



The Holy See

**LITURGY OF VESPERS
ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL
FOR THE CONCLUSION OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI**

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Thursday, 25 January 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During the "Week of Prayer" that will conclude this evening, the common entreaty addressed to the Lord for Christian unity was intensified in the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities across the world. Together, we meditated on the words of Mark's Gospel that have just been proclaimed: "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (Mk 7: 37), the biblical theme suggested by the Christian Communities of South Africa.

The situations of racism, poverty, conflict, exploitation, sickness and suffering in which they find themselves because of the impossibility of being able to make themselves understood in their needs, gives rise in them to an acute need to hear the word of God and to speak courageously.

Is not being deaf and mute, that is, being unable either to listen or to speak, a sign of a lack of communion and a symptom of division? Division and the inability to communicate, a consequence of sin, are contrary to God's plan. This year Africa has given us a theme for reflection of great religious and political importance, because the ability "to speak" and "to listen" is an essential condition for building the civilization of love.

The words "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" are good news that proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God and the healing of the inability to communicate and of division. This message is rediscovered in all Jesus' preaching and work. Wherever he went, whether travelling

through villages, cities or the countryside, the people "laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well" (Mk 6: 56).

The healing of the deaf-mute, on which we have meditated in these days occurred while Jesus, having left the region of Tyre, was making his way to the Sea of Galilee through the so-called "Decapolis", a multi-ethnic and multi-religious district (cf. Mk 7: 31), an emblematic situation even in our day.

As elsewhere, in the Decapolis too, they presented a sick man to Jesus, a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment (*moghilalon*), begging him to lay his hands upon him because they considered him a man of God.

Jesus took the man aside from the multitude and performed gestures that infer a salvific contact: he put his fingers into his ears, and touched the tongue of the sick man with his own saliva, then, looking up to Heaven, he commanded: "Be opened!". He spoke this command in Aramaic (*Ephphatha*), in all likelihood the language of the people present and of the deaf-mute himself. The Evangelist translated this term into Greek as (*dianoichthēti*). The ears of the deaf man were opened, his tongue was released, and "he spoke plainly" (*orthōs*).

Jesus exhorted them to say nothing about the miracle. But the more he exhorted them, "the more zealously they proclaimed it" (Mk 7: 36). And the comment full of wonder of those who had been there recalls the preaching of Isaiah concerning the coming of the Messiah: "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (Mk 7: 37).

The first lesson we draw from this biblical episode, also recalled in the rite of Baptism, is that listening, in the Christian perspective, is a priority.

In this regard, Jesus says explicitly: "Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11: 28). Indeed, to Martha worried about many things, he said that "one thing is needful" (Lk 10: 42). And from the context it becomes evident that this "one thing" is the obedient listening to the Word. Therefore, listening to the Word of God is a priority for our ecumenical commitment. Indeed, it is not we who act or who organize the unity of the Church. The Church does not make herself or live of herself, but from the creative Word that comes from the mouth of God.

To listen to the word of God together; to practice the *lectio divina* of the Bible, that is, reading linked with prayer; letting ourselves be amazed by the newness of the Word of God that never ages and is never depleted; overcoming our deafness to those words that do not correspond with our prejudices and our opinions; to listen and also to study, in the communion of believers of all ages; all these things constitute a path to be taken in order to achieve unity in the faith as a response to listening to the Word.

Anyone who listens to the Word of God can and must speak and transmit it to others, to those who have never heard it, or who have forgotten it and buried under the thorny troubles and deceptions of the world (cf. Mt 13: 22).

We must ask ourselves: have not we Christians become perhaps too silent? Do we not perhaps lack the courage to speak out and witness as did those who witnessed the healing of the deaf-mute in the Decapolis? Our world needs this witness; above all, it is waiting for the common testimony of Christians.

Therefore listening to the God who speaks also implies a reciprocal listening, the dialogue between the Churches and the Ecclesial Communities. Honest and loyal dialogue is the typical and indispensable instrument in the quest for unity.

The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council emphasized that if Christians do not know each other reciprocally, progress on the path of communion is unthinkable. Indeed, in dialogue we listen and communicate; we confront one another and, with God's grace, it is possible to converge on his Word, accepting its demands that apply to all.

The Council Fathers did not expect listening and dialogue to be helpful for ecumenical progress alone, but they added a perspective which refers to the Catholic Church herself: "From such dialogue" the conciliar text states, "will emerge still more clearly what the situation of the Catholic Church really is" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 9).

It is indispensable "that the doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety" for a dialogue that confronts, discusses and overcomes the divergences that still exist among Christians, but of course, "the manner and order in which Catholic belief is expressed should in no way become an obstacle to dialogue with our brethren" (*ibid.*, n. 11).

It is necessary to speak correctly (*orthos*) and in a comprehensible way. The ecumenical dialogue entails evangelical fraternal correction and leads to a reciprocal spiritual enrichment in the sharing of authentic experiences of faith and Christian life.

For this to happen, we must tirelessly implore the help of God's grace and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Christians of the whole world did during this special "Week" or what they will do in the Novena that precedes Pentecost, as on every appropriate occasion, raising their trusting prayer that all Christ's disciples may be one, and that, in listening to the Word, they may be able to give a concordant witness with the men and women of our time.

In this atmosphere of intense communion, I would like to address my cordial greeting to all those present: to the Cardinal Archpriest of this Basilica and to the Cardinal President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and to the other Cardinals, to my venerable Brothers in the

Episcopate and in the priesthood, to the Benedictine monks, to the men and women Religious, to the lay people who represent the entire diocesan community of Rome.

I would especially like to greet the brethren from the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities who have taken part in the celebration, thereby renewing the important tradition of concluding the "Week of Prayer" together on the day when we commemorate the striking conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus.

I am pleased to point out that the tomb of the Apostle to the Gentiles, where we are today, has recently undergone investigation and study, subsequent to which it was decided to make it visible to pilgrims by a timely adjustment under the main altar. I express my congratulations on this important initiative.

To the intercession of St Paul, untiring builder of the unity of the Church, I entrust the fruits of listening and of the common witness we have been able to experience in the numerous fraternal meetings and dialogues that took place during 2006, both with the Eastern Churches and with the Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the West.

In these events, it was possible to perceive the joy of brotherhood, together with regret that the tensions endure, keeping ever alive the hope that the Lord kindles within us.

Let us thank all those who helped to intensify the ecumenical dialogue with prayer, with the offering of their suffering and with their tireless action. It is above all to Our Lord Jesus Christ that we render our fervent thanks for everything.

May the Virgin Mary obtain that we may achieve as soon as possible the ardent desire of her divine Son: "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17: 21).

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