



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls
Monday, 25 January 2016*

[Multimedia]

“For I am the least of the apostles [...] because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor 15:9-10). This is how the Apostle Paul sums up the significance of his conversion. What happened after that dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ on the Road from Jerusalem to Damascus is not primarily a moral change but a transforming experience by the grace of Christ and, at the same time, the call to a new mission to proclaim to all the same Jesus whom Paul used to persecute by persecuting his disciples. At this moment, in fact, Paul understands that there is a real and transcendent union between the eternally living Christ and his followers: Jesus lives and is present in them and they live in him. The vocation to be an apostle is founded not on the human merits of Paul, who considers himself “unfit” and “unworthy”, but on the infinite goodness of God, who chose him and entrusted the ministry to him.

St Paul also bears witness to a similar understanding of what happened on the road to Damascus in his First Letter to Timothy: “I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (vv. 12-14). The superabundant mercy of God is the sole rationale upon which Paul’s ministry is founded, and it is at the same time what the Apostle must proclaim to all people.

St Paul’s experience is similar to that of the communities to whom the Apostle Peter directs his First Letter. St Peter addresses members of small and fragile communities, exposed to the threat of persecution, and he applies to them the glorious titles attributed to the holy People of God: “a

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9). For those early Christians, as today for all of us baptized, it is a cause for comfort and constant wonder to know that they are chosen to take part in God's salvific plan, fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in the Church. "Why me, Lord?"; "why us?". Here we touch upon the mystery of God's mercy and of his choice: the Father loves everyone and desires to save everyone, and that is why he calls some, "by conquering them" with his grace, so that through them his love may reach everyone. The mission of the entire People of God is to declare the wonderful deeds of the Lord, first among them the Paschal Mystery of Christ, through which we have all moved out of the darkness of sin and death into the splendour of his life, new and eternal (cf. 1 Pet 2:10).

In the light of the Word of God which we have heard, and which has guided us during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we can truly say that all of us believers in Christ are "called to declare the wonderful deeds" (cf. 1 Pet 2:9). Beyond the differences that still divide us, let us recognize with joy that at the origin of Christian life there is always one call whose maker is God himself. Let us move forward on the path to a full and visible communion among Christians not only when we come closer to one another, but above all as we convert to the Lord, who out of grace chooses us and calls us to be his disciples. To convert means to allow the Lord to live and work in us. That is why, when Christians of different Churches listen together to the Word of God and seek to put it into practice, they take important steps toward unity. It is not only the call that unites us; we also share one mission: to declare to all people the wonderful deeds of God. Like St Paul, and like the faithful to whom St Peter writes, we too cannot but proclaim the same merciful love that has conquered and transformed us. As we move towards full communion, we can already develop many forms of collaboration, to go together and collaborate in order to foster the spread of the Gospel. By walking and working together, we realize that we are already united in the name of the Lord. Unity is achieved on the journey.

In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, let us always bear in mind that there cannot be an authentic search for Christian unity without trusting fully in the Father's mercy. Let us ask first of all for forgiveness for the sin of our divisions, which are an open wound in the Body of Christ. As the Bishop of Rome and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church, I want to ask forgiveness and mercy for any behaviour on the part of Catholics towards Christians of other Churches that did not reflect the values of the Gospel. At the same time, I invite all Catholic brothers and sisters to forgive if, today or in the past, they have suffered offences from other Christians. We cannot erase what is past, nor do we wish to allow the weight of past transgressions to continue to pollute our relationships. The mercy of God will renew our relationships.

In this atmosphere of intense prayer, I greet in a brotherly way: H.E. Metropolitan Gennadios, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; H.G. David Moxon, Personal Representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury; and all the representatives of the different Churches and ecclesial communities of Rome who have gathered here this evening. With them we walked through the Holy Door of this Basilica, so as to remind ourselves that the only door which leads us

to salvation is Jesus Christ our Lord, the merciful face of the Father. I also cordially greet the young Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox students who are here in Rome with the support of the Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches working through the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, as well as the students from the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey who are visiting Rome to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic Church.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us join together today with the prayer that Jesus Christ prayed to his Father: “that they may all be one [...] so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). Unity is a gift of the mercy of God the Father. Here before the tomb of St Paul, Apostle and Martyr, sheltered in this splendid Basilica, we feel that our humble request is sustained by the intercession of the multitudes of Christian martyrs, past and present. They responded generously to the call of the Lord, they bore faithful witness with their lives to the wonderful deeds that God has done for us, and they already enjoy full communion in the presence of God the Father. Sustained by their example — an example that constitutes the ecumenism of blood — and comforted by their intercession, let us raise our humble prayer to God.