



The Holy See

LITURGY OF VESPERS
ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL
FOR THE CONCLUSION OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Sunday, 25 January 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a great joy every time we meet again at the sepulchre of the Apostle Paul, on the liturgical memorial of his conversion at the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I greet all of you with affection. In a particular way I greet Cardinal Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, the Abbot and the Community of monks who are hosting us. I also greet Cardinal Kasper, President of the [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity](#). With him I greet the Cardinals present, the Bishops and the Pastors of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities, who have come here this evening. A special word of recognition goes to those who have collaborated in the preparation of the prayer materials, personally living the practice of reflection and encounter in order to listen to one another and, together, to listen to the Word of God.

St Paul's conversion offers us the model and indicates to us the way towards full unity. Unity, in fact, requires conversion: from division to communion, from wounded unity to one that is healed and full. This conversion is a gift of the Risen Christ as it happened for St Paul. We have heard it in the Apostle's own words in the Reading just proclaimed: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor 15: 10). The same Lord who called Saul on the road to Damascus addresses the members of his Church which is one and holy and calling each one by name asks: why have you divided me? Why have you wounded the unity of my body? Conversion implies two dimensions. In the first step one knows and recognizes one's faults in the light of Christ, and this recognition becomes sorrow and contrition, the desire for a new beginning.

In the second step one recognizes that this new journey cannot come from oneself. It consists in letting oneself be conquered by Christ. As St Paul says: "I am racing to grasp the prize if possible, since I have been grasped by Christ [Jesus]" (Phil 3: 12). Conversion demands our "yes", my "racing"; ultimately it is not my action, but a gift in letting myself be formed by Christ. It is death and resurrection. Therefore St Paul does not say: "I am converted", but he says "I died" (Gal 2: 19), I am a new creature. Actually, St Paul's conversion was not a passage from immorality to morality his was a high morality from a mistaken faith to a correct faith his faith was true, even if incomplete but rather it was a state of being conquered by Christ's love. It was the renunciation of his own perfection, the humility of the one who places himself without reserve at the service of Christ for the brethren. And only in this renunciation of ourselves, in this conformity with Christ can we be united also among ourselves, do we become "one" in Christ. It is communion with the Risen Christ that gives us unity.

We can observe an interesting analogy with the dynamic of St Paul's conversion also by meditating on the biblical text of the Prophet Ezekiel (37: 15-28) chosen as the basis of our prayer this year. In it, in fact, is presented the symbolic gesture of the two pieces of wood reunited into one in the prophet's hand; the future action of God is represented with this gesture. The second part of chapter 37 the first part of which contains the famous vision of the dry bones and the resurrection of Israel is a work of God's Spirit. How can one fail to note that the prophetic sign of the reunification of the people of Israel is placed after the great symbol of the dry bones vivified by the Spirit? From it derives a theological scheme analogous to that of the conversion of St Paul. It is above all the power of God who, with his Spirit, works the resurrection as a new creation. This God, who is the Creator and is able to raise the dead, is also able to lead the divided people to unity again. Paul both as and more than Ezekiel becomes the elect instrument for preaching the unity Jesus won through his Cross and Resurrection: unity among Jews and pagans, to form a single new people.

Christ's Resurrection thus extends the parameters of unity: not only a unity of the tribes of Israel, but a unity of Jews and pagans (cf. Eph 2; Jn 10: 16); the unification of humanity dispersed by sin, and still more, a unity of all believers in Christ.

We owe the choice of this passage of the Prophet Ezekiel to our brothers from Korea, who felt strongly challenged by this biblical text both as Koreans and as Christians. With the division of the Hebrew people into two kingdoms, they have mirrored themselves as sons of a single land, whose political events have separated them into the north and the south. And this human experience of theirs has helped them to understand better the plight of the division of Christians. Now, in the light of this Word of God that our Korean brothers have chosen and proposed to all, emerges a truth full of hope: God promises his people a new unity that must be a sign and instrument of reconciliation and peace also on a historical level, for all the nations. The unity that God gives to his Church, and for which we pray, is naturally communion in the spiritual sense, in faith and in charity. But we know that this unity in Christ is the leaven of fraternity also on the social level, in relationships among nations and for the entire human family. It is the yeast of the Kingdom of God that makes

the mass of dough rise (cf. Mt 13: 33). In this sense, the prayer we are raising in these days, with reference to the prophecy of Ezekiel, has also become an intercession for the diverse situations of conflict currently afflicting humanity. There, where human words become powerless, because the tragic noise of violence and arms prevails, the prophetic power of the Word of God does not waver and it repeats to us that peace is possible, and that we must be instruments of reconciliation and peace. Therefore our prayer for unity and for peace asks always to be proven by courageous gestures of reconciliation among us Christians. I am thinking still of the Holy Land: how important it is that the faithful who live there, as well as the pilgrims who go there, offer to all the witness that diversity of rites and of traditions should not constitute an obstacle to mutual respect and fraternal charity. In the legitimate diversity of the various traditions we must seek unity in the faith, through our fundamental "yes" to Christ and to his one Church. In this way diversity will no longer be an obstacle that separates us, but an enrichment through the multiple expressions of the common faith.

I would like to conclude this reflection of mine by referring to an event that the more elderly among us certainly cannot forget. On 25 January 1959, exactly 50 years ago, Bl. [Pope John XXIII](#) manifested for the first time in this place his will to convoke "an ecumenical Council for the universal Church" (AAS LI [1959], p. 68). He made this announcement to the Cardinal Fathers in the Chapter Hall of the Monastery of St Paul after having celebrated solemn Mass in the Basilica. From that provident decision, suggested to my venerable Predecessor, according to his firm conviction, by the Holy Spirit, has also derived a fundamental contribution to ecumenism, summarized in the Decree [Unitatis redintegratio](#). Among other things, in it one reads: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind (cf. Eph 4: 23), from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way" (n. 7). The attitude of interior conversion in Christ, of spiritual renewal, of growth in charity toward other Christians has given way to a new situation in ecumenical relations. The fruits of theological dialogue, with their convergence and with the most precise identification of the divergences that still remain, urge the courageous pursuance of two directions: in the acceptance of what has been positively achieved and in a renewed commitment toward the future. Opportunely, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, whom I thank for the service they render to the cause of unity of all the Lord's disciples, has recently reflected on the reception of ecumenical dialogue and on the future. This reflection, if on one hand rightly wishes to value what has been gained, on the other, then, it intends to find new ways to continue the relations among the Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the current context. The horizon of full unity remains open before us. It is an arduous duty, but stirring for Christians who want to live in harmony with the Lord's prayer: "that they may be one, that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21). The Second Vatican Council has given us the prospect of "this holy objective the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human powers and gifts" (UR, 24). Trusting in the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ, and encouraged by the significant steps accomplished by the ecumenical movement, let us invoke the Holy Spirit with faith so that he continues to illuminate and guide our way. May the Apostle Paul, who fatigued and

suffered so much for the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, urge us and assist us from heaven. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the unity of the Church, accompany and sustain us.

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