



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Catechesis on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

"If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18: 19). This solemn assurance of Jesus to his disciples also sustains our prayer.

The "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity", by now a tradition, begins today. It is an important event for reflecting on the tragedy of the division of the Christian community and to ask with Jesus himself "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21). We also do so here today, in harmony with a great multitude throughout the world.

Indeed, prayer "for the union of all" involves Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, brought together in different forms, times and ways by the same faith in Jesus Christ, the one Lord and Saviour.

Prayer for unity is part of the central nucleus which the Second Vatican Council calls "the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8), a nucleus that includes public and private prayers, conversion of heart and holiness of life. This vision takes us back to the heart of the ecumenical problem, which is obedience to the Gospel in order to do God's will with his necessary and effective help.

The Council explicitly pointed this out to the faithful, declaring: "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" (*ibid.*, n. 7).

The elements that, despite the persistent division, still unite Christians, make it possible to raise a

common prayer to God. This communion in Christ sustains the entire ecumenical movement and indicates the very purpose of the search for unity of all Christians in God's Church. It is what distinguishes the ecumenical movement from any other initiative of dialogue and relations with other religions and ideologies.

In this too, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism is precise: "Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour" (*ibid.*, n. 1).

The common prayers that are prayed throughout the world, particularly in this period or around Pentecost, also express the desire for a common commitment to re-establish communion among all Christians. These prayers in common "are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity" (*ibid.*, n. 8).

With this affirmation, the Second Vatican Council basically interprets what Jesus said to his disciples when he assured them that if two of them were to agree on earth about anything for which they were to ask the Father who is in Heaven, he would grant it, "because" where two or three are gathered in his name he is in their midst.

After the Resurrection he assured them further that he would be with them "always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 20). It is Jesus' presence in the community of disciples and in our prayer itself which guarantees its effectiveness, to the point that he promised: "*whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" (Mt 18: 18).

However, let us not limit ourselves to imploring. We can also thank the Lord for the new situation that, with effort, has been created in ecumenical relations among Christians in brotherhood rediscovered through the establishment of strong ties of solidarity, the growth of communion and the forms of convergence achieved - certainly, in an unequal manner - between the various dialogues.

There are many reasons to give thanks. And if there is still so much to hope for and to do, let us not forget that God has given us a great deal on our way towards unity. Let us therefore be grateful to him for these gifts.

The future lies before us. The Holy Father John Paul II of happy memory - who did and suffered so much for the ecumenical cause - has opportunely taught us that "an appreciation of how much God has already given is the condition which disposes us to receive those gifts still indispensable for bringing to completion the ecumenical work of unity" (*Ut Unum Sint*, n. 41).

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us continue to pray, because we know that the holy cause of the restoration of Christian unity exceeds our poor human efforts and that unity, finally, is a gift of

God.

In this regard and with these sentiments, I will be following in John Paul II's footsteps next Wednesday, 25 January, the Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles, in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls to pray with our Orthodox and Protestant brethren: to pray to thank the Lord for what he has granted us; to pray that the Lord will guide us in the footprints of unity.

In addition, my first Encyclical will finally be published that same day, 25 January; its title is already known: "*Deus Caritas Est*", "*God is love*". The theme is not directly ecumenical, but the context and background are ecumenical because God and our love are the condition for Christian unity. They are the condition for peace in the world.

In this Encyclical I desire to show the concept of love in its various dimensions. Today, in the terminology with which we are familiar, "love" often appears very far from what a Christian thinks when he speaks of charity.

For my part, I would like to show that this is a single impulse with various dimensions. The "eros", this gift of love between a man and a woman, comes from the same source, the Creator's goodness, as the possibility of a love that gives itself for the sake of the other. The "eros" becomes "agape" to the extent that the two truly love each other and no longer seek themselves, their own joy and their own pleasure, but seek above all the good of the other.

Thus, this love which is "eros" is transformed into charity in a process of purification and deepening. From its own family it is opened to the greater family of society, the family of the Church, the family of the world.

I also endeavour to show that the very personal act that comes to us from God is a unique act of love. It must also be expressed as an ecclesial and organizational act.

If it is true that the Church is an expression of God's love, of that love God feels for his human creature, it must also be true that the fundamental act of faith, which creates and unites the Church and gives us the hope of eternal life and of God's presence in the world, gives rise to an ecclesial act. In practice, the Church must also love as a Church, as a community, institutionally.

And this so-called "Caritas" is not a mere organization like other philanthropic organizations, but a necessary expression of the deepest act of personal love with which God has created us, awakening in our hearts the impulse to love, a reflection of the God-Love who makes us in his image.

It took time to prepare and translate the text. It now seems to me a gift of Providence, the fact that the text should be published on the very day on which we will pray for Christian unity. I hope that it

will be able to illuminate and help our Christian life.

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, and in particular to the groups from Sweden, South Korea and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

I would also like to offer a special greeting to the circus people present in Rome in these days. I thank them for the beautiful performance and I encourage them always to show their faith in Christ joyfully.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, during these days of prayer for Christian unity I ask you, dear *young people*, to be everywhere, and especially among your peers, apostles of faithful adherence to the Gospel; I ask you, dear *sick people*, to offer your suffering for the full communion of all Christ's disciples; I urge you, dear *newly-weds*, to become more and more of one heart and one mind and to live in your families the "commandment of love".

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