young people who are studying here. I greet lastly all present, gathered here to pray for unity among all disciples of Christ.

This celebration is set in the context of the Year of Faith, inaugurated last 11 October, on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Communion in the same faith is the basis for ecumenism. Unity, in fact, is given by God as inseparable from faith; St Paul says it efficaciously: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, on faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6). The profession of baptismal faith in God, Father and Creator, that is revealed in his Son Jesus Christ, pouring forth the Spirit who gives life and who sanctifies, already unites Christians. Without faith — that is primarily a gift from God, but is also the response of man — the entire ecumenical movement would be reduced to a form of "contract" which adheres to a common interest. The Second Vatican Council reminds Christians that "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 brotherly love" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 7). The doctrinal questions that we still share must not be overlooked or minimized. Rather, they should be faced with courage, in a spirit of brotherhood and mutual respect. Dialogue, when it reflects the priority of faith, permits us to open ourselves to the action of God with a firm trust that by ourselves we cannot create unity; it is the Holy Spirit who guides us toward full communion, and makes us accept the spiritual wealth present in the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

In today's society it seems that the Christian message has less and less of an effect on personal and community life; and this is a challenge for all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities. Unity is in itself a privileged means, almost a presupposition to proclaiming in an ever more credible way the faith to those who do not yet know the Saviour, or who, despite having received the proclamation of the Gospel, have almost forgotten this precious gift. The scandal of division that undermined missionary activity was the impulse that started the ecumenical movement as we know it today. Full and visible communion among Christians is to be understood, in fact, as a fundamental characteristic for an ever

clearer witness. As we journey towards full unity, it is thus necessary to pursue a practical collaboration among the disciples of Christ for the cause of transmitting the faith to the contemporary world. Today there is great need for reconciliation, dialogue and mutual understanding — not in a moralistic perspective but as authentic Christians for an ever stronger presence in the context of our time.

True faith in God, then, is inseparable from personal holiness, just as it is from the search for justice. In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which ends today, the theme of our meditation was: “What does God require of us?”, inspired by the words of the Prophet Micah, which we have heard (cf. 6:6-8). It was proposed by the Student Christian Movement in India, in collaboration with the All India Catholic University Federation and the National Council of Churches in India, who also prepared aids for reflection and prayer. To those who collaborated in this I would like to express my deep gratitude and, with great affection, I assure you of my prayers for all Christians in India, who at times are called to witness to their faith in difficult conditions. “To walk humbly with God” (cf. Mic 6:8) means above all to walk in radical faith, like Abraham, trusting in God, finding in him our every hope and aspiration. However, it also means crossing over barriers, over hatred, racism and the social and religious discrimination that divides and damages society as a whole. As St Paul affirms, Christians must first offer a luminous example in the quest for reconciliation and for communion in Christ, such that overcomes every kind of division. In his Letter to the Galatians, the Apostle to the Gentiles says: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3: 27-28).

Our search for unity in truth and in love, lastly, must never lose sight of the fact that unity among Christians is the work and gift of the Holy Spirit and goes far beyond our own efforts. Thus, spiritual ecumenism, especially prayer, is the heart of the ecumenical task (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 8). Yet, ecumenism will not bear lasting fruit unless it is accompanied by concrete actions of conversion that move our consciences and foster the healing of memory and of relationships. As the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican Council II asserts, “there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart” (n. 7). An authentic conversion, like that called for by the Prophet Micah and of which the Apostle Paul is a significant example, will bring us ever closer to God, to the centre of our life, in such a way as to bring us also closer to one another. This is a fundamental element of our ecumenical commitment. Renewal of the interior life of our heart and mind, which is reflected in daily life, is crucial to every dialogue and path of reconciliation, making ecumenism a commitment of mutual understanding, respect and love, “that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us confidently invoke the Virgin Mary, incomparable model of evangelization, that the Church, “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1), may proclaim with candour, in our time, Christ the Saviour. Amen.

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