



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS

FOR THE CONCLUSION OF

THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT*

XVI Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls

Wednesday, 25 January 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

[Photo Gallery](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With great joy I address my warm greeting to all of you who are gathered in this Basilica on the liturgical Feast of the Conversion of St Paul for the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year, in which we shall be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. It was in this Basilica that Bl. John XXIII announced the Council on 25 January 1959. The theme that has been offered for our meditation in the Week of Prayer which we are concluding today is “We Will All Be Changed by the Victory of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 15:51-58).

The meaning of this mysterious transformation, of which the brief Second Reading speaks to us this evening, is wonderfully demonstrated in St Paul’s personal experience. After the extraordinary event that occurred on the road to Damascus, Saul, who was zealous in his persecution of the nascent Church, was transformed into a tireless apostle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is clear from what happened to this extraordinary evangelizer that his transformation was not the result of long inner reflection nor even the fruit of personal effort. It was first and foremost a work of the grace of God who acted in his own inscrutable ways. This explains why, in writing to the community of Corinth a few years after his conversion, St Paul affirms, as we heard in the first

passage of this Vespers: “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor 15:10).

In addition, in considering attentively what happened to St Paul, one understands that the transformation he experienced in his life is not limited to the ethical level — such as conversion from immorality to morality — nor to the intellectual level — such as a change in his way of understanding reality — but, rather, is a matter of the radical renewal of his being, similar in many aspects to a rebirth. This transformation is founded on participation in the mystery of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and is described as a gradual process of conformation to him. In the light of this awareness, when St Paul was subsequently called to defend the legitimacy of his apostolic vocation and of the Gospel he proclaimed, he was to say: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

St Paul’s personal experience enables him to expect with well-founded hope the fulfilment of this mystery of transformation that will concern all who have believed in Jesus Christ, as well as all humanity and the whole of creation. In the short Second Reading proclaimed this evening, St Paul, after developing a long case aimed at strengthening the hope of the Resurrection in the faithful, describes in a few lines, employing the traditional imagery of the apocalyptic literature of his time, the great day of the Last Judgement in which humanity’s destiny will be fulfilled: “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:52).

On that day all believers will be brought into conformity with Christ and all that is perishable will be transformed by his glory. St Paul says: “For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (v. 53).

Then the triumph of Christ will at last be complete, because, St Paul tells us further, showing how the ancient prophecies of Scripture are brought about, death will be overcome once and for all and with it sin which caused it to enter the world and the Law that establishes sin without providing the power to overcome it: “‘Death is swallowed up in victory’. / ‘O death where is your victory? / O death, where is your sting?’ / The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law” (vv. 54-56).

St Paul tells us, therefore, that every man and woman, through baptism in the death and Resurrection of Christ, participates in the victory of the One who defeated death first, setting out on a journey of transformation that is manifested from this moment in a newness of life that will reach its fullness at the end of time.

It is indeed significant that the passage ends with an expression of gratitude: “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57). The song of triumph over death changes into a hymn of thanksgiving raised to the Victor. This evening, in celebrating vespers in

praise of God, let us too join our voices, minds and hearts in this hymn of thanksgiving for what divine grace worked in the Apostle to the Gentiles and for the wonderful saving plan which God the Father brings about in us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we raise our prayers we are confident that we too will be transformed and brought into conformity with the image of Christ. This is particularly true in the prayer for Christian unity. Indeed, when we implore the gift of the unity of Christ's disciples, we make our own the desire expressed by Jesus Christ on the eve of his Passion and death in the prayer he addressed to the Father: "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). The prayer for Christian unity for this reason is nothing other than participation in the realization of the divine plan for the Church and the active commitment to reestablishing unity is a task and a great responsibility for all.

Although in our day we are experiencing the sorrowful situation of division, we Christians can and must look to the future with hope, since Christ's victory means surmounting all that prevents us from sharing the fullness of life with him and with others. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ confirms that God's goodness conquers evil and love conquers death. He accompanies us in the fight against the destructive power of sin that damages humanity and God's entire creation.

The presence of the Risen Christ calls all of us Christians to act together in the cause of good. United in Christ, we are called to share his mission, which is to bring hope to wherever injustice, hatred and desperation prevail. Our divisions dim our witness to Christ. The goal of full unity, which we await in active hope and for which we pray trustingly, is no secondary victory but an important one for the good of the human family.

In the dominant culture today, the idea of victory is often associated with instant success. In the Christian perspective, on the contrary, victory is a long, and in our human eyes, not always uncomplicated process of transformation and growth in goodness. It happens in accordance with God's time, not ours, and requires of us deep faith and patient perseverance. Although the Kingdom of God bursts definitively into history with Jesus' Resurrection, it has not yet come about fully. The final victory will only be won with the Second Coming of the Lord, which we await with patient hope.

Our expectation of the visible unity of the Church must also be patient and trusting. Only in this frame of mind do our prayers and our daily commitment to Christian unity find their full meaning. The attitude of patient waiting does not mean passivity or resignation but rather a prompt and attentive response to every possibility of communion and brotherhood that the Lord gives us.

In this spiritual climate I would like to extend special greetings, first to Cardinal Monterisi, Archpriest of this Basilica, and to the Abbot and the community of Benedictine monks for hosting us. I greet Cardinal Koch, President of the [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity](#), and all the co-workers of this Dicastery. I address my cordial and brotherly greetings to His Eminence

Metropolitan Gennadios, Representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and to Reverend Canon Richardson, Personal Representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to all the Representatives of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here this evening.

In addition, I am particularly glad to greet several members of the Working Group composed of spokespeople of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities present in Poland, who prepared the booklets for the Week of Prayer this year. I would like to express my gratitude to them and my hope that they will continue on the way of reconciliation and fruitful collaboration. I am also pleased to greet the members of the Global Christian Forum who are in Rome in these days to reflect on increasing the number of participants in the ecumenical movement to include new members. Further, I greet the group of students from the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey of the World Council of Churches.

I would like to entrust to St Paul's intercession all those who, with their prayers and their commitment, are sparing no effort in the cause of Christian unity. Although, at times, one has the impression that there is still a long way to go to reach the reestablishment of communion and that the road is fraught with obstacles, I invite all to renew their determination to pursue, with courage and generosity, the unity which is God's will, after the example of St Paul who, in the face of every kind of difficulty always firmly kept his trust in God which led to the fulfilment of his work.

Moreover, on this journey there is no lack of positive signs of rediscovered brotherhood and of a shared sense of responsibility for the great problems that are afflicting our world. All this is a cause of joy and of great hope and must encourage us to continue in our endeavour to reach the final goal all together, knowing that in the Lord our effort is not in vain (cf. 1 Cor 15:58). Amen.

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