



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE – SECOND VESPERS

58th WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

Saturday, 25 January 2025

[Multimedia]

Jesus arrives at the home of his friends Martha and Mary four days after the death of their brother Lazarus. Having apparently lost all hope, Martha's first words express her grief and her regret that Jesus had arrived too late: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (*Jn* 11:21). At the same time, however, Jesus' presence kindles the light of hope in Martha's heart and leads her to a profession of faith: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (v. 22). It is an attitude of always leaving the door open, never closed! Jesus speaks to her about the resurrection of the dead not only as an event that will take place at the end of time, but as something already present, because he himself is the resurrection and the life. And then he asks her a question: "Do you believe this?" (v. 26). That question is also meant for us, for you, for me: "Do you believe this?"

Let us also consider this same question: "Do you believe this?" (v. 26). It is a short but challenging question.

This tender encounter between Jesus and Martha from the Gospel teaches us that even in times of desolation, we are not alone and we can continue to hope. Jesus gives life even when it seems that all hope has vanished. Hope can falter following difficult experiences such as a painful loss, an illness, a bitter disappointment or a sudden betrayal. Although each of us may experience moments of despair or know people who have lost hope, the Gospel tells us that Jesus always

restores hope because he raises us up from the ashes of death. Jesus always raises us up and gives us the strength to go on, to begin anew.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us never forget that hope does not disappoint! Hope never disappoints! Hope is like a rope anchored on the shore that we cling to; it never disappoints. This is also important for the life of Christian communities, our churches and our ecumenical relationships. At times, we are overwhelmed by fatigue and discouraged by the results of our labours. It can even seem as if the dialogue and the efforts made on both sides are hopeless, almost doomed to failure. All of this makes us experience the same anguish as Martha, but the Lord comes to us. Do we believe this? Do we believe that he is the resurrection and the life? That he rewards our efforts and always gives us the grace to continue our journey together? Do we believe this?

This message of hope is at the heart of the Jubilee we have begun. The Apostle Paul, whose conversion to Christ we commemorate today, declared to the Christians of Rome, “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (*Rom 5:5*). We have all received the same Spirit, all of us, and this is the foundation of our ecumenical journey. The Spirit guides on this journey. There are no practical things that help us understand it better. No, there is the Spirit, and we have to follow the Spirit’s lead.

The Jubilee Year of Hope celebrated by the Catholic Church coincides with an anniversary of great significance for all Christians: the 1700th anniversary of the first great ecumenical council: the Council of Nicaea. This Council sought to preserve the unity of the Church at a very difficult time, and the Council Fathers unanimously approved the Creed that many Christians still recite each Sunday at the celebration of the Eucharist. This Creed is a common profession of faith that transcends all the divisions that have riven the Body of Christ over the centuries. The anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is therefore a year of grace, an opportunity for all Christians who recite the same Creed and believe in the same God. Let us rediscover the common roots of the faith; let us preserve unity! Let us always move forward! May the unity we all are searching for be found. What comes to mind is something that the great Orthodox theologian Ioannis Zizioulas used to say: “I know the date of full communion: the day after the final judgment! In the meantime, we must walk together, work together, pray together, love together. And this is something very beautiful!

Dear brothers and sisters, this faith we share is a precious gift, but it is also a task. The anniversary should be celebrated not only as a “historical memory”, but also as a pledge to bear witness to the growing communion between us. We must take care not to let it slip away, but rather to build solid bonds, cultivate mutual friendship, and be instruments of communion and fraternity.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we can also draw from the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea a call to persevere in the journey towards unity. This year, the celebration of Easter coincides in both the Gregorian and Julian calendars, a circumstance that proves providential as we commemorate the anniversary of the Ecumenical Council. I renew my appeal that this coincidence may serve as an appeal to all Christians to take a decisive step forward towards unity around a common date for Easter (cf. Bull *Spes Non Confundit*, 17). The Catholic Church is open to accepting the date that everyone wants: a date of unity.

I am grateful to Metropolitan Polycarp, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to Archbishop Ian Ernest, who represents the Anglican Communion and is concluding his valuable service for which I am very appreciative – I wish him the best as he returns to his home country – and to the representatives of other Churches who are participating in this evening sacrifice of praise. It is important to pray together, and your presence here this evening is a source of joy for everyone. I also greet the students supported by the Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches at the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, the students from the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute at Bossey and the many other ecumenical groups and pilgrims who have come to Rome for this celebration. I thank the choir, who provided us with a very beautiful atmosphere for praying. May each of us, like Saint Paul, find our hope in the incarnate Son of God and offer it to others wherever hope has been lost, lives broken or hearts overwhelmed by adversity (cf. *Homily Opening of the Holy Door and Midnight Mass*, 24 December 2024).

In Jesus, hope is always possible. He also sustains our hope as we journey towards him in unity. And so we return again to the question asked of Martha and asked of us this evening: “do you believe this?”. Do we believe in communion with one another? Do we believe that hope does not disappoint?

Dear sisters, dear brothers, this is the time to confirm our profession of faith in the one God and to find in Christ Jesus the way to unity. As we wait for the Lord to “come again in glory to judge the living and the dead” (Nicene Creed), let us never grow tired of bearing witness, before all peoples, to the only-begotten Son of God, the source of all our hope.