



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

During Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Wednesday, 22 January 1997

1. “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

In this Week of Prayer for Unity (18-25 January), Christians — Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant — meet with greater fervour to pray together. The division between Christ’s disciples is so obvious a contradiction that they cannot be resigned to it without feeling in some way responsible for it. The purpose of this particular week is to encourage the Christian community to devote itself more intensely to prayer, in order to experience at the same time how beautiful it is to live together as brothers and sisters. Despite the tensions sometimes caused by existing differences, these days give us in some way a foretaste of the joy that full communion will bring when it is finally achieved.

The Joint International Committee, consisting of representatives of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, which annually prepares the texts for this Week of Prayer, this year has proposed *the theme of reconciliation*, taking its inspiration from St Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. The Apostle first of all makes this great announcement: “God has reconciled us to himself through Christ”. The Son of God has taken man’s sin upon himself and has obtained forgiveness, restoring our communion with God. Indeed, God wants all humanity to be reconciled.

It is clear from the Letter to the Corinthians that reconciliation is God’s grace. On the other hand, the Letter also states that God “gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18b); he has entrusted to us “the message of reconciliation” (ibid., 19b). This message engages all the Lord’s disciples. But how can they hope that their invitation to reconciliation will be heard, if they do not

first live in full reconciliation with those who share their faith?

It is this problem which must trouble the conscience of every believer in Jesus Christ, who died in order “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn 11:52b). However, we should take comfort in the certainty that, despite our weaknesses, God is at work in us and will eventually realize his plans.

2. In this regard, ecumenical developments often give us *reasons for hope and encouragement*. If we look at the world from the Second Vatican Council until today, the state of Christian relations has greatly changed. The Christian community is closer and the spirit of brotherhood more evident.

Certainly, there are reasons for sadness and concern. Nevertheless, each year events occur that have a positive impact on the efforts towards full unity. In this past year as well, significant contacts have been made on different occasions with the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the East and West. Some of these events are covered by the media of social communications; others are left in the shadows but are no less useful.

I would like to note in particular the growing co-operation taking place in institutions of education or scholarly research. The contribution that these efforts can make to solving the open problems between Christians — in the historical, theological, disciplinary and spiritual fields — is certainly important with regard to overcoming the misunderstandings of the past and to the common search for the truth. This collaboration is not only a necessary method today; in it we already experience a type of communion of intent.

Regarding the year just ended, I would like to recall the *Common Declaration* signed with His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians (13 December 1996). With this ancient Church, which in this century has been especially enriched by the witness of a host of martyrs, there has been a Christological dispute since the Council of Chalcedon (451), that is, over 1500 years ago. Throughout these centuries theological misunderstandings, linguistic difficulties and cultural differences had hindered true dialogue. To our great joy, the Lord enabled us at last to profess the same faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man. In the Common Declaration, we acknowledged him as “perfect God as to his divinity, perfect man as to his humanity; his divinity is united to his humanity in the Person of the Only-Begotten Son of God, in a union which is real, perfect, without confusion, without alteration, without division, without any form of separation”.

Last year I also met many brothers from other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, such as His Grace Dr George Leonard Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, and other dignitaries who came to visit me in Rome. On my journeys outside this city, I also had the great joy of meeting representatives of other Churches who are giving committed witness to their faith in Christ and seeking communion together with local Catholics.

There have been other small but significant steps towards the reconciliation of hearts and minds. The Spirit of God will guide us to complete, mutual understanding and to the desired goal of full communion.

3. Unfortunately, in addition to doctrinal difficulties, among Christians there are still hard feelings, reticence and distrust, which sometimes break out in expressions of gratuitous aggression.

This means that there must be more intense efforts of *spiritual ecumenism* — consisting in conversion of heart, renewal of mind, personal and shared prayer — and *theological dialogue*. These efforts must increase precisely as we approach the Great Jubilee, an exceptional occasion for all Christians to join together in bringing the good news of reconciliation to the generations of the new millennium.

This first year of preparation for the Jubilee has for its theme: “Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever” (cf. Heb 13:8). In *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I stressed that “from an ecumenical point of view, this will certainly be a very important year for Christians to look together to Christ the one Lord, deepening our commitment to become one in him, in accordance with his prayer to the Father” (n. 41).

With all those who are praying this week for Christian unity, we too offer our prayers as we ask the Lord for the gift of reconciliation.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I wish to welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, especially the pilgrims from Denmark, Finland and the United States. I thank the choir for its praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the grace and peace of Christ our Saviour.

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