

MASS WITH HIS HOLINESS ARAM I
AS PART OF WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 25 January 1997

1. "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us; and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever" (Ps 117 [116]:1-2). With these words from the psalm, the Old Testament already proclaimed *God's saving plan for all the nations*. This plan is universal; indeed, it could even be said to be "ecumenical" since it concerns the inhabited earth, that is, the *oikoumene*.

This vision of the salvation God offers all peoples of the world is also described in the first reading of today's liturgy through the image of the messianic feast. "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food" (Is 25:6). The prophet Isaiah gives us a glimpse of the mysterious and provident work of the Lord, who acts in the service of unity and the salvation of humanity. He lifts the veil obscuring the peoples' gaze, swallows up death and wipes away tears from all faces (cf. Is 25:7-8).

Yes, this extraordinary power really comes from God; in him we put our hope. However, at the same time we feel committed to supporting this plan of salvation with all our energy.

This universalist perspective already present in the Old Testament is echoed in today's Gospel, which presents us with the missionary mandate Jesus gave his Apostles before his Ascension into heaven: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). He then added: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). With strong and decisive words at the end of his messianic mission, Christ once again confirms the universal plan of salvation willed by the Father and indicates its global dimension by speaking of all the nations and all the world.

2. This universal mission of salvation takes on great importance on the day when the Church commemorates *the conversion of St Paul*. Among the Apostles, in fact, Paul himself expresses and fulfils the Church's universal mission in a particular way. On the road to Damascus Christ associates him with the divine plan of universal salvation: "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will ... for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14-16).

Until that moment the zealous Pharisee Saul was convinced that the plan of salvation concerned only one people: Israel. He therefore fought the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christians, with every possible means. From Jerusalem he went to Damascus precisely because there, where Christianity was spreading rapidly, he wanted to imprison and punish all those who were abandoning the ancient traditions of their fathers and were embracing the Christian faith. Near Damascus, he is illumined by a light from on high. He falls to the ground, and at that dramatic moment Christ makes him aware of his error.

On this occasion, Jesus reveals himself fully to Paul as *the One who rose from the dead*. Thus the Apostle is allowed "to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth" (Acts 22:14). From that moment, Paul becomes an "apostle" like the Twelve, and, when addressing the Galatians, will be able to state: "He who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15ff.).

3. Dear brothers and sisters, it is truly a happy occasion that gathers us every year in this ancient Basilica for the Eucharistic celebration that closes the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. We recall Paul's conversion in this church dedicated to him. From the time when the risen Jesus revealed himself to him in Damascus, to the supreme witness he gave in Rome, Paul was a zealous servant of the communion which must exist among the members of the Body of Christ. His "daily pressure" was, as he himself confesses, "my anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Cor 11:28).

Precisely from his apostolic work for the reconciliation and communion of believers the theme for the Week of Prayer this year draws its inspiration: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

The striving for reconciliation in accordance with truth and love, which was the centre of our prayer during this Week, must accompany us every day. Today's Eucharistic celebration is a sign of our quest for deeper communion among all Christians. It acquires a specific ecumenical significance thanks to the presence of our *very dear brother in Christ*, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, *His Holiness Aram I*, whom I greet with cordial brotherly affection.

The Armenian nation was baptized at the beginning of the fourth century. The trials and persecution suffered down the centuries by the Armenian people and their Church are well known. Precisely because of these events, at the beginning of the second millennium part of the population was obliged to flee from Armenia and take refuge in Cilicia, the land of Paul of Tarsus. The Catholicate of the Great House of Cilicia played an important role in guaranteeing the Christian life of the Armenian people during the diaspora.

4. The embrace of peace between the Catholicos and the Bishop of Rome, Successor of the Apostle Peter, and the blessing they will impart together in the Lord's name, testify to their *mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the apostolic succession*. Even in the diversity of the tasks entrusted to each, we are co-responsible together for what binds us: to transmit faithfully the faith received from the Apostles, to witness to the love of Christ for every human being in the frequently tragic situations of the contemporary world, to strengthen our progress towards the full unity of all Christ's disciples. To do this, we need periodically to consult one another, so that we can proclaim the Gospel in unison and serve it with an undivided heart.

I invite you all, dear brothers and sisters present here, to pray that the much appreciated visit to the Bishop of Rome by the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia may encourage each one of us increasingly to live the mystery of communion in accordance with the truth and in charity. May the blood of our martyrs and the communion of our saints help us to be renewed in the Tradition we have in common. The recent visit of the Catholicos of All Armenians, His Holiness Karekin I, was an eloquent witness to our will to deepen our communion in a reciprocal

diakonia: "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor 12:26). Thus we have encouraged each other to serve one another through charity (cf. Gal 5:13).

5. In recent years the celebration of the conversion of St Paul has become *the annual feast of ecumenical commitment*. In Rome, as all over the world, disciples of Christ belonging to the various Churches and Communities meet to raise a chorus of prayer to God for Christian unity. The association of this prayer with the liturgical feast of the conversion of St Paul highlights the fact that the unity and communion of all Christians can be attained only *by way of conversion*.

On this day we especially recall the words of Jesus' priestly prayer: "That they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21). Christ's prayer discloses to us the profound dimension of conversion: to be converted to unity means to clear the way of the greatest obstacle to the world's conversion to Christ.

Just as Paul of Tarsus discovered the true way that leads to salvation and understood that the crucified and risen Christ has led the people of Israel and all humanity to it, so also Christians must realize that the way of salvation comes through their unity in Christ, and that this requires a special spiritual commitment by all. The Second Vatican Council has explained the meaning of *unitatis redintegratio* among all Christians, illustrating its methods and means at the present moment in the Church's history. In the Encyclical *Ut unum sint* I wished to recall, 30 years after its publication, the directives of this conciliar document, drawing timely applications from it.

6. Today we give thanks to the Blessed Trinity for the efforts made in recent years and, at the same time, we ask for light for the new steps to be taken on this path, in generous and faithful obedience to the impulses of the Holy Spirit.

During this Week of Prayer, ecumenical meetings and special celebrations have been held in every part of the world to ask God for the great gift of unity. The Church in Rome, particularly linked with the apostolic tradition of Sts Peter and Paul, has also participated in this unanimous prayer of all Christians. She is founded on the pillars of the *Coryphaei* of the Apostles. Due precisely to her particular identity, she wishes to offer signs of acceptance and communion to the community of Christ's disciples throughout the world. With them, she also proclaims the greatness of the Lord's name to all peoples of our time.

"Praise the Lord, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us;
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever".

Amen!

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