



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO POLAND (MAY 31-JUNE 10, 1997)

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II AT THE ECUMENICAL PRAYER SERVICE

31 May 1997

*Praised be Jesus Christ!*¹. I cordially greet all here present at our joint Ecumenical Prayer Service. I thank the Cardinal Metropolitan of Wrocław for his words of welcome. I greet Monsignor Jan Szarek, President of the Polish Ecumenical Council, and in his person all the Representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities which are members of the Polish Ecumenical Council. With a sense of communion in Christ, I greet the Sisters and Brothers of other Orthodox Churches which have been invited, the Representatives of Churches and Protestant Communities from abroad, and also the Representatives of other Christian Churches and Communities. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, has gathered us together here. May his Name be praised in this meeting, and may the Holy Spirit enable the word of God, which we have heard with the obedience of faith, to bear fruit.² The principal theme of this Liturgy of the Word is contained in what Jesus included in his priestly prayer, the day before his Passion and Death on the Cross. It is the prayer for the unity of his disciples: Father, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:20-21). This prayer includes not only the Apostles, but also all the generations of those who will receive the same faith from the Apostles. We constantly make reference to these words of Christ in the Upper Room in ecumenical prayer and action: *Ut unum sint*. Here it is a matter of unity in the likeness of Trinitarian unity. "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (Jn 17:21). The mutual relation of the Persons in the unity of the Blessed Trinity is the highest form of unity, its supreme model. While Christ prays for the unity of his disciples, he shows at the same time that this unity is a gift, as well as an obligation. It is a gift which we receive from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is also an obligation, since it has been given as a task. It has been given as a task to all Christian generations, beginning with the Apostles; to everyone, in the first and second millennia. Christ twice returns to this essential thought. For he prays thus: "The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me" (Jn 17:22-23). Here Christ crosses, so to speak, the boundaries of the divine unity of the Trinity

and passes to that unity which is the task of Christians. He says: "that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23). Christ's disciples must come together in perfect unity, also visible, so that the world may see in them a visible sign for itself. The unity of Christians therefore has this essential meaning: to bear witness to the credibility of Christ's mission, to reveal the Father's love for him and for his disciples. Precisely for this reason, this unity, the supreme gift of the Most Holy Trinity, is at the same time the loftiest obligation of all who profess Christ.³ When they listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Churches and Ecclesial Communities feel called irrevocably to the search for an ever more profound unity, not only interior but also visible. A unity that becomes a sign for the world, so that the world may recognize this and so that the world may believe. There is no turning back on the ecumenical path! Christians who live in societies, where many experience in a tragic way external and internal divisions, constantly need to deepen their awareness of the magnificent gift of reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ. Only in this way can they themselves become messengers of reconciliation between those who yearn to be reconciled with God, and thus contribute to the reconciliation between Churches and Ecclesial Communities as a path and stimulus to reconciliation between Nations. This exhortation to reconciliation will also be the topic of the Second European Ecumenical Assembly, which from 23 to 29 June of this year will take place at Graz in Austria. The effects of many events which have taken place in the history of the world and of Europe in fact call for reconciliation. My thoughts willingly return to our last meeting in the Church of the Most Holy Trinity in Warsaw, in 1991. At that time I said that we need tolerance, but that among Churches tolerance alone is certainly not enough. What kind of brothers and sisters are people who only tolerate one another? We also need to accept one another. Today I recall these words and resolutely confirm them. But we cannot be content even with mutual acceptance. For the Lord of history is bringing us to the Third Millennium of Christianity. A great hour is striking. Our reply should be equal to the great moment of this special *kairos* of God. Here, in this place, I wish to say: Tolerance is not enough! Mutual acceptance is not enough. Jesus Christ, he who is and who is to come, expects from us a visible sign of unity, a joint witness. Sisters and Brothers, I come to you with this message. I ask for a joint witness borne to Christ before the world. I ask this in the name of Christ! I address myself first to all the faithful of the Catholic Church, especially my Brothers in the episcopal ministry, and also the clergy, consecrated persons and all the lay faithful. I also dare to ask this of you, beloved Sisters and Brothers of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. In the name of Christ, I ask for a joint Christian witness. The West so much needs our deep and living faith at the historic stage of the building of a new system with many different points of reference. The East, spiritually devastated by years of a programmed doing without God, needs a strong sign of trust in Christ. Europe needs all of us solidly united round the Cross and the Gospel. We must read the signs of the times carefully. Jesus Christ expects from all of us the witness of faith. The future of evangelization is linked to the witness of unity given by the Church. A sign of this joint witness is fraternal cooperation in the ecumenical sphere in Poland. I am thinking here of the special group which has worked on the Sacrament of Baptism as the foundation of the Christian unity which already exists. It has already succeeded in publishing the results of its work. You are also preparing an ecumenical translation of Sacred Scripture. A private initiative of certain people has been transformed into official inter-Church cooperation. The result of this cooperation is the ecumenical translation of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, published by the Biblical Society on 17 February this year. We hope that an ecumenical translation of the whole Bible will be published for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. At present you intend to establish a new inter-Church ecumenical structure endowed with greater dynamism. This initiative, necessary from every point of view, is being sponsored by the Polish Ecumenical Council. I hope that this idea will be transformed into an effective forum for meetings, dialogue, understanding and practical joint actions, and therefore also for witness. I wish to thank cordially the initiators of this project and to express my sincere appreciation for these noble efforts.⁴ The difficult path of reconciliation leads to joint witness, without which

unity is impossible. Our Churches and Ecclesial Communities need reconciliation. Can we be fully reconciled with Christ without being fully reconciled among ourselves? Can we bear joint and effective witness to Christ if we are not reconciled with one another? Can we be reconciled with one another without forgiving one another? Forgiveness is the condition for reconciliation. But this cannot take place without interior transformation and conversion, which is the work of grace. "The commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer" (*Ut unum sint*, 2). The reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel points out the need for conversion when it refers to the scattering of Israel: "For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land ... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez 36:24,26). To set out on the ecumenical path to unity requires a change of heart and renewal of the mind. We should therefore implore from the Holy Spirit the grace of humility, an attitude of fraternal generosity to others. In the Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul encourages his readers to lead a life in a manner worthy of their calling, to cultivate in themselves the virtues of humility, meekness and patience, and to bear with one another in love (cf. Eph 4:1-3). This human cooperation with the grace of the Holy Spirit manifests the joint hope of all Christ's disciples to come to full unity. With sincere prayer let us support our ecumenical commitment. In this our second millennium, in which the unity of Christ's disciples has suffered tragic divisions in the East and in the West, prayer for the rediscovery of full unity is a special obligation of ours. We must yearn for the restoration of the unity willed by Christ, and we must pray for this unity: for it is a gift of the Most Holy Trinity. The stronger the link which unites us to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the easier it will be for us to deepen our mutual brotherhood.⁵ Today's meeting is taking place in the context of the International Eucharistic Congress which is going on right here in Wrocław . It is an expression of our faith and our devotion, but it is also a great act of worship, which preserves in the Church the memory of Christ. The Eucharist, by making present the mystery of the Redemption, the Sacrifice of Christ offered on the Cross, brings about union with him, awakens the desire and hope of our resurrection in the fullness of his life. This great mystery of faith strengthens our inner conviction of personal union with Christ and reawakens the need for reconciliation with others. Christians, belonging to the various Churches, and united by the same Baptism, jointly recognize the great role which, in man's reconciliation with God and neighbour, is played by the Eucharist, although "due to disagreements in matters of faith, it is not yet possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic Liturgy. And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so 'with one heart'. At times it seems that we are closer to being able finally to seal this 'real though not yet full' communion" (*Ut unum sint*, 45). In this great event, which we are celebrating here in Wrocław with the participation not only of Catholics but also of the brothers and sisters from other Churches from Poland and abroad, can be seen the beginning of ecumenical conversion and the hoped-for reconciliation of the Christian Churches and Communities. That unity will be perfect when it becomes possible for everyone to join in the celebration around the same chalice. It will be the expression of the unity of every community at the local and universal level, the expression of our perfect union with the Lord and among ourselves. For "almost everyone, though in different ways, longs that there may be one visible Church of God, a Church truly universal and sent forth to the whole world, that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God" (*Ut unum sint*, 7). In recent years the distance which separates the Churches and Ecclesial Communities from one another has diminished significantly. Even so it is still too great! Too great! Christ did not will it so! We must do everything possible to restore the fullness of communion. We cannot stop along this path. Let us turn once again to Jesus' priestly prayer, in which he says: "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21). May these words of Christ be for us all an exhortation to make an effort on behalf of the great work of unity, on the threshold

of the Year 2000 which is drawing to a close. In today's liturgy we sing the Psalm of the Good Shepherd: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want ... He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 23:1-4). This is a great encouragement to trust and ecumenical hope. If the divisions among Christians correspond to that "valley of the shadow of death" through which all our Communities are passing, there is still the Lord, there is Christ, the Good Shepherd. It is he who guides and it is he who will bring the separated Christian Communities to that unity for which he prayed so fervently the day before his Passion on the Cross. During this joint ecumenical prayer service let us ask God, who is the Father of us all, to gather together all his scattered children, to lead them effectively on the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation, so that they will bear joint witness to Jesus Christ, his Son, who is Lord and Saviour, the same yesterday, today and for ever (cf. Heb 13:21). Father, may they "all be one" - *ut unum sint!* (Jn 17:21). © Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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