



The Holy See

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER AT ST PAUL-OUTSIDE-THE-WALLS

OPENING OF THE HOLY DOOR
WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Tuesday, 18 January 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters!¹ Paul's words to the community of Corinth, "*by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*" (1 Cor 12: 13), seem to form a counterpoint to Christ's prayer: "*As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, I pray that they may be one in us*" (Jn 17: 21). Christ's prayer for unity! It is the prayer he addressed to the Father just before his passion and death. Despite our resistance, it continues to bear fruit, although mysteriously. Does not the grace of the "ecumenical movement" flow from this prayer? As the Second Vatican Council affirms: "The Lord of ages ... in recent times has begun to bestow more generously upon divided Christians remorse and a longing for unity", so that there "increases from day to day a movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1). We were and are witnesses to this. We have all been enriched by the grace of the Spirit who guides our steps towards unity and full, visible communion. The *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* begins today in Rome with the celebration that has gathered us together. I wanted it to coincide with the opening of the Holy Door in this basilica dedicated to the Apostle of the Gentiles, to stress the ecumenical dimension that should mark the Jubilee Year 2000. At the beginning of a new Christian millennium, in this *year of grace* that invites us to be converted *more radically to the Gospel*, we must turn with more heartfelt prayer to the Spirit, imploring the grace of our unity.

"Baptized by one Spirit into one body": gathered in the basilica that bears Paul's name, we, representatives of different peoples and nations, of various Churches and Ecclesial Communities, feel directly challenged by these words of the Apostle of the Gentiles. We know we are brothers and sisters who are still divided, but we have set out with firm conviction on the path that leads to the full unity of Christ's Body.² Dear brothers and sisters, welcome to you all! I offer each of you the embrace of peace in the Lord who has gathered us together, as I cordially thank you for your presence, which I deeply appreciate. In each of you I would like to greet with a "holy kiss" (Rom 16: 16) all the members of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities that you worthily represent. Welcome to this gathering, which marks another step towards the unity of the Spirit in whom "*we have been baptized*". The Baptism we have received is one. It brings about a sacramental bond of unity among all who have been reborn through it. A purifying water, the "water of life", it enables us to pass through the one "door" which is Christ: "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved" (Jn 10: 9). Christ is the door of our salvation, which leads to reconciliation, to peace and to unity. He is the light of the world (cf. Jn 8: 12) and we, in conforming perfectly to him, are called to bring this light into the new century and the

new millennium. The humble symbol of a door which opens bears in itself an extraordinary wealth of meaning: it proclaims to all that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (*Jn* 14: 6). He is such for every human being. The more united we are, being recognized as disciples of Christ by loving one another as he has loved us (cf. *Jn* 13: 35; 15: 12), the more effective this proclamation will be. The Second Vatican Council has fittingly recalled that division openly contradicts Christ's will, scandalizes the world and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1).³ The unity desired by Jesus for his disciples is a sharing in the unity he has with the Father and which the Father has with him. "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you", he said at the Last Supper, "may they be one in us" (*Jn* 17: 21). Consequently, the Church, "a people made one in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (St Cyprian, *De Dom. orat.*, 23), cannot fail to look constantly at that supreme model and principle of unity which is resplendent in the Trinitarian mystery. The Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit are one in the distinction of Persons. Faith teaches us that, by the power of the Spirit, the Son became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man (*Creed*). At the gates of Damascus Paul has, in the power of the Spirit, a most extraordinary experience of the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ and becomes the Apostle of the One who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (*Phil* 2: 7). When he writes: "*by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*", he means to express his faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God and to reveal the particular analogy of Christ's body: the analogy between the body of the God-man, a physical body through which our redemption was wrought, and his mystical and social body, which is the Church. Christ lives in her, making himself present through the Holy Spirit in all who form one body in him.⁴ Can a body be divided? Can the Church, the Body of Christ, be divided? Ever since the first Councils, Christians have together professed "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Church. They know, with Paul, that there is one body, one Spirit and one hope to which all are called: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (*Eph* 4: 5-6). In contrast to this mystery of unity, which is a gift from above, the divisions bear a historical character that attests to the human weaknesses of Christians. The Second Vatican Council recognized that divisions arose "for which, often enough, people on both sides were to blame" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3). In this *year of grace*, each of us must have a greater awareness of his own personal responsibility regarding the breaches that have marked the history of Christ's Mystical Body. This awareness is indispensable if we are to advance towards that goal which the Council described as *unitatis redintegratio*, the restoration of our unity. But unity cannot be restored without inner conversion, because the desire for unity is born and grows from the renewal of mind, the love of truth, self-denial and the free outpouring of love. Thus: conversion of heart and holiness of life, with personal and community prayer for unity, are the nucleus from which the ecumenical movement draws its strength and substance.

The longing for unity goes hand in hand with a profound ability to "sacrifice" what is personal, in order to dispose the soul to ever greater fidelity to the Gospel. *Preparing ourselves for the sacrifice of unity* means changing our viewpoint, broadening our horizons, knowing how to recognize the action of the Holy Spirit who is at work in our brethren, discovering new dimensions of holiness and opening ourselves to fresh aspects of Christian commitment. If, sustained by prayer, we can renew our minds and hearts, the dialogue we are pursuing will eventually go beyond the limits of an exchange of ideas and become an exchange of gifts, a dialogue of love and truth which challenges and urges us to move ahead in order to offer God "the greatest sacrifice", which is our peace and fraternal harmony (cf. St Cyprian, *De Dom. orat.*, n. 23).⁵ In this basilica built in honour of Paul, remembering the words with which the Apostle today has challenged our faith and our hope, "*by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*", let us ask Christ to forgive everything in the Church's history which has compromised his plan of unity. Let us confidently ask him, *the door of life, the door of salvation, the door of peace*, to support our steps, to make the progress already achieved long-lasting, to

grant us the support of his Spirit, so that our commitment will be ever more authentic and effective. Dear brothers and sisters, my wish at this solemn moment is that the year *of grace 2000* will be an opportunity for all of Christ's disciples to give new impetus to the ecumenical commitment and to welcome it as a *demand of the Christian conscience*. The future of evangelization, the proclamation of the Gospel to the men and women of our time, greatly depends on this. From this basilica, which today sees us gathered together with hope-filled hearts, I look ahead to the new millennium. The wish that flows from my heart and becomes a fervent entreaty before the throne of the eternal Father is that, in the not too distant future, Christians will at last be reconciled and be able to walk together again as one people obedient to the Father's plan, a people who can repeat with one voice and in the joy of renewed brotherhood: "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with all the spiritual blessings in the heavens" (Eph 1: 3). May the Lord Jesus hear our prayers and our ardent plea. Amen! "*Unitate, unitate!*" This cry which I heard during my visit to Bucharest comes back to me like a loud echo. "*Unitate, unitate*", shouted the people gathered for the Eucharistic celebration: all Christians, Catholics, Orthodox and Evangelical Protestants were chanting together: "*Unitate, unitate*". Thank you for this call, this comforting call of our brothers and sisters. Perhaps we too can leave this basilica crying out like them: "*Unità, unità; Unité, Unity*". Thank you.

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