

Meditations: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Day 1)

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

- Jesus' prayer: "that all may be one"
- Origin of the custom and importance of unity
- Recognising Christ in others

THE OCTAVE OF PRAYER for Christian Unity begins today. During

these days, together with the whole Church we will meditate more deeply on some words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper that enkindle our desires for union. After more than thirty years spent living among us, Christ *knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father* (*Jn 13:1*). In the face of his imminent betrayal and suffering, his Heart burns with love for his disciples, and *He loved them to the end*. Just a few hours before being arrested, He leaves us as an inheritance three marvellous gifts as an inheritance: the washing of the feet, the gift of the Holy Eucharist, and his teachings in the discourse during the Last Supper.

In the long farewell discourse that St John records for us, Jesus beseeches the Father for the unity of those who, down through the centuries, will come to be his disciples: *Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they*

may be one, as we are one (Jn 17:11). During this octave, the Church encourages us to unite ourselves to Jesus' filial prayer, and to identify ourselves more fully with the sentiments in his Heart and his ardent longing for unity.

When our Lord said "keep those whom you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one," his followers were still few; the Gospel was confined to a limited geographical and social milieu. But the Heart of Jesus reached out much further, embracing the entire Church down through the centuries, with all its hopes and difficulties. Christ prays for our unity, because He knows how important it will be for the spread of the faith and as a motive of credibility for his followers: *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.

The Second Vatican Council tells us that “human powers and capacities alone cannot achieve this holy objective – the reconciling of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ. It is because of this that the Council rests all its hope on Christ’s prayer for the Church.”^[1] Unity is a gift that we receive from God. And so Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that “we cannot ‘bring about’ unity by our powers alone. We can only obtain unity as a gift of the Holy Spirit.”^[2] During this week of prayer for Christian unity, we want Jesus’ intense petition to the Father to resound in our hearts in a special way. All the words spoken by the Son of God should move our hearts, and now we have another opportunity to be surprised anew by them. St Josemaría, spurred by this desire for

unity, wanted all the faithful of the Work to ask in the *Preces* each day for this gift: *Ut omnes unum sint sicut tu Pater in me et ego in te!*

ON THE HUNDREDTH anniversary of this Octave in the Church, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of its origin: “When it was introduced, it proved a truly fruitful intuition. Fr Paul Wattson was an American Anglican who later entered the communion of the Catholic Church and founded the *Society of the Atonement* (Community of Brothers and Sisters of the Atonement); in 1908, with another Episcopalian, Fr Spencer Jones, he launched the prophetic idea of an octave of prayer for Christian unity.”^[3] This initiative spread rapidly and, eight years later, Benedict XV decided to extend it to the entire Church.^[4]

The dates for the octave have been the same from the start: from 18 to 25 January, both significant dates in the liturgical calendar then in use: “In the calendar at that time, the Feast of the Chair of St Peter, who is the firm foundation and sure guarantee of the unity of the entire People of God, was celebrated on 18 January, while on 25 January, then as today, the liturgy celebrates the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.”^[5]

On one feast we recall the mission that Christ entrusted to Peter and, through him, to his successors: to strengthen all his disciples in the faith. The other feast makes clear to us that the path for attaining unity is personal conversion, made possible thanks to a personal encounter with the risen Christ. Both feasts – the Chair of St Peter and the Conversion of St Paul – direct our eyes to the Person of Christ, who is the One in

whom we will all be united at the end.

St John Paul II reminded us that “ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, *is not just some sort of ‘appendix’* which is added to the Church’s traditional activity.”^[6] Rather, it is an organic part of her mission and stems from taking seriously the task which Christ left us, and for which he prayed to the Father before his Passion. “Unity is our common mission; it is the condition that enables the light of Christ to be spread better in every corner of the world, so that men and women convert and are saved.”^[7] It is a path we are invited to follow, as good sons and daughters, listening attentively to the Spirit of the Lord.

THE FAREWELL discourse during the Last Supper was not the first time Jesus had urged his disciples to strive to remain united. At different moments he had stressed to them that they are called to serve one another as brothers and sisters, since *you have one teacher, and you are all brethren ... you have one Father, who is in heaven ... you have one master, the Christ (Mt 23:8-10)*. As Pope Francis said: “By the working of the Holy Spirit, we have become one in Christ, sons in the Son, true worshippers of the Father. This mystery of love is the deepest ground of the unity which binds all Christians and is much greater than their historical divisions. To the extent that we humbly advance towards the Lord, then, we also draw nearer to one another.”^[8]

The Second Vatican Council recognized that, among the endowments which together build up and

give life to the Church, many can also be found outside its visible confines, including “the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit.”^[9] In all these realities, it is the same operative force of Christ that is impelling us all towards unity. The effort of ecumenism seeks, through different paths, to strengthen this communion and lead it towards the full and visible union of all of Jesus’ followers.^[10] Hence it is an act of justice and charity to recognize the riches of Christ present in all those who – at times even at the cost of shedding their blood – give testimony to Him.

During this octave of prayer for the unity of Christians, we ask our Lord Jesus Christ to help us share in his longing for unity in the Church. We will help to foster unity if we allow ourselves to be converted personally

to the risen Christ, reproducing in our own life his way of being and acting, his desire to be the servant of everyone (cf. *Mk* 10:44), in order to undertake a dialogue of charity with our brothers and sisters. “Christ’s example leads us to begin a dialogue; his example teaches us how we should speak with our fellow men.”^[11] Throughout this octave, we will invoke the Holy Spirit during the Mass, so that with his help we may be “gathered into one”,^[12] and “become one body, one spirit in Christ.”^[13] With filial trust we place the fruit of these days of prayer in the hands of Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of all Christians.

[1] Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 24.

[2] Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to ecumenical meeting at the Twentieth World Youth Day*, 19 August 2005.

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

[4] Cf. Pope Benedict XV, Brief *Romanorum Pontificum*, 25 February 1916.

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

[6] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, 20.

[7] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 25 January 2006.

[8] Pope Francis, Homily, 25 January 2015.

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

[10] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 26 January 2006.

[11] St Josemaría, *Letter 24 October 1965*, 15.

[12] Eucharistic Prayer II.

[13] Eucharistic Prayer III.

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