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Meditations: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Day 2)

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

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- Prayer: the centre of every ecumenical endeavour
- Personal conversion so as to purify the memory
- Practical ways: dialogue and work in common

JESUS MEETS his apostles in the Upper Room on the eve of the Passover. Our Lord knows that his hour has come; He will no longer sit at table with them again, but will wait for them when He has gone to the Father. The apostle St John, who was present in those important moments, before giving an account of the events of that night, describes Jesus' feelings: *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end* (Jn 13:1). It is precisely this love of Christ – a love which He also has for each one of us – that led him to ask his Father, minutes later, for the unity of his disciples throughout the centuries. Ecumenism, said St Josemaría, presupposes “the desire to enlarge the heart, to open it to all mankind with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all men and takes in all men, for he has loved all mankind first.”[1]

Unity is a manifestation of charity: it is born of our union with God and overflows into a love that does not separate us from others and that never says “enough.” We Christians “feel that our hearts are enlarged,” St John Chrysostom said in a homily. “Just as heat expands a body, so charity has an expanding power, because it is a warm and ardent virtue.” Consequently, as St John Paul II points out, “we proceed along the road leading to the conversion of hearts guided by love which is directed to God and, at the same time, to all our brothers and sisters, including those not in full communion with us. Love gives rise to the desire for unity, even in those who have never been aware of the need for it.”[2]

Moved by his intimate union with the Father and his thirst for souls, Jesus prays: *I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one*

(Jn 17:23). This desire for unity invites us also to pray in close union with Jesus' prayer, *for* all Christians and *with* all Christians. The primacy of prayer is undoubtedly at the heart of the whole ecumenical effort on the road to unity.

“If Christians meet more often and more regularly before Christ in prayer, they will be able to gain the courage to face all the painful human reality of their divisions, and they will find themselves together once more in that community of the Church which Christ constantly builds up in the Holy Spirit, in spite of all weaknesses and human limitations.”[3] This praying together, as Pope Benedict XVI points out, “is not, therefore, a voluntaristic or purely sociological act, but rather an expression of faith that unites all Christ's disciples.”[4]

SEATED BESIDE St Paul's tomb, Pope Francis pointed out that an authentic search for unity means entrusting ourselves, in sincere prayer, to the Father's mercy. We humbly ask God's forgiveness for our divisions, which are an open wound in the Body of Christ. Our atonement extends also to those brothers and sisters separated by the un-Christian behaviour of Catholics in the past. Similarly, we Catholics atone when, today or in the past, we have been offended by other Christians. "We cannot erase what is past," continued Pope Francis on that occasion, "nor do we wish to allow the weight of past transgressions to continue polluting our relationships."

Certainly, as the Second Vatican Council points out, in the acts of separation between Christians sometimes "both sides were to blame. The children who are born into these Communities and who

grow up believing in Christ cannot be accused of the sin involved in the separation, and the Catholic Church embraces them as brothers, with respect and affection.”[5] The foundation of ecumenical commitment lies in the conversion of hearts. In this way, with our hearts renewed, we will contemplate the past with the clear eyes of Christ, and He will grant us the grace necessary to purify our memory, freeing it from misunderstanding and prejudice.

St Paul’s life is a good example of this. His conversion was “not a passage ... from a mistaken faith to a correct faith (his faith was true, even if incomplete), but rather it was a matter of being conquered by Christ’s love. It was the renunciation of his own perfection, the humility of the one who places himself without reserve at the service of Christ for the brethren. And only in this renunciation of ourselves, in this

conformity with Christ can we be united also among ourselves, do we become ‘one’ in Christ.”[6] Certainly, commitment to unity and prayer for unity do not apply only to those who live in a state of division; on the contrary, we too are called not to ignore this concern in our personal dialogue with God. With the assurance of the communion of the saints, we pray in unison with our brothers and sisters throughout the world: *that we may all be one.*

PRAYER AND personal conversion are our main means of working for Christian unity. It could even be said that the best form of ecumenism consists in striving to live according to the Gospel, in order to bring to life the image of that Christ with whom we wish to be united. At the same time, we must be sincerely interested

in establishing a dialogue with our separated brothers. In order to do this, it is good to remember, first of all, that “the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.”^[7] Authentic ecumenical dialogue avoids all forms of reductionism, syncretism or superficial agreement, and is based on love for the truth. Only by looking at others with Jesus’ eyes and listening to them attentively can we perhaps even see certain aspects of the richness of the Christian message with new clarity.

Along with dialogue, another very effective way to promote Christian unity is to work together. More and more areas are opening up for ecumenical collaboration, especially with regard to making the Gospel present in society. St Josemaría said that since the spirit of Opus Dei

encourages personal initiative in our apostolate and in our work, it can be fruitful in generating “many points of easy contact with our separated brethren. Here they find, put into living practice, a good many of the doctrinal presuppositions in which they, and we Catholics, have placed so many well-founded ecumenical expectations.”[8]

There are thus two ways of working for unity: on the one hand, prayer and conversion of heart; and on the other, dialogue and collaboration with other Christians. Trusting in the power of the prayer of the whole Church during this octave, we go to Mary with simplicity. Her docility to the Holy Spirit is a precious example of a true ecumenical attitude.

[1] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 11.

[2] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, 21.

[3] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, 22.

[4] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 23 January 2008.

[5] Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.

[6] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 25 January 2009.

[7] Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 1.

[8] St Josemaría, *Conversations*, 22.

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