

## ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

### **"Let's Accept the Invitation to 'Pray Without Ceasing'"**

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 23, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered today at the general audience in Paul VI Hall during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

\* \* \*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which comes to an end Friday, Jan. 25. This day marks the conversion of St. Paul the Apostle. Christians from various churches and ecclesiastical communities come together at this time in unanimous prayer to ask the Lord Jesus for the re-establishment of unity among his disciples.

It is a unanimous plea made with one soul and one heart in response to the Redeemer's own desire, who turned to our Father at the Last Supper and said, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:20-21). Asking for the gift of unity, Christians join in Christ's prayer and commit themselves to work actively so that all of humanity welcomes and recognizes Christ as our only Shepherd and Lord, and thus experiences the joy of his love.

This year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity takes on a special value and meaning, because it celebrates its 100th anniversary. From its beginnings it was a truly fertile intuition. It began in 1908: Father Paul Wattson, an American Anglican, founder of the "Society of the Atonement" (community of the Brothers and Sisters of Atonement), together with an Episcopalian, Father Spencer Jones, launched the prophetic idea of an octave of prayers for the unity of Christians. The idea was welcomed by the archbishop of New York and the papal nuncio.

In 1916 the call to pray for unity was then extended to the entire Catholic Church, thanks to the intervention of my venerated predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, with the papal brief "At Perpetuum Rei Memoriam."

The initiative provoked much interest and was gradually established everywhere, perfecting its

structure with time, and evolving also thanks to the contribution of Abbé Couturier (1936).

Later, when the prophetic wind of the Second Vatican Council blew, the urgency of unity was felt even more. After the Conciliar assembly the journey continued for the patient quest for full communion among all Christians, an ecumenical journey that year after year has found one of its most defining and beneficial moments in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

One hundred years after the first call to pray together for unity, this Week of Prayer has now become a consolidated tradition, preserving the spirit and the dates chosen by Father Wattson. Indeed he chose them for their symbolic meaning. According to the calendar at that time, Jan. 18 was the feast of the Chair of St. Peter, which is a strong foundation and guarantee of unity of the people of God, while on Jan. 25, as in present times, the liturgy celebrates St. Paul's conversion.

While we give thanks to the Lord for these 100 years of prayer and of common engagement among many disciples of Christ, we remember with gratitude the author of this providential spiritual initiative, Father Wattson, and with him all those who promoted and enriched it with their contributions, making it something all Christians own together.

I was just telling you that the Second Vatican Council had dedicated a great deal of time and attention to the subject of Christian unity, especially in its decree on the Church ("Unitatis Redintegratio") in which, among other things, the importance of prayer in promoting unity is particularly emphasized. Prayer is at the very heart of all church life. "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (UR, 8).

Thanks to this spiritual ecumenism -- sanctity of life, conversion of heart, private and public prayer -- the joint pursuit of unity has made great strides forward in the last decade and has diversified in many initiatives; from getting acquainted with and meeting members of various churches and church communities; to conversations and collaboration among various branches that become increasingly friendly; to theological discussions on concrete ways in which we can join together and collaborate with each other.

That which has given, and continues to give, life to this journey toward full unification for all Christians first and foremost -- is prayer. "Pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17) is the theme of this year's Week of Prayer. It is at the same time an invitation that never stops resonating in our communities, because prayer is the light, the strength, the guide for our

footsteps as we listen humbly to our God, the God of us all.

Secondly, the Council emphasizes common prayer, joint prayer between Catholics and other Christians directed toward the only celestial Father. To this end the Decree on Ecumenism affirms: "These prayers offered in common are doubtless a very effective means to beseech for Christian unity" (UR, 8). In common prayer Christian communities unite before the Lord, they become aware of the contradictions generated by division, and they show the will to obey the Lord's will, faithfully turning to him for his omnipotent help. Furthermore, the decree adds that such prayers are "a genuine manifestation of the links with which Catholics continue to be joined to their separated brothers" (ibid.).

Common prayer is therefore not a voluntarist or a purely sociological action, but an expression of faith that unites all disciples of Christ.

As the years have passed, active collaboration has been established in this field, and since 1968, the then Secretariat for Christian Unity, which became the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the World Council of Churches, together prepare the guidelines for the Week of Prayer for Unity, which are then divulged to the world reaching areas that would have not been covered without this collective work.

The conciliar decree on ecumenism refers to prayer for unity when, toward the end, it affirms that the council knows that "this holy proposition to reconcile all Christians in the unity of the Church of Christ, the one and only, surpasses all human forces and gifts. Therefore, it places all its hope in the Christ's prayer for the Church" (UR 24).

It is the knowledge of our human limits that drives us to abandon ourselves to the hands of the Lord with complete trust. We see only too well the true meaning of the Prayer Week; to rely on the prayer of Christ, who continues to pray in his Church so that "all may be one ... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

Today the truth of these words really hits home. The world suffers from the absence of God, from God's inaccessibility; it strives to know the face of God. But how could the men of today meet the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ if we, Christians, are divided, if one set of teachings is against the other?

Only united are we really able to show to the world -- that needs it -- the face of God, the face of

Christ.

Although the dialogue and all we do is very necessary, it is also obvious that it is not through our own strategies that we can achieve unity. What we can obtain is our availability and capability to welcome this unity when the Lord grants it to us. Here is the sense of prayer: to open our hearts, to create in us the availability that opens the road to Christ.

In the liturgy of the ancient Church, after the sermon the main celebrant -- the bishop or the president of the celebration -- used to say: "Conversi ad Dominum" (turn to the Lord). Then he and everybody else stood up and turned themselves toward the East. All wanted to look toward Christ. Only if converted, only through this conversion to Christ, in this common look at Christ, can we find the gift of unity.

We can state that it was prayer for unity that enlivened and accompanied the various stages of the ecumenical movement, especially since the Second Vatican Council. In this period the Catholic Church got in touch with the various Churches and ecclesial communities of the East and the West with various forms of dialogue, facing with them the theological and historical issues that had risen over the centuries and had established elements of division. The Lord has allowed such friendly relations to improve reciprocal knowledge and to intensify communion, at the same time giving a clearer perception of the problems that still exist and are the causes of division.

Today, during this week, we give thanks to God who has sustained and guided the journey thus far; a rich journey that the conciliar decree on ecumenism described as "emerged by the grace of the Holy Spirit" and "growing more ample every day" (UR, 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, let's accept the invitation to "pray without ceasing" that the apostle Paul extended to the first Christians of Thessalonica, a community that he himself founded. Because he knew that dissent had started, he implored them to be patient with everyone, to not repay evil with evil, but to look for the good between them and everyone, and to be happy whatever the circumstances, happy, because the Lord is near us. St. Paul's sermon to the Thessalonians can guide the behavior of Christians in their ecumenical relations today.

Above all he says: "Live in peace among yourselves." And then: "Pray without ceasing, and in all circumstances, give thanks" (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:13-18). Let us also welcome this entreaty from the apostle both to thank the Lord for the progress achieved in the ecumenical movement, and to appeal for full unity.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, make it possible for all the disciples of her divine Son to live in peace and reciprocal charity, as a true example before the whole world, and make the face of God accessible in the face of Christ, who is God-with-us, God of peace and unity.

[Translation by Laura Leoncini]

[After praying the Angelus, the Holy Father greeted pilgrims in six languages. In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This week, Christians throughout the world celebrate the Hundredth Anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, initiated by Father Paul Wattson, founder of the Society of the Atonement. The theme chosen for this year is Saint Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to "pray always" (1 Thess 5:17). According to the Second Vatican Council, prayer and holiness of life are "the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8). When Christians from various communities come together to pray in common, they acknowledge that unity cannot be achieved by human strength alone. Only by relying on God's grace can they live according to Jesus's prayer that "they may all be one" (Jn 17:20-21). I therefore invite all Christians to render fitting thanks to Almighty God for the progress achieved thus far along the path of ecumenism, and to persevere as they strive toward unity so that "the world may believe" (Jn 17:21) that Jesus is the only Son sent by the Father.

I extend a cordial welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's audience, including students and staff from Saint Mary's High School in Sydney, and members of a delegation from the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders. May God bestow abundant blessings upon all of you!