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Unity is a journey, not a destination, says the Pope to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

“Christian unity is an *essential requirement of our faith*, a requirement that springs from the intimacy of our being as believers in Jesus Christ”, said Pope Francis this morning as he received in audience the participants in the plenary session of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, on the theme “Christian unity: what model for full communion?” During the audience Francis also referred to the important ecumenical meetings he has attended throughout the year, both in Rome and during his apostolic trips. which enabled him to confirm that the desire for communion, one of his main concerns, is living and intense.

“We wish to live unity, because we wish to follow Christ, to live His love, to benefit from the mystery of His being one with the Father, which is the essence of divine love. … According to Jesus’ priestly prayer, what we yearn for is unity in the love of the Father, which comes to us as a gift in Jesus Christ, love that also informs thought and doctrines. It is not enough to be in agreement in comprehension of the Gospel, but it is necessary that all believers are united to Christ and in Christ. It is our personal and community conversion, our gradual conformation to Him, our living increasingly in Him, that enables us to grown in communion between us. This is the soul that also supports sessions of study and every other type of effort to arrive at more closely aligned points of view. Keeping this clearly in mind, it is possible to unmask some false models of communion that in reality do not lead to unity but instead contradict its essence”.

Firstly, he said, “Unity is not the fruit of our human efforts or the product constructed by ecclesiastical diplomacy, but is instead a gift that comes from on high. We men are not able to achieve unity by ourselves, nor can we decide its forms and timing. … Our task is that of receiving this gift and making it visible to all. From this point of view, unity, rather than a destination, is a journey, with its roadmaps and rhythms, its slowdowns and its accelerations, and also its pauses. Unity as a journey requires patient waiting, tenaciousness, effort and commitment. It does not annul conflicts and does not cancel out disagreement; on the contrary at times it can mean exposure to the risk of new misunderstandings. Unity can be welcomed only by those who decide to undertake the journey towards a destination that today may appear distant. However, those who take this route are comforted by the continual experience of a communion that is joyfully glimpsed, if not fully reached, every time that presumptions are set aside and we acknowledge that we are all in need of God’s love. … Equally, the unity of love is already made a reality when those who God chose and called to form His people proclaim together the wonders that He has fulfilled for them, especially by offering the witness of life full of charity towards

all. For this, I like to repeat that unity is achieved by journeying, to recall that when we journey together, that is, when we encounter each other as brothers, when we pray together and collaborate together in proclaiming the Gospel and in the service of others, we are already united. All the theological and ecclesiological divergences that still divide Christians will be overcome only along this path, without us knowing how or when, but this will happen in accordance with what the Holy Spirit will suggest for the good of the Church".

Secondly, he continued, unity is not uniformity. "The different theological, liturgical, spiritual and canonical traditions which have developed in the Christian world, when they are genuinely rooted in the apostolic tradition, are a wealth for and not a threat to the unity of the Church. Seeking to suppress this diversity is to counter the Holy Spirit, Who acts by enriching the community of believers with a variety of gifts. Throughout history, there have been attempts of this type, with consequences that at times still cause suffering today. If instead we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit, richness, variety and diversity never become conflict, because He inspires us to live variety in the communion of the Church. The ecumenical task is to respect legitimate diversity and to reach the point of overcoming irreconcilable differences with the unity that God asks of us. The continuing existence of such divergences must not paralyse us, but rather drive us to seek together a way of facing such obstacles successfully".

Finally, unity is not absorption. "Christian unity does not lead to a 'reverse ecumenism', for which one would have to deny their own history of faith; neither does it tolerate proselytism, which is instead poisonous to the path of ecumenism. Before seeing what separates us, it is necessary to perceive also in an existential way the wealth of what we have in common, such as the Sacred Scripture and the great professions of faith of the first ecumenical Councils. In this way, we Christians are able to acknowledge we are brothers and sisters who believe in the one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, committed together to finding the way of obeying today the word of God, Who wants us to be united".

Pope Francis concluded by reiterating that Ecumenism is true when it is able to move attention away from itself, from its own arguments and formulations, to the Word of God that demands to be heard, welcomed and witnessed in the world. Therefore, the various Christian communities are called not to compete with one another, but to collaborate. My recent visit to Lund reminded me of the relevance of the ecumenical principle formulated there by the Ecumenical Council of Churches in 1952, which recommends that Christians 'should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately'.