



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY  
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL  
FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY**

*To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Walter Kasper*

*President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*1. I willingly address this Message to you in order to ask you to be kind enough to convey my greeting to the Members, Consultors and Officials of this Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on the occasion of its Plenary Assembly. Many of the participants in this important event are associated for the first time with the task entrusted to the Pontifical Council, and thus starting to share directly in the "passion" for the unity of all Christ's disciples. That the disciples "may all be one" was Christ's prayer to the Father on the eve of his Passion (cf. Jn 17: 20-23). It is a prayer that demands our commitment since it constitutes an indispensable task for the Church, which feels called to spare no effort in hastening its fulfilment. In fact, "to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity. Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer: "*ut unum sint*" (Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 9).2. I am certain that the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, as well as the experts in various disciplines gathered at the plenary meeting, are fully aware of the Church's urgent need to advance in the task of re-establishing full communion among Christians. Moreover, the commitment with which my Predecessors have worked and prayed for the achievement of this goal is visible to all. I myself have said several times that the movement directed at restoring unity among all Christians is one of the great pastoral concerns of my Pontificate. Today, 25 years after my election to the See of Peter, I thank the Lord because I can see that in the ecumenical process, despite the ups and downs, we have taken important and meaningful steps towards our goal.3. Of course, the ecumenical route is not an easy one. As we gradually progress, we can more easily make out the obstacles and estimate their difficulty. The same goal declared in the various theological dialogues in which the Catholic Church is engaged with the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities seems even in certain cases to become more problematic. The prospect of full and visible communion can sometimes give rise to distressing phenomena and reactions in those who want to accelerate the process at all costs, or in those who become discouraged at the long journey ahead. We are learning at the school of ecumenism, however, to live this interim period with humble trust, aware that it is, in any case, a journey of no return. Together let us overcome disagreements and difficulties, together let us recognize our non-compliance and procrastinations regarding unity, let us re-affirm our desire for reconciliation wherever it seems threatened by mistrust or suspicion. All this can only be done, in the Catholic Church herself and in her ecumenical action, by starting out with the conviction that there is no other option, for "the movement promoting Christian unity is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather,

ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work" (*ibid.*, n. 20).<sup>4</sup> Like a beacon to guide us between the shadows of the divisions inherited from so many centuries of sinning against unity, our steadfast hope endures that Christ's Spirit will sustain us on this crossing, healing our weaknesses and reticence and teaching us to live his commandment of love to the full: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13: 35). The force of love impels us towards one another and prepares us for listening, dialogue, conversion and renewal (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1). The main theme of this Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity - "Ecumenical spirituality" - fits most appropriately into this specific context.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the years, many initiatives have been started to encourage Christians to pray. I wrote in the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*: "Along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to *common prayer*, the prayerful union of those who gather together around Christ himself" (n. 22). Among these initiatives, the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" deserves special encouragement. I myself have often urged people to make it a widespread practice that is supported everywhere, not a routine habit but a prayer that is constantly enlivened by the sincere desire for an ever broader commitment to restoring the unity of all the baptized. Indeed, I have also encouraged the faithful of the Catholic Church in many ways not to forget in their daily conversation with God to make their own the prayer for Christian unity. I am therefore deeply grateful to those who have supported my concern and have constantly prayed for Christian unity in their conversation with the Lord. Forty years after the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, when many of the pioneers of ecumenism have already entered the Father's House, we can see in looking back over the ground covered that we have come a long way and have entered the very heart of the divisions, exactly where they hurt most. This has come about above all thanks to prayer. We must, therefore, take note of the "primacy" we should give to the commitment to pray. Only an intense ecumenical spirituality, lived in docility to Christ and fully open to the promptings of the Spirit, will help us live with the necessary dynamism this interim period in which we must sum up our progress and our defeats, with the lights and the shadows on our journey of reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> I hope, Your Eminence, that new insights will stem from the Plenary Assembly of this Pontifical Council that will broaden ecumenical spirituality and root it more deeply in the souls of all. This will be an effective antidote to any discouragement, doubt or hesitation. The most truly pleasing sacrifice to offer to God is peace and fraternal concord among Christians: the spectacle of a people gathered together by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. St Cyprian, *De Dominica Oratione*, 23: PL 4, 536). My Blessing to you all! *From the Vatican, 3 November 2003* JOHN PAUL II