



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 22 January 2003

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

All the baptized have duty to seek full unity

Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Lord founded the "one" and "only" Church. In the Nicene Creed we profess: "I believe [in] the one holy catholic and apostolic Church". The Second Vatican Council reminds us: "Yet many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true heritage of Jesus Christ. To be sure, all proclaim themselves to be the disciples of the Lord, but their convictions clash and their paths diverge as if Christ himself were divided" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1).

Unity is a great gift, a gift that we bear in fragile and breakable vessels of clay. How realistic this affirmation is, has been shown by the vicissitudes of the Christian community down through the centuries.

In virtue of the faith that unites us, all of us Christians are bound, each according to his own vocation, to re-establish full communion, the valuable "treasure" left us by Christ. With a pure and sincere heart, we should work tirelessly to accomplish this evangelical mandate. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity brings us back to this basic task and offers us the chance to gather for prayer in our own Churches and ecclesial communities, and in joint gatherings with Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, so that with one voice and heart we may pray for the precious gift of full unity.

2. "*We have this treasure in vessels of clay*" (II Cor 4,7). St Paul says this when speaking about the apostolic ministry that consists in making the splendour of the Gospel shine forth for humanity and observes: "*We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; as for ourselves, we are*

your servants for the sake of Jesus Christ" (*ibid.*, 5). He knows the burden and difficulty of evangelization, as well as human frailty. He knows well that the treasure of the Christian kerygma entrusted to us in vessels of clay is transmitted by weak instruments, *"to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us"* (*ibid.*, 7). No enemy will ever succeed in supplanting the proclamation of the Gospel or in suppressing the voice of the Apostle who confesses: *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed"* (v. 8). He added, *"We too believe and so we speak"* (v. 13).

3. At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for his disciples *"that they all might be one as you Father are in me and I in you"* (Jn 17,20-21). Unity is the "treasure" that he gave them. It is a treasure that presents two characteristics. On the one hand, unity expresses fidelity to the Gospel, and, on the other, as the Lord himself stated, it is a condition that all might believe that he is the one sent by the Father. For this reason, the unity of the Christian community is oriented to the evangelization of all peoples.

Despite the sublimity and greatness of this gift, human weakness has brought about its incomplete acceptance and appreciation. In the past, the relations between Christians have at times been characterized by opposition, and even at times, by mutual hatred. As the Second Vatican Council rightly recalled, all that is a "stumbling block" for the world and "damage" for the preaching of the Gospel (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1).

4. Yes, the gift of unity is contained in "vessels of clay" that can break and for this reason demand the greatest care. It is necessary to cultivate among Christians a love that is dedicated to overcoming the differences; it is necessary to make the effort to overcome every barrier with unceasing prayer, with persevering dialogue, and with fraternal and concrete cooperation in helping the poorest and the neediest.

The strong yearning for unity must never be wanting in the daily life of the Churches and ecclesial communities nor in the life of the faithful. From this perspective, I thought it useful to suggest a joint reflection on the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, established as "perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23) in order "to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 95). May the Holy Spirit enlighten the pastors and theologians of our Churches in this patient and certainly profitable dialogue.

5. Looking at the whole ecumenical scene, I feel duty bound to thank the Lord for the distance travelled till now, both for the quality of the fraternal relations knitted among the different communities and for the results of the theological dialogues, even if they are different in their methods and levels. We can say that today Christians are more close-knit and solidary, even if the road toward unity continues to be uphill with its obstacles and bottlenecks. Following the path indicated by the Lord, they advance with confidence, because they know that they are

accompanied by the Risen Lord, as the disciples of Emmaus, toward the goal of full ecclesial communion that actually leads to the common "breaking of the Bread".

6. *Dearest Brothers and Sisters,*

St Paul invites us to vigilance, perseverance and confidence, indispensable dimensions of the ecumenical mandate.

To this end, we pray together to the Lord in this "Week of Prayer" with the prayer taken from the prepared text: "Holy Father, despite our weakness, you have made us witnesses of hope, faithful disciples of your Son. We carry this treasure in vessels of clay and we fear we may fail in the face of sufferings and evil. At times, we even doubt the power of the word of Jesus, who said, "that they all may be one'. Give us again the experience of the glory that shines on the face of Christ, so that in all our actions, our dedication, and our life we may proclaim to the world that He is alive and at work among us". Amen.

To the English-speaking pilgrims

I am pleased to extend a warm greeting to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's audience, particularly those from Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, Japan and the United States. I invite all of you to offer special prayers for Christian unity during this week, and I gladly invoke upon you the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young persons, the sick and newly-weds

My greeting to you, *young persons, sick and newly-weds*. Beloved, in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let our prayer to the Lord be intense so that as soon as possible we may reach the full communion of all the disciples of Christ.

In this spirit I invite all of you, dear *young persons*, to be everywhere, especially with your peers, apostles of faithful loyalty to the Gospel. I ask you, dear *sick persons*, to offer your sufferings for the cause of Christian unity. I exhort you, dear *newly-weds*, to become ever more one heart and one mind at the heart of your families.