

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

**CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS  
54th WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

***HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS***

*Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls  
Monday, 25 January 2021*

[*H. Em. Card. Kurt Koch read the homily prepared by Pope Francis for the occasion*]

“Abide in my love” (*Jn* 15:9). Jesus links this request to the image of the vine and the branches, the final image that he offers us in the Gospels. The Lord himself is the vine, the “true” vine (v. 1), who does not betray our expectations, but remains ever faithful in love, despite our sins and our divisions. Onto this vine, which is himself, all of us, the baptized, are grafted like branches. This means that we can grow and bear fruit only if we remain united to Jesus. Tonight let us consider this indispensable unity, which has a number of levels. With the vine in mind, we can imagine unity as consisting of three concentric rings, like those of a tree trunk.

The first circle, the innermost, is *abiding in Jesus*. This is the starting point of the journey of each person towards unity. In today’s fast-paced and complex world, it is easy to lose our compass, pulled as we are from every side. Many people feel internally fragmented, unable to find a fixed point, a stable footing, amid life’s changes. Jesus tells us that the secret of stability is to abide in him. In this evening’s reading, he says this seven times (cf. vv. 4-7.9-10). For he knows that “apart from him, we can do nothing” (cf. v. 5). Jesus also showed us how to abide in him. He left us his own example: each day he withdrew to pray in deserted places. We need prayer, as we need water, to live. Personal prayer, spending time with Jesus, adoration, these are essential if we are to abide in him. In this way, we can place our worries, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows in the Lord’s heart. Most of all, centred on Jesus in prayer, we can experience his love. And in this way receive new vitality, like the branches that draw sap from the trunk. This is the first unity, our personal integrity, the work of the grace we receive by abiding in Jesus.

The second circle is that of *unity with Christians*. We are branches of the same vine, we are “communicating vessels”, in the sense that the good or the evil that each of us does affects all others. In the spiritual life, then, there is also a sort of “law of dynamics”: to the extent that we abide in God, we draw close to others, and to the extent that we draw close to others, we abide in God. This means that if we pray to God in spirit and truth, then we come to realize our need to love others while, on the other hand, “if we love one another, God abides in us” (1 *Jn* 4:12). Prayer unfailingly leads to love; otherwise, it is empty ritual. For it is not possible to encounter Jesus apart from his Body, made up of many members, as many as are the baptized. If our worship is genuine, we will grow in love for all those who follow Jesus, regardless of the Christian communion to which they may belong, for even though they may not be “one of ours”, they are his.

Even so, we know that loving our brothers and sisters is not easy, because their defects and shortcomings immediately become apparent, and past hurts come to mind. Here the Father

comes to our aid, for as an expert farmer (cf. *Jn* 15:1), he knows exactly what to do: "every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (*Jn* 15:2). The Father *takes away and prunes*. Why? Because in order to love, we need to be stripped of all that leads us astray and makes us withdraw into ourselves and thus fail to bear fruit. Let us ask the Father, then, to prune our prejudices with regard to others, and the worldly attachments that stand in the way of full unity with all his children. Thus purified in love, we will be able to be less concerned about the worldly obstacles and stumbling stones from the past, which nowadays distract us from the Gospel.

The third circle of unity, the largest, is *the whole of humanity*. Here, we can reflect on the working of the Holy Spirit. In the vine that is Christ, the Spirit is the sap that spreads to all the branches. The Spirit blows where he wills, and everywhere he wants to restore unity. He impels us to love not only those who love us and think as we do, but to love everyone, even as Jesus taught us. He enables us to forgive our enemies and the wrongs we have endured. He inspires us to be active and creative in love. He reminds us that our neighbours are not only those who share our own values and ideas, and that we are called to be neighbours to all, good Samaritans to a humanity that is frail, poor and, in our own time, suffering so greatly. A humanity lying by the roadsides of our world, which God wants to raise up with compassion. May the Holy Spirit, the source of grace, help us to live in *gratuitousness*, to love even those who do not love us in return, for it is through pure and disinterested love that the Gospel bears fruit. A tree is known by its fruits: by our gratuitous love it will be known if we are part of the vine of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit thus teaches us the *concreteness of love* for all those brothers and sisters with whom we share the same humanity, the humanity which Christ inseparably united to himself by telling us that we will always find him in the poor and those in greatest need (cf. *Mt* 25: 31-45). By serving them together, we will realize once more that we are brothers and sisters, and will grow in unity. The Spirit, who renews the face of the earth, also inspires us to care for our common home, to make bold choices about how we live and consume, for the opposite of fruitfulness is exploitation, and it is shameful for us to waste precious resources of which many others are deprived.

That same Spirit, the architect of the ecumenical journey, has led us this evening to pray together. As we experience the unity that comes from addressing God with one voice, I would like to thank all those who in the course of this week have prayed, and continue to pray, for Christian unity. I offer a fraternal greeting to the representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here, to the young Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox studying here in Rome under the aegis of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and to the professors and students of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, who would have come to Rome as in previous years, but were unable to do so because of the pandemic and are following us through the media. Dear brothers and sisters, may we remain united in Christ. May the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts make us feel children of the Father, brothers and sisters of one another, brothers and sisters in our one human family. May the Holy Trinity, communion of love, make us grow in unity.

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