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Celebration of the Second Vespers of the Solemnity of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle, concluding the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

At 17:30 today, in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls, the Holy Father Francis presided at the celebration of the Second Vespers of the Solemnity of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle, at the conclusion of the 51st Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on the topic: "Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power" (cf. *Ex* 15: 1-21).

Representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities present in Rome took part in the celebration.

At the end of Vespers, before the apostolic blessing, His Eminence 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 pronounced by Pope Francis during the celebration:

Homily of the Holy Father

The reading from the book of Exodus tells us about Moses and Mary, brother and sister, who raise a hymn of praise to God on the shores of the Red Sea, together with the community that God has freed from Egypt. They sing their joy because in those waters God saved them from an enemy who sought to destroy them. Moses himself had previously been saved from the water and his sister had witnessed the event. Indeed, the Pharaoh had ordered: "Every son that is born ... you shall cast into the Nile" (*Ex* 1: 22). Having instead found the basket with the child inside the rushes of the Nile, the daughter of Pharaoh had called him Moses, because she said: "I took him from the waters!" (*Ex* 2: 10). The story of the rescue of Moses from the waters thus prefigures a greater rescue, that of the entire people, whom God would let pass through the waters of the Red Sea, before closing them on their enemies.

Many ancient Fathers understood this liberating passage as an image of Baptism. It is our sins that have been drowned by God in the living waters of Baptism. Much more than Egypt, sin threatened to make us slaves

forever, but the power of divine love overwhelmed it. Saint Augustine (*Sermon 223E*) interprets the Red Sea, where Israel saw the salvation of God, as an anticipatory sign of the blood of Christ crucified, source of salvation. All of us as Christians have passed through the waters of Baptism, and the grace of the Sacrament has destroyed our enemies, sin and death. Leaving the waters we have attained the freedom of children; we emerged as a people, as a community of saved brothers and sisters, as “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (*Eph 2: 19*). We share the fundamental experience: the grace of God, His mercy powerful in saving us. And precisely because God has accomplished this victory in us, together we can sing His praises.

In life we then experience the tenderness of God, Who in our daily life saves us lovingly from sin, fear and anguish. These precious experiences must be conserved in the heart and in the memory. But, as it was for Moses, individual experiences are linked to an even greater history, that of the salvation of the people of God. We see it in the song intoned by the Israelites. It begins with an individual story: “The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation” (*Ex 15: 2*). But later it becomes a narrative of salvation for all the people: “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed” (v. 13). Those who raise this song have realized that they are not alone on the shores of the Red Sea, but rather that they are surrounded by brothers and sisters who have received the same grace and proclaim the same praise.

Saint Paul, whose conversion we celebrate today, also had the powerful experience of grace, which called him to transform from a persecutor to an apostle of Christ. God’s grace also led him to seek communion with other Christians, immediately: first in Damascus and then in Jerusalem (cf. *Acts 9: 19, 26-27*). This is our experience as believers. As we grow in spiritual life, we increasingly understand that grace reaches us together with others and is to be shared with others. So, when I raise my thanksgiving to God for what He has done in me, I find I do not sing alone, because other brothers and sisters sing my same song of praise.

The various Christian Confessions have had this experience. In the last century we finally understood that we are together on the shores of the Red Sea. In Baptism we have been saved and the grateful song of praise, which other brothers and sisters sing, belongs to us, because it is also ours. When we say we recognize the baptism of Christians of other traditions, we confess that they too have received the Lord’s forgiveness and His grace which operates in them. And we welcome their worship as an authentic expression of praise for what God does. We wish then to pray together, uniting our voices even more. And even when divergences separate us, we recognize that we belong to the people of the redeemed, to the same family of brothers and sisters, beloved by the one Father.

After their liberation, the chosen people undertook a long and difficult journey through the desert, often wavering, but drawing strength from the memory of God’s saving work and His presence, always close. Today’s Christians too encounter many difficulties along the way, surrounded by so many spiritual deserts, which cause hope and joy to dry up. Along the way there are also serious dangers, which endanger life: how many brothers today suffer persecution for the name of Jesus! When their blood is shed, even if they belong to different Confessions, they become together witnesses of faith, martyrs, united in the bond of baptismal grace. Together with friends of other religious traditions, Christians today still face challenges that demean human dignity: they flee situations of conflict and misery; they are victims of human trafficking and other forms of modern slavery; they suffer hardship and hunger, in a world that is increasingly rich in means and poor in love, where inequalities continue to increase. But like the Israelites of Exodus, Christians are called to conserve together the memory of what God has accomplished in them. By reviving this memory, we can support each other and face, armed only with Jesus and the sweet power of His Gospel, every challenge with courage and hope.

Brothers and sisters, with a heart full of joy for having sung together today a hymn of praise to the Father, through Christ our Saviour and in the Spirit that gives life, I wish to extend my warm greetings to you, to all of you: to His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, Representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; to His Grace Bernard Ntahoturi, personal representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury; and to all the representatives and members of the various Christian Confessions gathered here. I was pleased to greet the Ecumenical Delegation of Finland, whom I had the pleasure of meeting this morning. I also greet the students of the *Ecumenical Institute of Bossey*, who are visiting Rome to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox who study here thanks to the generosity of the Committee for

Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches, which works at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Together we have given thanks to God for what He has accomplished in our lives and in our communities. Let us present to Him today our needs and those of the world, trusting that He, in His faithful love, will continue to save and accompany His people on their journey.

The Holy Father's impromptu address before the Blessing

The following are the Pope's words before the Blessing, greeting the Lutheran Pastor who is preparing to leave Rome:

Our brother, the Lutheran Pastor in Rome, will take leave after ten years to start another job in Hamburg, and I asked him to come and also to give us all his blessing.

[Blessing]
