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## “The ‘slow ascent to unity’” - Benedict XVI

At his Wednesday general audience on January 24, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the ecumenical concerns of the 2007 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The annual worldwide octave of prayer for Christian unity closed the next day on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul which is celebrated on January 25th.

The Holy Father opened his talk by quoting the scriptural theme for the 2007 commemoration — “He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak” (Mark 7: 37). He observed: “We could also repeat these words, which express the wonder of the people who witnessed the healing of the man who could not hear or speak, on seeing the wonderful flowering of the commitment for the re-establishment of Christian unity.”

After stating that the cause of church unity is a responsibility incumbent on the whole Church, Pope Benedict XVI first affirmed that prayer constitutes the primary duty for all the baptized. In accord with the biblical theme, he noted that “[b]y praying, and praying together, Christians acquire a greater awareness of their condition of brothers, even if they are still divided; and by praying we learn better to listen to the Lord, as we can only find the path to unity by listening to the Lord and following his voice.”

Pope Benedict XVI’s reflection on the passage from Mark’s Gospel illumines the present reality of the ecumenical journey — “Ecumenism is certainly a slow process, at times perhaps even discouraging when one gives into the temptation to ‘hear’ and not to ‘listen,’ to say half-truths, instead of having the courage to proclaim them.” That ongoing process of spiritual ecumenism struggles “to emerge from ‘comfortable deafness,’ as if the unaltered Gospel did not have the capacity to reflower, reaffirming itself as a providential leaven of conversion and spiritual renewal for each one of us.”

According to the Holy Father, ecumenism, then, can be understood to be “a gradual journey of ascent, as are all journeys of repentance.” Yet, in spite of the struggles and difficulties, the ecumenical journey also realizes “great moments of joy, refreshing pauses, and allows one to breathe fully the very pure air of full communion.”

At that point in his address, the Holy Father reviewed the significant ecumenical events during the past year of 2006. He concluded: “Are these not perhaps instances of lofty spiritual values, moments of joy, of great significance in this slow ascent to unity of which I have spoken?”

Over forty years ago, the “slow ascent” of the ecumenical journey was initiated with the Second Vatican Council’s *Unitatis Redintegratio* (“The Decree on Ecumenism,” 1964). In relationship with *Lumen Gentium* (“The Constitution on the Church,” 1964) that Decree became the magna charta of the Catholic Church’s participation in the ecumenical movement.

The Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* identified the restoration of Christian unity as a principal concern of Second Vatican Council. Besides contradicting the will of Christ, a divided Christianity is a scandal and obstructs evangelization, the mission of “preaching the gospel to every creature.” (UR n. 1)

Thirty years after the close of the Council, *Ut Unum Sint* (“That All May Be One,” 1995), Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on ecumenism, reinvigorated the conciliar commitment to ecumenism with a renewed sense of urgency and direction on the part of the Catholic Church.

In that encyclical, Pope John Paul II testified to the pastoral priority which he personally ascribed to ecumenism: “When I say that for me, as Bishop of Rome, the ecumenical task is ‘one of the pastoral priorities’ of my Pontificate, I think of the grave obstacle which the lack

*The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK’s Board of Directors.*

## 2 "The 'slow ascent to unity'"

of unity represents for the proclamation of the Gospel." (UUS n. 99)

Pope John Paul II emphasized that "ecumenism is an organic part of her [the Church's] life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does ..." (UUS n. 20) Accordingly the promotion of Christian unity is "a duty of Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love." (UUS n. 8)

In 1994 Paul John Paul II issued *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* ("As the Third Millennium Draws Near"). That apostolic letter addressed the significance of the end of the second millennium of Christianity in the spiritual preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000.

The ecumenical future was an integral component of the vision for renewal in the new millennium. This horizon was rooted in the compelling conviction that the third millennium would become an age of Christian unity. By contrast, whereas the first millennium was the period of undivided Christianity, the second millennium had been marked by major separations that split the Christian world. The first major break occurred with the Churches of the East; a later division took place at the time of the Reformation with the ecclesial Communities of the West

In this regard, the hope for the 2000s, nevertheless, was focused on overcoming those tragic divisions in the movement of the separated churches and ecclesial communities towards full communion with each other.

In the words of Pope John Paul II, the Second Vatican Council initiated the "Advent" of the journey towards the threshold of the third millennium. The Decree on Ecumenism had grounded the Church's participation in the ecumenical movement with an irrevocable decision. At the Council Catholicism ventured into the mainstream of efforts to promote Christian unity as the Church was summoned to a new ecumenical openness

*Ut Unum Sint* confirmed the Decree on Ecumenism with a renewed spirit and direction. In

that encyclical Pope John Paul II declared that the ecumenical task is not optional or merely "some sort of appendix" to the Church's activity.

Thus, as an "organic part" of ecclesial life, the ecumenical dimension is integral to the nature of the church. It enjoins "a duty of Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love." It is a call to which the whole Church must respond.

On April 20, 2005, in his first message as Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI recognized the ecclesial task of fostering Christian unity "as a primary commitment, to work without sparing energies for the reconstitution of the full and visible unity of all the followers of Christ."

Later, at the Ecumenical Meeting on the occasion of the XX World Youth Day in Cologne on August 19, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI restated his dedication to ecumenism: "... immediately following my election as Bishop of Rome, I declared, as the Successor of the Apostle Peter, my firm commitment to making the recovery of full and visible Christian unity a priority of my Pontificate."

The Holy Father further explained, "In doing so, I wished consciously to follow in the footsteps of my great predecessors: Pope Paul VI, who over 40 years ago signed the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and Pope John Paul II, who made that Document his inspiration for his activity."

At the close of his meditation on the 2007 biblical theme for the Week of Prayer, Pope Benedict XVI noted that the decades following the Vatican Council have been a period when "the search for unity is realized at different levels and innumerable circumstances: in parishes, in hospitals, in contacts between people, in collaboration between local communities in all parts of the world, and especially in areas where to carry out a gesture of good will in favor of a brother calls for great effort and also for a purification of the memory."

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