



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Word, Eucharist and divided Christians

1. In the programme for this Jubilee Year we could not omit the dimension of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as I had indicated earlier in *Tertio millennio adveniente* (cf. nn. 53 and 55). The Trinitarian and Eucharistic line we developed in our previous catecheses now prompts us to reflect on this aspect, examining first of all the problem of restoring unity among Christians. We do so in the light of the Gospel account of the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24: 13-35), observing the way that the two disciples who were leaving the community were spurred to reverse their direction to rediscover it.

2. The two disciples turned their backs on the place where Jesus had been crucified, because the event had been a cruel disappointment to them. For this very reason they were leaving the other disciples and returning, as it were, to individualism. "They were talking with each other about all these things that had happened" (Lk 24: 14), without understanding their meaning. They did not realize that Jesus had died "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered" (Jn 11: 52).

They only saw the tremendously negative aspect of the cross, which had destroyed their hopes: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24: 21). The risen Jesus comes up and walks beside them, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Lk 24: 16), because from the spiritual standpoint they were in the darkest shadows. Then Jesus, with wonderful patience, endeavours to bring them back into the light of faith through a long biblical catechesis: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24: 27). Their hearts began to burn (cf. Lk 24: 32). They begged their mysterious companion to stay with them. "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed

and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight" (*Lk 24: 30-31*). Thanks to the clear explanation of the Scriptures, they emerged from the gloom of incomprehension into the light of faith and were able to recognize the risen Christ "in the breaking of the bread" (*Lk 24: 35*).

The effect of this profound change was an impulse to set out again without delay and return to Jerusalem to join "the Eleven gathered together and those who were with them" (*Lk 24: 33*). The journey of faith had made fraternal union possible.

3. The connection between the interpretation of the word of God and the Eucharist also appears in other parts of the New Testament. In his Gospel John links this word with Eucharist, when in the discourse at Capernaum he presents Jesus recalling the gift of manna in the wilderness and reinterpreting it in a Eucharistic key (cf. *Jn 6: 32-58*). In the Church of Jerusalem, diligent listening to the *didache*, that is, the apostolic teaching based on the word of God, preceded participation in the "breaking of bread" (*Acts 2: 42*).

At Troas, when the Christians gathered around Paul "to break bread", Luke relates that the gathering began with a long speech by the Apostle (cf. *Acts 20: 7*), which was certainly intended to nurture their faith, hope and charity. It is clear from all this that unity in faith is the necessary condition for common participation in the Eucharist.

With the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist - as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, citing St John Chrysostom (*In Joh. hom.*, 46) - "the faithful, united with their Bishops, have access to God the Father through the Son, the Word made flesh who suffered and was glorified, in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And so, made 'sharers of the divine nature' (2 Pt 1: 4), they enter into communion with the most holy Trinity. Hence, through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature, and through concelebration their communion with one another is made manifest" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 15). This link with the mystery of divine unity thus produces a bond of communion and love among those seated at the one table of the Word and of the Eucharist. The one table is a sign and expression of unity. "Thus Eucharistic communion is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion and its visible expression" (*Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, 1993, n. 129).

4. In this light we can understand how the doctrinal divisions between the disciples of Christ grouped in the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities limit full sacramental sharing. Baptism, however, is the deep root of a basic unity that links Christians despite their divisions. Therefore, although Christians who are still separated are excluded from participation in the same Eucharist, it is possible to introduce into the Eucharistic celebration, in specific cases provided for in the *Ecumenical Directory*, certain signs of participation that express the unity already existing and move in the direction of the full communion of the Churches around the table of the Word and

of the Lord's Body and Blood. Consequently, "on exceptional occasions and for a just cause, the Bishop of the Diocese may permit a member of another Church or Ecclesial Community to take on the task of reader" during a Eucharistic celebration in the Catholic Church (n. 133). Likewise, "whenever necessity requires or a genuine spiritual advantage suggests, and provided that the danger of error or indifferentism is avoided", a certain reciprocity regarding the sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick is lawful between Catholics and Eastern Christians (cf. nn. 123-131).

5. Nevertheless, the tree of unity must grow to its full extent, as Christ implored in his great prayer in the Upper Room, proclaimed here at the start of our meeting (cf. *Jn* 17: 20-26; *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 22). The limits to intercommunion at the table of the Word and of the Eucharist must become a call to purification, to dialogue and to the ecumenical progress of the Churches.

They are limits that make us feel all the more strongly, in the Eucharistic celebration itself, the weight of our divisions and contradictions. The Eucharist is thus a challenge and a summons in the very heart of the Church to remind us of Christ's intense, final desire: "that they may be one" (*Jn* 17: 11, 21).

The Church must not be a body of divided and suffering members, but a strong, living organism that moves onward, sustained by the divine bread as prefigured in Elijah's journey (cf. *1 Kgs* 19: 1-8), to the summit of the definitive encounter with God. There, at last, will be the vision of Revelation: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (*Rv* 21: 2).

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I warmly welcome the group from the *NATO Defense College*: I encourage you always to see your professional duties as a service to the cause of peace. I extend a special greeting to the members of the Irish Defence Forces, the *Gardaí* and the Prison Service, led by the Head Chaplain. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Ireland, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.