

Meditations: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Day 7)

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

- Christ chooses St Peter and his successors
- The Papacy as an institution affirms universality in unity
- Union with the Pope also means union with his magisterium

JESUS DEDICATED the three years of his public life to announcing throughout the land of Israel the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. He did so with his preaching, his miracles and his very presence. At a given moment, when some of the leaders of the people were hardening their hearts against Him, He withdrew with his Apostles to territories outside Israel. These journeys may be seen as foreshadowing the universality of the Gospel. And it was there, in the district of Caesarea Philippi, that Our Lord said to Peter publicly, in the presence of his chosen ones, *I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it* (*Mt 16:18*). At that point, this was a promise for the future; his Passion and Death, Peter's denial and the cowardice of the other Apostles still lay ahead. The risen Jesus, in a conversation at the lakeside after the

miraculous catch of 153 large fish, recalled what He had said to Peter previously. Now He officially endowed him with a special task within the chosen group: *Feed my lambs ... Tend my sheep* (Jn 21:15-16).

Pope Benedict XVI points out that St Peter in fact “began his ministry in Jerusalem, after the Ascension of the Lord and Pentecost.” Afterwards he travelled to Antioch, the third most important city in the Roman Empire. And “from there, Providence led Peter to Rome ... So it is that the See of Rome, which had received the greatest of honours, also has the honour that Christ entrusted to Peter of being at the service of all the particular Churches for the building up and unity of the entire People of God.”[1]

The institution of the Papacy shows clearly that the Kingdom founded by Christ is no utopian ideal, but is

already present in this world, as a visible society. It is made up of real people, with defects, but Christ promised that, down through the centuries, whoever became his representative on earth would not lack his grace. *Behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren (Lk 22:31-32)*. As we reflect on all of this, we can understand the filial emotion that St Josemaría felt when he first arrived in Rome. On 23rd June 1946, as he saw the dome of St Peter's from the car, he was visibly moved, and recited the Creed aloud. Afterwards he spent the whole of his first night in Rome on the balcony of the apartment where he was staying, which was very close to the Vatican, in a vigil of prayer for the Church and the Pope. “Think how confidently I prayed for the Pope,

contemplating the windows of the Papal apartments.” St Josemaría would often say that “love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a delightful passion, for in him we see Christ.”[2]

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT episodes in the Acts of the Apostles is the baptism of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who became a Christian, together with his whole household. Cornelius had gathered many of his relatives and friends to listen to Peter, who said: *God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean* (Acts 10:28). After answering some questions, he added, *Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him* (Acts 10:34-35). This was the first

time St Peter had addressed people who were not Jewish. In the middle of his discourse, to everyone's amazement, the Holy Spirit came down on those who were gathered there. St Jerome commented on this passage: "This man's baptism by the Apostle consecrated the salvation of the Gentiles."[3]

From the very first moments of the expansion of Christianity, Peter's mission was to unite his brethren and affirm the catholicity, the universality, of the Church founded by Christ, who had entrusted the Church to him as her visible head. Pope Benedict XVI says that "St Peter's journey to Rome, as representative of the world's peoples, comes especially under the word 'one': his task was to create the *unity* of the *catholica*, the Church formed by Jews and pagans, the Church of all the peoples. And this is Peter's ongoing mission: to ensure that the

Church is never identified with a single nation, with a single culture or with a single State but is always the Church of all; to ensure that she reunites humanity over and above every boundary and, in the midst of the divisions of this world, makes God's peace present, the reconciling power of his love.”[4]

When Jesus instituted a visible head for his pilgrim Church on earth, he was not turning his followers into a closed group but just the opposite. The Pope, as St Peter's successor, presides over everyone in charity, and he is vigilant to ensure that all those who have been called to follow Christ know that they are hearing Christ's own Word no matter where they are. Peter and the other Apostles, the Pope and the bishops in communion with him, are the guarantee that what is being passed on is the true Church of Christ. In the early days, this one Church was

passed on to the Gentiles in the Roman Empire, and afterwards to every country on earth. “I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul,” wrote St Josemaría, “bathed in the blood of martyrs, the centre from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but rather of authentic ecumenism. It 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.”^[5]

ST PAUL, in the years following the revelation he had received at Damascus, explored the mystery of Christ in progressively greater depth, to the point of recognizing that he

himself was an Apostle too. And yet, strikingly, after carrying out his apostolate for several years, he went to see St Peter, to check his teachings with the head of the Church. *I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, he wrote to the Galatians, and remained with him fifteen days ... Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain (Gal 1:18; 2:1-2).* Right from the beginning of the Church, Christians saw Peter and his successors as a guarantee of unity in everything, including how to express the teachings of the Gospel that they were passing on.

St Josemaría insisted: “There is no other possible attitude for a Catholic:

we have to defend the authority of the Pope always, and to be ready always to correct our own views with docility, in line with the teaching authority of the Church.”^[6] And naturally, this desire to be faithful has to be shown, among other things, “by knowing his thought, which he tells us in Encyclicals or other documents. We have to do our part to help all Catholics pay attention to the teaching of the Holy Father, and bring their everyday behaviour into line with it.”^[7] Accordingly, we will make sure that our unity with Peter’s successor is expressed both in affection and in deeds. We will not only follow his indications and his magisterium intelligently, but we will also try to discover in depth what exactly the Holy Spirit wishes to give the world through him.

Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia, ibi Deus,^[8] St Josemaría used to say, quoting words of St Ambrose. “We want to be with

Peter, because with him is the Church, with him is God; and without him, we don't find God. That's why I wanted to romanize the Work. Love the Holy Father very much. Pray a lot for the Pope. Love him very, very much! He needs all the affection of his children.”^[9] An important and necessary part of our apostolate is to bring Christians into unity with the one whom the Holy Spirit has set at the head of the People of God at this specific moment in history. All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! All of us in union with the Pope will bring souls to Jesus through the motherly mediation of Mary. We ask her, the Mother of the Church, to gather us round her as she did at Pentecost, and bind all her Son's disciples together as one. We especially ask her for the gift of a heartfelt communion with the Holy Father shown in deeds. For he is the “Sweet Christ on earth,” as St Catherine of Siena used to call Peter's successor.

[1] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 22 February 2006.

[2] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 13.

[3] St Jerome, *Epistola 79,2.*

[4] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 June 2008.

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

[6] St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 581.

[7] *Ibid.*, 633.

[8] St Ambrose, *In Ps. 40*, 30.

[9] St Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 11 May 1965.

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