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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Second Vespers of the Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul concludes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

At 5.30 this afternoon, in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, the Holy Father Francis presided at the celebration of the Second Vespers of the Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle, concluding the fiftieth Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on the theme “Reconciliation – the love of Christ compels us” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14-20).

The celebration was attended by the representatives of other Churches and ecclesial communities present in Rome.

At the end of Vespers, before the apostolic blessing, Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, addressed a greeting to the Holy Father.

The following is the full text of the homily Pope Francis pronounced during the celebration:

Encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus radically transformed the life of St. Paul. Henceforth, for him, the meaning of life would no longer consist in trusting in his own ability to observe the Law strictly, but rather in cleaving with his whole being to the gracious and unmerited love of God: to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Paul experienced the inbreaking of a new life, life in the Spirit. By the power of the risen Lord, he came to know forgiveness, confidence and consolation. Nor could Paul keep this newness to himself. He was compelled by grace to proclaim the good news of the love and reconciliation that God offers fully in Christ to all humanity.

For the Apostle of the Gentiles, reconciliation with God, whose ambassador he became (cf. 2 Cor 5:20), is a gift from Christ. This is evident in the text of the Second Letter to the Corinthians which inspired the theme of this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “Reconciliation – the love of Christ compels us” (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-20). “The love of Christ”: this is not our love for Christ, but rather Christ’s love for us. Nor is the reconciliation to which we are compelled simply our own initiative. Before all else it is the reconciliation that God offers us in Christ. Prior to any human effort on the part of believers who strive to overcome their divisions, it is God’s free gift. As a result of this gift, each person, forgiven and loved, is called in turn to proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation in word and deed, to live and bear witness to a reconciled life.

Today, in the light of this, we can ask: How do we proclaim this Gospel of reconciliation after centuries of division? Paul himself helps us to find the way. He makes clear that reconciliation in Christ requires sacrifice. Jesus gave His life by dying for all. Similarly, ambassadors of reconciliation are called, in His name, to lay down their lives, to live no more for themselves but for Christ Who died and was raised for them (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-15). As Jesus teaches, it is only when we lose our lives for love of Him that we truly save them (cf. Lk 9:24). This was the revolution experienced by Paul, but it is, and always has been, the Christian revolution. We live no longer for ourselves, for our own interests and “image”, but in the image of Christ, for Him and following Him, with His love and in His love.

For the Church, for every Christian confession, this is an invitation not to be caught up with programmes, plans and advantages, not to look to the prospects and fashions of the moment, but rather to find the way by constantly looking to the Lord’s cross. For there we discover our programme of life. It is an invitation to leave behind every form of isolation, to overcome all those temptations to self-absorption that prevent us from perceiving how the Holy Spirit is at work outside our familiar surroundings. Authentic reconciliation between Christians will only be achieved when we can acknowledge each other’s gifts and learn from one another, with humility and docility, without waiting for the others to learn first.

If we experience this dying to ourselves for Jesus’ sake, our old way of life will be a thing of the past and, like St. Paul, we will pass over to a new form of life and fellowship. With Paul, we will be able to say: “the old has passed away” (2 Cor 5:17). To look back is helpful, and indeed necessary, to purify our memory, but to be fixated on the past, lingering over the memory of wrongs done and endured, and judging in merely human terms, can paralyse us and prevent us from living in the present. The word of God encourages us to draw strength from memory and to recall the good things the Lord has given us. But it also asks us to leave the past behind in order to follow Jesus today and to live a new life in Him. Let us allow Him, Who makes all things new (cf. Rev 21:5), to unveil before our eyes a new future, open to the hope that does not disappoint, a future in which divisions can be overcome and believers, renewed in love, will be fully and visibly one.

This year, in our journey on the road to unity, we recall in a special way the fifth centenary of the Protestant Reformation. The fact that Catholics and Lutherans can nowadays join in commemorating an event that divided Christians, and can do so with hope, placing the emphasis on Jesus and his work of atonement, is a remarkable achievement, thanks to God and prayer, and the result of fifty years of growing mutual knowledge and ecumenical dialogue.

As we implore from God the gift of reconciliation with Him and with one another, I extend cordial and fraternal greetings to His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to His Grace David Moxon, the personal representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to all the representatives of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here. I am especially pleased to greet the members of the joint Commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and to offer my good wishes for the fruitfulness of the plenary session taking place in these days. I also greet the students of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey – how joyful they are! I met them this morning; they are visiting Rome to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic Church. Also, the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox young people studying in Rome thanks to the scholarships provided by the Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches, based in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. To the superiors and staff of this Dicastery I express my esteem and gratitude.

Dear brothers and sisters, our prayer for Christian unity is a sharing in Jesus’ own prayer to the Father, on the eve of His passion, “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). May we never tire of asking God for this gift. With patient and trusting hope that the Father will grant all Christians the gift of full visible communion, let us press forward in our journey of reconciliation and dialogue, encouraged by the heroic witness of our many brothers and sisters, past and present, who were one in suffering for the name of Jesus. May we take advantage of every occasion that Providence offers us to pray together, to proclaim together, and together to love and serve, especially those who are the most poor and neglected in our midst.

