

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

**CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS
54th WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls
Monday, 25 January 2021*

[*H. Em. Card. Kurt Koch read the homily prepared by Pope Francis for the occasion*]

“Abide in my love” (*Jn* 15:9). Jesus links this request to the image of the vine and the branches, the final image that he offers us in the Gospels. The Lord himself is the vine, the “true” vine (v. 1), who does not betray our expectations, but remains ever faithful in love, despite our sins and our divisions. Onto this vine, which is himself, all of us, the baptized, are grafted like branches. This means that we can grow and bear fruit only if we remain united to Jesus. Tonight let us consider this indispensable unity, which has a number of levels. With the vine in mind, we can imagine unity as consisting of three concentric rings, like those of a tree trunk.

The first circle, the innermost, is *abiding in Jesus*. This is the starting point of the journey of each person towards unity. In today’s fast-paced and complex world, it is easy to lose our compass, pulled as we are from every side. Many people feel internally fragmented, unable to find a fixed point, a stable footing, amid life’s changes. Jesus tells us that the secret of stability is to abide in him. In this evening’s reading, he says this seven times (cf. vv. 4-7.9-10). For he knows that “apart from him, we can do nothing” (cf. v. 5). Jesus also showed us how to abide in him. He left us his own example: each day he withdrew to pray in deserted places. We need prayer, as we need water, to live. Personal prayer, spending time with Jesus, adoration, these are essential if we are to abide in him. In this way, we can place our worries, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows in the Lord’s heart. Most of all, centred on Jesus in prayer, we can experience his love. And in this way receive new vitality, like the branches that draw sap from the trunk. This is the first unity, our personal integrity, the work of the grace we receive by abiding in Jesus.

The second circle is that of *unity with Christians*. We are branches of the same vine, we are “communicating vessels”, in the sense that the good or the evil that each of us does affects all others. In the spiritual life, then, there is also a sort of “law of dynamics”: to the extent that we abide in God, we draw close to others, and to the extent that we draw close to others, we abide in God. This means that if we pray to God in spirit and truth, then we come to realize our need to love others while, on the other hand, “if we love one another, God abides in us” (1 *Jn* 4:12). Prayer unfailingly leads to love; otherwise, it is empty ritual. For it is not possible to encounter Jesus apart from his Body, made up of many members, as many as are the baptized. If our worship is genuine, we will grow in love for all those who follow Jesus, regardless of the Christian communion to which they may belong, for even though they may not be “one of ours”, they are his.

Even so, we know that loving our brothers and sisters is not easy, because their defects and shortcomings immediately become apparent, and past hurts come to mind. Here the Father

comes to our aid, for as an expert farmer (cf. *Jn 15:1*), he knows exactly what to do: "every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (*Jn 15:2*). The Father *takes away and prunes*. Why? Because in order to love, we need to be stripped of all that leads us astray and makes us withdraw into ourselves and thus fail to bear fruit. Let us ask the Father, then, to prune our prejudices with regard to others, and the worldly attachments that stand in the way of full unity with all his children. Thus purified in love, we will be able to be less concerned about the worldly obstacles and stumbling stones from the past, which nowadays distract us from the Gospel.

The third circle of unity, the largest, is *the whole of humanity*. Here, we can reflect on the working of the Holy Spirit. In the vine that is Christ, the Spirit is the sap that spreads to all the branches. The Spirit blows where he wills, and everywhere he wants to restore unity. He impels us to love not only those who love us and think as we do, but to love everyone, even as Jesus taught us. He enables us to forgive our enemies and the wrongs we have endured. He inspires us to be active and creative in love. He reminds us that our neighbours are not only those who share our own values and ideas, and that we are called to be neighbours to all, good Samaritans to a humanity that is frail, poor and, in our own time, suffering so greatly. A humanity lying by the roadsides of our world, which God wants to raise up with compassion. May the Holy Spirit, the source of grace, help us to live in *gratuitousness*, to love even those who do not love us in return, for it is through pure and disinterested love that the Gospel bears fruit. A tree is known by its fruits: by our gratuitous love it will be known if we are part of the vine of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit thus teaches us the *concreteness of love* for all those brothers and sisters with whom we share the same humanity, the humanity which Christ inseparably united to himself by telling us that we will always find him in the poor and those in greatest need (cf. *Mt 25: 31-45*). By serving them together, we will realize once more that we are brothers and sisters, and will grow in unity. The Spirit, who renews the face of the earth, also inspires us to care for our common home, to make bold choices about how we live and consume, for the opposite of fruitfulness is exploitation, and it is shameful for us to waste precious resources of which many others are deprived.

That same Spirit, the architect of the ecumenical journey, has led us this evening to pray together. As we experience the unity that comes from addressing God with one voice, I would like to thank all those who in the course of this week have prayed, and continue to pray, for Christian unity. I offer a fraternal greeting to the representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here, to the young Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox studying here in Rome under the aegis of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and to the professors and students of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, who would have come to Rome as in previous years, but were unable to do so because of the pandemic and are following us through the media. Dear brothers and sisters, may we remain united in Christ. May the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts make us feel children of the Father, brothers and sisters of one another, brothers and sisters in our one human family. May the Holy Trinity, communion of love, make us grow in unity.

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Library of the Apostolic Palace
Wednesday, 20 January 2021*

Catechesis - Prayer for Christian Unity

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In this catechesis, we will reflect on the *prayer for Christian unity*. In fact, the week of the 18th to the 25th of January is dedicated specifically to this — to ask God for the gift of unity to overcome the scandal of division among believers in Jesus. After the Last Supper, he prayed for his own, “that they may all be one” (*Jn 17:21*). This was his prayer before the Passion; we could call it his spiritual testament. Let us note, however, that the Lord did not command that his disciples be united. No, *he prayed* to the Father for us, so that we might be one. This means that we are unable to achieve unity by our own strength. Unity is above all a gift, it is a grace to be requested through prayer.

Each one of us needs it. In fact, we know that we are incapable of preserving unity even within ourselves. The Apostle Paul, too, felt a painful conflict within himself: wanting the good but being inclined toward evil (cf. *Rm 7:19*). He had thus grasped the root of so many divisions that surround us — between people, in families, in society, between nations and even between believers — it is inside us. The [Second Vatican Council](#) stated, “the imbalances under which the world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another.[...] Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society” (*Gaudium et spes*, 10). Therefore, the solution to these divisions is not to oppose someone, because discord generates more discord. The true remedy begins by asking God for peace, reconciliation, unity.

This is true, first of all, for Christians. Unity can be achieved only as a fruit of prayer. Diplomatic efforts and academic dialogue are not enough. Jesus knew this and opened the way for us by praying. Our prayer for unity is thus a humble but trusting *participation in the prayer of the Lord*, who promised that any prayer said in his name would be heard by the Father (cf. *Jn 15:7*). At this point, we can ask ourselves: “Do I pray for unity?”. It is Jesus’ will but, if we inspect the intentions for which we pray, we will probably realize that we have prayed little, perhaps never, for Christian unity. And yet, the world’s faith depends on it; in fact, the Lord asked for unity among us “so that the world might believe” (*Jn 17:21*). The world will not

believe because we will convince it with good arguments, but rather if we will have borne witness to the love that unites us and draws all of us near.

During this time of serious hardship, the prayer that unity may prevail over conflict is even more necessary. It is urgent that we set aside particularism in order to promote the common good, and our good example is fundamental to this: it is essential that Christians pursue the path toward full visible unity. In the last decades, thanks be to God, there have been many steps forward, but we need to persevere in love and in prayer, without lacking trust nor tiring. It is a path that the Holy Spirit gave rise to in the Church, in Christians and in us all, from which there is no turning back. Ever onward!

To pray means to fight for unity. Yes, fight, because our enemy, the devil, is the one who divides, as the word itself says. Jesus asks for unity in the Holy Spirit, to create unity. The devil always divides. He always divides because it is convenient for him to divide. He fosters division everywhere, and in any way, while the Holy Spirit always joins in unity. In general, the devil does not tempt us with high theology, but with the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters. He is astute: he magnifies others' mistakes and defects, sows discord, provokes criticism and creates factions. God has another way: He takes us as we are, he loves us so much, but he loves us as we are and takes us as we are; he takes those of us who are different, he takes sinners, and he always spurs us towards unity.

We can evaluate ourselves and ask ourselves if, in the places in which we live, we nurture conflict or fight for an increase of unity with the tools that God has given us: prayer and love. What fuels conflict, instead, is gossip, always talking behind peoples' backs. Gossip is the most handy weapon the devil has to divide the Christian community, to divide families, to divide friends, to always divide. The Holy Spirit always inspires us to unity.

The theme of this Week of Prayer specifically regards love: "Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit" (cf. *Jn* 15:5-9). The root of communion is love of Christ who makes us overcome our prejudices to see in others a brother or sister to be loved always. Then we will discover that the Christians of other confessions — with their traditions, with their history — are gifts from God, they are gifts present within the territories of our diocesan and parish communities. Let us begin to pray for them and, when possible, with them. We will thus learn to love and appreciate them. Prayer, the Council reminds us, is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 8). Therefore, may prayer be the starting point to help Jesus achieve his dream: that they all may be one.