



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 17 January 1979*

The world Week of prayer for the unity of Christians opens tomorrow. Today, therefore, I would like to reflect together with you on this important subject which commits every baptized person, pastors and faithful (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 5), each according to his own capacity, his function, and the place he occupies in the Church.

1. This problem is binding in a special way on the bishop of this ancient Church of Rome, founded on the preaching and the testimonies of the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul. Service of unity is the primary duty of the ministry of the bishop of Rome.

For this reason I am glad to know that in our diocese of Rome, as in so many other dioceses of the world, this week has been organized with care and with the aim of involving everyone: parishes, religious communities, Catholic organizations, schools, youth groups, and even environments of suffering, such as hospitals. I am glad to know that, where possible, the attempt is being made to organize also common prayers with the other brother Christians, in harmony of sentiments, in order that, in obedience to the Lord's will, we may grow in faith, towards full unity, for the building up of the body of Christ, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith", as the apostle Paul writes to the first Christian of Ephesus, "and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

The pursuit of unity must penetrate all levels of the life of the Church, and involve the whole people of God, to arrive finally at a concordant and unanimous profession of faith.

2. A privileged instrument for participation in pursuit of the unity of all Christians is prayer. Jesus Christ himself left us his extreme desire for unity through a prayer to the Father: "that they may all

be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:21).

Also the Second Vatican Council strongly recommended to us prayer for the unity of Christians, defining it "the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8). As the soul to the body, so prayer gives life, consistency, spirit, and finality to the ecumenical movement.

Prayer puts us, first and foremost, before the Lord, purifies us in intentions, sentiments, in our heart, and produces that "interior conversion", without which there is no real ecumenism (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7).

Prayer, furthermore, reminds us that unity, ultimately, is a gift of God, a gift for which we must ask and for which we must prepare in order that we may be granted it. Thus also unity, like every gift, like every grace, depends "upon God's mercy" (Rom 9: 16). Since the reconciliation of all Christians "transcends human powers and gifts" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24), continual and fervent prayer expresses our hope, which does not play us false, and our confidence in the Lord who will make everything new (cf. Rom 5:5; Rev 21:5).

3. But the action of God requires our answer, more and more faithful, more and more full. This holds good also and above all for the construction of the unity of all Christians.

This year, the subject of the Week of prayer for unity calls our attention precisely to the exercise of some fundamental virtues of Christian life. "Be in one another's service for the glory of God." This subject is taken from a passage of the First Letter of Peter (1 Pt 4:7-11). The apostle addresses some communities of the diaspora, of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia, Asia, at a moment of particular difficulty. He recalls these communities to Christian faith and affirms that "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Pt 4:7). The time in which we are living is eschatological time, the time, that is, which goes from the redemption operated by Christ to his glorious return. We must therefore live in active expectation. In this context the apostle Peter calls them to keep sober in order to dedicate themselves to prayer; he asks them to keep love "unfailing", to practise hospitality, that is, openness and generous giving to the brethren, in particular to the under-privileged and emigrants. He asks them to live according to the grace received and to put this grace in the service of others, as good stewards of God's varied grace.

Faithful listening to this advice and its practical application purifies, on the one hand, the relations between persons, because "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8), on the other hand it consolidates the community, strengthens it and makes it grow. It is a question of a real exercise of the pursuit of unity. The subject proposes to us to live together as much as possible the common heritage of Christians. Contacts, cooperation, mutual love, reciprocal service, make us get to know one another better, make us rediscover what we have in common, and make us also see how much is still divergent between us. These contacts also urge us to find ways to overcome these

divergences.

The Second Vatican Council had pointed out to us that from cooperation one can easily learn "how the road to the unity of Christians may be made smooth" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 12). In fact, prayer, mutual love, service of one another construct fellowship among Christians and put them on the way to full unity.

4. In this week our prayer for the unity of Christians must be, above all, prayer of thanks and supplication. Yes, we must thank the Lord who has brought forth among all Christians the desire for unity (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1), and who has blessed this pursuit, which is extending and deepening more and more.

In recent times the Catholic Church has set up brotherly relations with all the other Churches and ecclesial Communities, relations which we wish to continue and deepen with trust and hope. With the Orthodox Churches of the East the dialogue of charity has made us rediscover a communion that is almost full, even if still imperfect. It is consoling to see how this new attitude of understanding is not limited only to the leaders of the Churches, but is gradually penetrating into the local Churches; for a change of relations on the local plane is indispensable for all further progress.

The practice of the virtues, to which this week of prayers calls us, can also cause new creative experiences of unity to spring forth.

In this connection I wish to recall that a theological dialogue is about to open between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches of Byzantine tradition in order to eliminate those difficulties which still prevent eucharistic concelebration and full unity. This is an important moment and we implore God's help for it. Dialogues have also been in progress for some time with our Western brothers, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed Churches, and consoling convergences have been met with on subjects which, in the past, constituted deep divergences. Useful relations have also been set up with the World Council of Churches and with other confessional and interconfessional Christian organizations. The way, however, is not finished, and we must continue it, to reach the goal. So let us renew our prayer to the Lord, in order that he may give Christians light and strength to do everything possible to obtain full unity in truth as soon as possible, so that "speaking the truth in love, we (shall) grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4:15-16).

5. And now, dear brothers and sisters, let us unite in prayer and make ours the intentions set forth above, with the following invocations, to which you are all invited to answer: "Listen to us, O Lord!"

— In the spirit of Christ, our Lord, let us pray for the Catholic Church, for the other Churches, for the whole of mankind.

— All: Listen to us, Lord.

— Let us pray for all those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice and for those who are striving for freedom and peace.

— All: Listen to us, Lord!

— Let us pray for those who exercise a ministry in the Church, for those who have special responsibilities in social life, and for all those who are in the service of the little and the weak.

— All: Listen to us, Lord!

— Let us ask God for ourselves for the courage to persevere in our commitment for the realization of the unity of all Christians.

— All: Listen to us, Lord!

Lord God we trust in you. Grant us to act in the way pleasing to you. Grant us to be faithful servants of your glory. Amen.

In the hope that during the week for unity you will continue to pray for these intentions, I willingly impart to you the Apostolic Blessing.

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