



# The Holy See

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CONCLUSION OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

## **HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II**

*Thursday, 25 January 2001*

*Basilica of St Paul-Outside-the-Walls*

1. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (Jn 14: 6). These words from the Gospel of John have shone brightly on this *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* which ends today; they shine forth as a kind of programme for the new millennium on which we have set out.

I gladly express my respectful and heartfelt greeting to the Delegates of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities who have responded to my invitation and are here today to take part in this Ecumenical Celebration of the Word. With this celebration we solemnly conclude the days dedicated to more intense prayer for the great cause which is so close to our hearts.

Through the members of the Delegations gathered here I wish to convey to the leaders and faithful of the various Confessions my good wishes and my fraternal embrace of peace.

2. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The human heart, like the hearts of Jesus' disciples, is often troubled in the face of life's unforeseen events (cf. Jn 14: 1). Many people, especially the young, ask what path they should take. In the storm of words that they endure every day, they ask: Where is the truth? Which road should we take? How can we overcome the power of death with life?

These are basic questions which express the reawakening in many of a longing for the spiritual dimension of life. These questions Jesus has already answered, when he affirmed: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The task of Christians today is to repropose this decisive proclamation with all the power of their witness. Only in this way can the men and women of today discover that Christ is the power and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1: 24), that he is the fulfilment of every

human longing (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 45).

3. The ecumenical movement of the 20th century had the great distinction of clearly reaffirming the need for this witness. After centuries of separation, misunderstanding, indifference and even conflict, there has been a rebirth among Christians of the realization that faith in Christ unites them, and that this faith is a force capable of overcoming all that separates them (cf. Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, n. 20). By the grace of the Holy Spirit, with the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has committed herself irrevocably to travel the path of the ecumenical quest (cf. *ibid.*, n. 3).

The differences that still exist between us must not and cannot be downplayed. True ecumenical commitment is not a search for compromise, nor does it make concessions where the Truth is concerned. It knows that divisions between Christians are contrary to the will of Christ; it knows that they are a scandal that weakens the voice of the Gospel. Its efforts are aimed not at ignoring divisions but at overcoming them.

At the same time, awareness of what is still lacking for full communion helps us to appreciate more fully what we already share. In fact, despite the misunderstandings and the many problems that still keep us from feeling fully united, important elements of holiness and truth which belong to the one Church of Christ, even outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church, urge us on to full unity (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nn. 8, 15; *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3). It is not that outside the Catholic Church there is an ecclesial void (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 13); indeed, there are many fruits of the Spirit, such as holiness and witness to Christ - sometimes even to the shedding of blood - which evoke our admiration and gratitude (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 4; *Ut unum sint*, nn. 12, 15).

The dialogues which have developed since the Second Vatican Council have brought a new awareness of the heritage and task common to Christians, and have produced very significant results. We have not yet of course reached the goal, but we have taken important steps forward.

From being far apart and, often, adversaries - as we once were - we have grown closer and become friends. We have rediscovered Christian brotherhood. We know that our Baptism incorporates us into the one Body of Christ, in a communion that, while not yet full, is nonetheless real (cf. *Ut unum sint*, nn. 41-42). We have every reason to praise the Lord and thank him.

4. With a profoundly grateful heart I think back to the Jubilee Year. From the ecumenical point of view, the Jubilee recorded moments that were truly prophetic and moving (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 12).

There remains the vivid memory of the gathering in this basilica on 18 January 2000, when for the first time a Holy Door was opened in the presence of Delegates of Churches and Ecclesial Communities from all over the world. Indeed, the Lord granted me still more: I was able to cross

the threshold of that Door, the symbol of Christ, together with the representative of my Eastern Brother, Patriarch Bartholomew, and with the Primate of the Anglican Communion. For a brief moment - all too brief! - we walked together. But how encouraging that short journey was, a sign of God's providence along the remainder of the road that we must still travel! We gathered once more in the company of representatives of many Churches and Ecclesial Communities at the Colosseum on 7 May for the commemoration of the 20th Century Witnesses to the Faith: we felt this celebration as a seed of life for the future (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, nn. 7, 41).

With joy I took part in the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, to celebrate the millennium with a day of prayer and fasting on the vigil of the Transfiguration, 6 August 2000. It is with feelings of deep emotion that I think back to the ecumenical meetings which I was able to have during my pilgrimage to Egypt, Mount Sinai, and especially the Holy Land.

I have grateful memories of the visit of the Delegation sent by the Ecumenical Patriarch for the feast of Sts Peter and Paul, and the visit of the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II. Nor can I forget the many representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities whom I have met in Rome during these last months.

5. The Jubilee also drew attention in a positive way to the painful divisions which still exist. It would be less than honest to disguise or ignore them. But they should not lead us to mutual recriminations or discouragement. The pain resulting from misunderstanding or mistakes must be overcome by prayer and penance, by signs of love, by theological investigation. The questions which remain open are not an obstacle to dialogue; rather, they ought to be seen as an incentive to frank and charitable discussion. The question remains: *Quanta est nobis via?* How long until our journey comes to an end? It is not ours to know the answer, but we are encouraged by hope, knowing that we are being led by the presence of the Risen One and the inexhaustible power of his Spirit, always capable of new surprises (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 12).

On the strength of this certainty, we look to the new millennium. It lies before us like a boundless stretch of water into which we must cast our nets (cf. *Lk 5: 6ff.*). My thoughts turn first of all to the young people who will build the new century and who have the ability to change its character. We have a duty to them of bearing common witness.

6. A fundamental task in this perspective is the purification of memory. In the second millennium we were hostile and divided; we condemned and fought one another. We must forget the shadows and the wounds of the past and strain forward towards the coming hour of God (cf. *Phil 3: 13*).

To purify our memories also means to develop a spirituality of communion (*koinonia*), on the model of the Trinity, a communion which embodies and reveals the very essence of the Church (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 42). We need to live and practise that communion which, though not yet full, already exists between us. Leaving behind distrust, we must meet, know one another

better, learn to love one another, and work together fraternally as much as possible.

Yet the dialogue of charity would not be genuine without the dialogue of truth. Overcoming our differences involves serious theological study. We cannot gloss over those differences; we cannot alter the deposit of faith. But we can certainly try to understand more deeply the Church's teaching in the light of the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers, and to explain that teaching in a way that makes it intelligible today.

All the same, it is not up to us to "create unity". Unity is the Lord's gift. And so we must pray, as we have done during this week, that we may be given the Spirit of unity. At every celebration of the Eucharist the Catholic Church prays: "Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom". Prayer for unity is a part of every Eucharist. It is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 21).

7. The new year just begun is a very promising time for us to bear witness together that Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life". We shall have the opportunity for this, and already there are hopeful signs on the horizon. In 2001, for example, all Christians will celebrate Christ's Resurrection on the same date. This should encourage us to reach agreement on a common date for this feast. Christ's victory over death and hatred has also inspired the initiative of the World Council of Churches to devote the next 10 years to eliminating violence.

I myself have high expectations for the journeys that will take me to Syria and Ukraine. It is my desire that they should contribute to reconciliation and peace between Christians. Once more I will become a pilgrim on the pathways of the world, in order to bear witness to Christ, "the way, and the truth, and the life".

Your presence today at this celebration, dear Delegates of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, encourages me in my commitment, a commitment which I see as an essential part of my ministry. Let us go forward together, with new enthusiasm, on the path to full unity! Christ travels this path with us.

To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.