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Meditations: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Day 8)

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January).

- God's grace converts St Paul
- God counts on us as he did on St Paul
- St Paul is a model for attaining holiness

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THIS OCTAVE OF PRAYER for the union of Christians concludes with

the commemoration of St Paul's conversion. *Saul*, we hear in the first reading of the Mass, *still breathing out threats to murder the Lord's disciples, went to see the High Priest (Acts 9:1-2)*. Paul was a zealous defender of the law of Moses and, from his point of view, the teaching of Christ was a danger to Judaism. Hence he did not hesitate to put all his energy into exterminating the Christian community. He had consented to the death of Stephen and, still not satisfied, *he began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison (Acts 8:3)*.

He goes to Damascus, where the seed of faith has been kindled, with full authority *so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:2)*. But the Lord had different plans for him.

When he was close to Damascus suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”, “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. St Paul will never forget this personal encounter with the risen Christ. Many years later, now a tireless witness to the faith, he recalled it again: *Last of all – he writes to the Corinthians – as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am (1 Cor 15:8-10).*

Thinking about these scenes, St Josemaría remarked: “What preparation did St Paul have when Christ knocked him off his horse, left him blind and called him to be an apostle? None whatsoever! However,

when he responds and says: *Lord, what do you want me to do?* (Acts 9:6), *Jesus chooses him as an apostle.*”[1] All his eagerness which had previously led him to persecute Christians, pushes him now – with a new force, greater than he could ever have imagined – to spread faith in Christ to every corner of the earth. Nothing will be capable of separating him from fulfilling his task. His life was marked forever by that encounter on the way to Damascus, which was the beginning of his vocation.

WE MUST insistently ask the Holy Spirit for the grace of Christian unity which we anxiously desire. God’s grace, St Augustine reminds us, “is given freely.”[2] We know that *God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1

Tim 2:4). And we also know that He depends on our collaboration in this, through our life and our words, when we give testimony to the joy that living with Christ brings. In this mission the words of St Paul are always valid, when he asked those around him: *But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14-15).*

The foundation on which St Paul sustained all his tireless work to spread the Gospel was his personal encounter with Jesus: *Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? (1 Cor 9:1)*. Only by frequently returning to this moment, recalling it on a daily basis, could the Apostle of the Gentiles attract so

many people to an encounter with the One who had radically transformed his own life. And it is there, in our own encounter with Christ, that we too will find the impetus to collaborate in reuniting all Christians once again. Pope Benedict XVI, stressing the force that moved St Paul, remarked: “The apostle is not made by himself but is made such by the Lord; consequently the apostle needs to relate constantly to the Lord. Not without reason does Paul say that he is ‘called to be an apostle’.”[3]

St Josemaría often imagined the circumstances that St Paul lived through: an enormous empire that worshipped false gods and whose way of life was in stark contrast with the lives of those who followed Jesus. At that moment the message of the Gospel was, St Josemaría said, “just the opposite of the general tenor of the times, but St Paul, who knows –

who has tasted to the full the joy of belonging to God – launches out, with security in his task of preaching, and does it always, even from prison.”[4] Conscious that an authentic encounter with Christ can only lead to joy, St Paul explained to the Corinthians the reasons that drove him to evangelise: *Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy (2 Cor 1:24).*

“LEARN TO PRAY, learn to seek, learn to ask, learn to call: until you find, until you receive, until it is opened to you.”[5] The best path for convincing our Lord to confer on his Church the grace of Christian unity, is persevering prayer. St Paul, as soon as he was helped to his feet, went to Damascus, *and for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank (Acts 9:9).* Only once this time

of prayer and penance had finished did God send his servant Ananias: *Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name (Acts 9:15).*

Conscious that our apostolic work – including the longed-for restoration of Christian unity – does not depend on our own strength, we see that the most important thing is to prepare ourselves adequately to receive God's graces. Everything that helps us to foster this interior disposition, allowing Christ to unfold his will in our lives, is an eminently apostolic task. Thus we can say that prayer and a spirit of penitence are the main paths to ecumenism: because only Jesus is capable of moving hearts.

Pope Francis once asked: “How do we proclaim this Gospel of reconciliation after centuries of division? Paul himself helps us to find the way. He makes clear that reconciliation in Christ *requires sacrifice*. Jesus gave his life by dying for all. Similarly, ambassadors of reconciliation are called, in his name, to lay down their lives, to live no more for themselves but for Christ who died and was raised for them.”^[6] The conversion of St Paul is a model that directs us towards total unity. The Church, through the example of the Apostle’s life, shows us the way: encounter with Christ, personal conversion, prayer, dialogue, working together.

In the days after the Ascension, Jesus’ disciples *with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14)*. Let us trust in the intercession of our Mother so that, as

was the case then, we may achieve unity between all Christians: so that one day we are once again reunited, all together, by her side.

[1] St Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 9 April 1971.

[2] St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 31, 2, 7.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 10 September 2008.

[4] St Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 25 August 1968.

[5] St Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 25 August 1968.

[6] Pope Francis, Homily, 25 January 2017.

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