

Wednesday, January 18, 2012

INVOKING THE GIFT OF UNITY AMONG CHRISTIANS

VATICAN CITY, 18 JAN 2012 (VIS) - The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which begins today, was the theme of Benedict XVI's general audience celebrated this morning in the Paul VI Hall. The Holy Father explained how this initiative has been held annually for more than a century and brings together Christians from Churches and ecclesial communities, who "invoke that extraordinary gift for which the Lord Jesus prayed during the Last Supper: ... 'That they may all be one'".

The Week of Prayer - established in 1908 by Paul Wattson, founder of an Anglican religious community who later entered the Catholic Church - "is one of the most effective annual expressions ... of the impetus which Vatican Council II gave to the search for full union among all Christ's disciples", said the Pope. "This spiritual event, which unites Christians from all traditions, increases our awareness of the fact that the unity we strive for cannot result merely from our own efforts; rather, it is a gift we receive and must constantly invoke from on high".

The texts for this year's Week of Prayer have been prepared by a group of representatives from the Catholic Church, and from the Polish Ecumenical Council which proposed the theme of "We will all be changed by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ". The history of Poland - marked by defeats and victories, by the struggle to end oppression and achieve freedom - led the ecumenical group to reflect more deeply upon what it means to "win" and to "lose".

In this context the Pope pointed out that, "in contrast to 'victory' understood in triumphal terms, Christ shows us a very different way. His victory does not involve power and might. ... Christ speaks of victory through love, mutual assistance and boosting the self-esteem of those who are 'last', forgotten, excluded. For all Christians, the best expression of such humble service is Jesus Christ Himself, His total gift of self, the victory of His love over death. ... We can share in this 'victory' only if we allow ourselves to be transformed by God".

Likewise, "the unity for which we pray requires inner conversion, both shared and individual. But this must not be limited to cordiality and cooperation; we must reinforce our faith in God; ... we must enter into the new life in Christ, Who is our true and definitive victory; we must open to one another, accepting all the elements of unity which God has conserved

for us; ... we must feel the pressing need to bear witness, before the men and women of our time, to the living God Who made Himself known in Christ".

Ecumenism, as defined by Vatican Council II and Blessed John Paul II, is "the responsibility of the entire Church and of all the baptised, who must augment the partial communion that already exists among Christians until achieving full communion in truth and charity. Praying for unity ... must then be an integral part of the prayer life of all Christians, in all times and places, especially when people from different traditions come together to work for victory in Christ over sin, evil, injustice and the violation of human dignity".

Benedict XVI also pointed out that "lack of unity among Christians hinders the effective announcement of the Gospel and endangers our credibility", but noted that, "as far as the fundamental truths of the faith are concerned, there is far more that unites us than divides us. ... This is a great challenge for the new evangelisation, which will be more fruitful if all Christians together announce the truth of the Gospel and Jesus Christ, and give a joint response to the spiritual thirst of our times".

In conclusion, the Pope exhorted the faithful to unite more intensely in prayer during the course of the coming Week, "to increase shared witness, solidarity and collaboration among Christians, in expectation of that glorious day when together we will all be able to celebrate the Sacraments and profess the faith transmitted by the Apostles".

At the end of his audience, the Holy Father greeted a group of Italian lawyers, encouraging them to practise their profession "in faithfulness to the truth, which is a fundamental premise of justice".