PRAYER FOR UNITY AND RECONCILIATION AMONG CHRISTIANS

VATICAN CITY, 25 JAN 2009 (VIS) -

Yesterday afternoon in the Roman basilica of St. Paul's Outside-the-Walls, the Pope presided at the celebration of the second Vespers of the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, thus marking the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which was dedicated to the theme "That they may become one in your hand" (Ezek. 37, 17). The ceremony, which this year coincided with the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of the Apostle, was attended by cardinals and bishops, as well as by representatives from other Churches and ecclesial communities.

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In his homily the Holy Father reflected upon the conversion of St. Paul, saying "it presents us with a model of, and shows us the way to, full unity" which, "indeed, calls for conversion: from division to communion, from a lacerated unity, to a restored and complete unity".

The conversion of the Apostle of the Gentiles "was not a move from immorality to morality, from an erroneous faith to a correct faith, rather it was the fact of being conquered by the love of Christ, of renouncing one's own perfection. It was the humility of one who placed himself unreservedly at the service of Christ for his brothers and sisters. And it is only in this self-renunciation, in this conformity to Christ, that we also become united to one another, that we become 'one' in Christ. It is communion with the risen Christ that gives us unity".

"Of course, the unity that God gives His Church, and for which we pray, is communion in a spiritual sense, in faith and in charity; yet we know that this unity in Christ is also a ferment for fraternity at a social level, in relations between nations and among the entire human family. ... The prayers we raise over these days, with reference to Ezekiel's prophecy, are also a form of intercession for the various situations of conflict that currently afflict humankind".

Benedict XVI pointed out that "where human words are powerless because the tragic noise of violence and arms prevails, the prophetic power of the Word of God does not fail but repeats to us that peace is possible, and that we must be instruments of reconciliation and peace. Hence our prayer for unity and peace must always be backed up by courageous gestures of reconciliation among us Christians".

"How important it is", said the Pope referring to the Holy Land, "that the faithful who live there, and the pilgrims who visit, provide testimony before the whole world that the diversity of rites and traditions is not be a hindrance to mutual respect and fraternal charity.

"In the legitimate diversity of varying positions we must seek unity in the faith, in our fundamental 'yes' to Christ and to His one Church", he added. "And thus diversity will no longer be an obstacle that separates us, but a richness in the multiplicity of expressions of the shared faith".

The Holy Father recalled that fifty years ago today Blessed John XXIII "first expressed his desire to call 'an ecumenical Council for the Universal Church'", which led to "a fundamental contribution to ecumenism, as recapitulated in the Decree 'Unitatis redintegratio'".

He went on: "The attitude of interior conversion to Christ, of spiritual renewal, of increased charity towards other Christians, has given rise to a new situation in ecumenical relations. The fruits of theological dialogue, with its points of agreement and with a more exact understanding of remaining differences, encourage us to continue courageously in two directions: in accepting what has been achieved and in a renewed commitment to the future".

"What remains before us is the horizon of complete unity", Benedict XVI concluded. "This is a demanding but stimulating task for Christians who wish to live in harmony with the prayer of the Lord: 'that they may all be one, that the world may believe'".

Angelus Blessing on the Feast