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Vespers with the Archbishop of Canterbury: promoters of a bold and real ecumenism

In the church of St. Andrew and St. Gregory on Rome's Caelian Hill, Pope Francis presided at vespers with the participation of the archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby. The rite formed part of the fiftieth anniversary of the encounter between Blessed Paul VI and the then-archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and the institution of the Anglican Centre in Rome. Before the ceremony the Pope and the archbishop signed a common declaration, which we publish separately.

In his homily, the Pope quoted the prophet Ezekiel who describes God as a shepherd herding his scattered sheep, separated from each other "in the day of clouds and thick darkness". "The Lord seems thus, through the Prophet, to turn to us with a twofold message", said Francis. "First, a message of unity: God, as Shepherd, desires the unity of His people, and He especially desires those appointed as Shepherds under Him to spend themselves in pursuit of unity. Second, the reason we are told of the divisions in the flock: in the days of clouds and thick darkness, we lost sight of the brother who stood beside us, we became unable to recognise and rejoice in our respective gifts and in the graces we've received. This happened because the darkness of incomprehension and suspicion and, overhead, the dark clouds of disagreements and disputes, gathered around us – often formed for historical and cultural reasons and not only for theological reasons".

"But we have the firm belief that God loves to dwell among us, who are His flock and precious treasure", he emphasised. "He is a tireless pastor Who continues to act, encouraging us to walk towards greater unity, which can only be achieved with the help of His grace. Therefore we remain confident, because in us, even though we are fragile earthen vessels, God loves to pour out his grace. He is convinced that we can move from darkness to light, from dispersion to unity, from wanting to plenitude. This path of communion is the path of all Christians and is your particular mission, for you are the shepherds of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission".

"It is a great vocation, that of working as instruments of communion always and everywhere", Francis observed. "This means promoting at the same time the unity of the Christian family and the unity of the human family. The two areas are not only not opposed but are mutually enriching. When, as disciples of Jesus, we offer our services jointly, each opening and the meeting, overcoming the temptation of closures and insulation, we work both at the same time when we work side-by-side, when we promote the unity of Christians as well as that of the human family. We recognise ourselves as brothers who belong to different traditions, but are driven by the same

Gospel to undertake the same mission in the world. Then it would be always good, before embarking on any activity, for you to put these questions to yourselves: Why ought not we do this together with our Anglican brothers? Can we bear witness to Jesus by acting together with our Catholic brothers?"

The Pope stressed that it is in sharing the difficulties and joys of the ministry that we once again grow close to each other. "May God grant you to be promoters of a bold and real ecumenism, always on a journey in search of opening new paths, which will benefit in the first place that your brothers in the Provinces and the Episcopal Conferences", he exclaimed. "This is always and above all a matter of following the example of the Lord, His pastoral methodology, of which the prophet Ezekiel reminds us: to seek out the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wound, heal the sick. Only thus shall the scattered people be brought together".

He went on to refer to our common journey in the footsteps of Christ the Good Shepherd, inspired by the pastoral staff of St. Gregory the Great, to symbolise the "great ecumenical significance of this meeting", adding that "Pope Gregory, from this wellspring of mission, chose and sent St. Augustine of Canterbury and his monks to the Anglo-Saxon nations, inaugurating a great chapter in evangelisation, which is our common history, and binds us inseparably. Therefore it is right that this pastoral staff be a symbol of our shared journey of unity and mission".

"At the centre of the curved part of the staff is represented the Risen Lamb. Thus, while reminding us of the will of the Lord to gather the flock and go in search of the lost sheep, the staff also seems to show us the central content of the love of God in Jesus crucified and risen, the Lamb sacrificed and living. It is love that penetrated the darkness of the sealed tomb, and opened the doors to the light of eternal life. The love of the Lamb victorious over sin and death is the true innovative message to carry together to those who are lost today, and to those who still do not have the joy of knowing the compassionate face and merciful embrace of the Good Shepherd. Our ministry consists in illuminating the darkness with this gentle light, with the meek power of love that conquers sin and overcomes death. We have the joy to recognise and celebrate the heart of the faith. Let us once again make that our centre and focus, without being distracted by that, which, enticing us to follow the spirit of the world, would detract from the original freshness of the Gospel. From there comes our shared responsibility, the one mission to serve God and humanity".

Pope Francis concluded by observing that according to some authors, the pastoral staves often have a pointed tip at the other end, which may well suggest not only the vocation to guide and gather the sheep in the name of the Risen Christ, but also to prod those that tend to stand too close and shut in, urging them to get out. "The mission of the pastors is to help the flock entrusted to them, that it be always out-going, on the move to proclaim the joy of the Gospel; not closed in tight circles, in ecclesial 'microclimates' which would take us back to the days of clouds and thick darkness. Together we ask God for the grace to imitate the spirit and example of the great missionaries, through which the Holy Spirit has revitalised the Church, which is revived when she goes out of her own accord on the ways of the world to live and proclaim the Gospel. Let us remember what happened in Edinburgh, at the origins of the ecumenical movement: it was precisely the fire of mission that allowed us to begin to overcome the barriers and break down the fences that isolated us and made a common path unthinkable. Let us pray together for this: the Lord grant us that from here might arise a renewed élan for communion and mission".
