



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 17 January 2007

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins tomorrow. I myself will conclude it in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls this 25 January with the celebration of Vespers, to which representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities of Rome are also invited.

The days from 18 to 25 January, and in other parts of the world the week around Pentecost, are a strong time of commitment and prayer on the part of all Christians, who can avail themselves of the booklets produced jointly by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

I have been able to sense how sincere the desire for unity is at the meetings I have had with various representatives of Churches and Ecclesial Communities in these years, and in a most moving way, during my recent Visit to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Istanbul, Turkey.

On these and on other experiences that opened my heart to hope, I will reflect at greater length next Wednesday. The way to unity remains long and laborious; yet, it is necessary not to be discouraged and to journey on, in the first place relying on the unfailing support of the One who, before ascending into Heaven, promised his followers: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28: 20*).

Unity is a gift of God and the fruit of his Spirit's action. Consequently, it is important to pray. The

closer we draw to Christ, converting to his love, the closer we also draw to one another.

In some countries, including Italy, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is preceded by the Day of Christian-Jewish reflection, which is celebrated precisely today, 17 January.

For almost 20 years now the Italian Bishops' Conference has dedicated this Judaism Day to furthering knowledge and esteem for it and for developing the relationship of reciprocal friendship between the Christian and Jewish communities, a relationship that has developed positively since the Second Vatican Council and the historic visit of the Servant of God John Paul II to the Major Synagogue of Rome.

To grow and be fruitful, the Jewish-Christian friendship must also be based on prayer. Therefore, today I invite you all to address an ardent prayer to the Lord that Jews and Christians may respect and esteem one another and collaborate for justice and peace in the world.

This year the biblical theme proposed for common reflection and prayer during this "Week" is: "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (*Mk 7: 31-37*). These words are taken from Mark's Gospel and refer to the healing of a deaf-mute by Jesus. In this short passage, the Evangelist recounts that the Lord, after putting his fingers into his ears and touching his tongue with saliva, worked the miracle by saying: "Ephphatha", which means "be opened". Having regained his hearing and the gift of speech, the man roused the admiration of others by telling what had happened to him.

Every Christian, spiritually deaf and mute because of original sin, receives with Baptism the gift of the Lord who places his fingers on his face and thus, through the grace of Baptism, becomes able to hear the Word of God and to proclaim it to his brethren. Indeed, from that very moment it is his task to mature in knowledge and love for Christ so as to be able to proclaim and witness effectively to the Gospel.

This topic, shedding light on two aspects of the mission of every Christian community - the proclamation of the Gospel and the witness of charity -, also underlines how important it is to translate Christ's message into concrete initiatives of solidarity. This encourages the journey to unity because it can be said that any relief to the suffering of their neighbour which Christians offer together, however little, also helps to make more visible their communion and fidelity to the Lord's command.

Prayer for Christian unity cannot, however, be limited to one week a year. The unanimous plea to the Lord that in times and ways known only to him he may bring about the full unity of all his disciples must extend to every day of the year.

Furthermore, the harmony of intentions in the service to alleviate human suffering, the search for

the truth of Christ's message, conversion and penance are obligatory steps through which every Christian worthy of the name must join his brother or sister to implore the gift of unity and communion.

I exhort you, therefore, to spend these days in an atmosphere of prayerful listening to the Spirit of God, so that important steps may be made on the path to full and perfect communion among all Christ's disciples. May the Virgin Mary obtain this for us; may she, whom we invoke as Mother of the Church and help of all Christians, sustain our way towards Christ.

To special groups

Today, I am pleased to offer a cordial welcome to the Canons of the Chapter of Leeds Cathedral. I also extend a warm greeting to the members of the Cantinovum Choir from Finland. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, England, Australia and the United States of America, I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Today, we are celebrating the liturgical memorial of St Anthony Abbot, the outstanding Father of Monasticism, teacher of spiritual life and sublime model of Christian life. May his example help you, dear *young people*, to follow Christ without compromises; may he sustain you, dear *sick people*, in moments of hardship and trial; and may he stimulate you, *newly-weds*, not to neglect prayer in your everyday life.

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