

ECUMENICAL PRAYER SERVICE

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*St. Joseph's Parish, New York
Friday, 18 April 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My heart abounds with gratitude to Almighty God – “the Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (*Eph 4:6*) – for this blessed opportunity to gather with you this evening in prayer. I thank Bishop Dennis Sullivan for his cordial welcome, and I warmly greet all those in attendance representing Christian communities throughout the United States. May the peace of our Lord and Savior be with you all!

Through you, I express my sincere appreciation for the invaluable work of all those engaged in ecumenism: the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, the Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and many others. The contribution of Christians in the United States to the ecumenical movement is felt throughout the world. I encourage all of you to persevere, always relying on the grace of the risen Christ whom we strive to serve by bringing about “the obedience of faith for the sake of his name” (*Rom 1:5*).

We have just listened to the scriptural passage in which Paul – a “prisoner for the Lord” – delivers his ardent appeal to the members of the Christian community at Ephesus. “I beg you,” he writes, “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph 4:1-3*). Then, after his impassioned litany of unity, Paul reminds his hearers that Jesus, having ascended into heaven, has bestowed upon men and women all the gifts necessary for building up the Body of Christ (cf. *Eph 4:11-13*).

Paul’s exhortation resounds with no less vigor today. His words instill in us the confidence that the Lord will never abandon us in our quest for unity. They also call us to live in a way that bears witness to the “one heart and mind” (*Acts 4:32*), which has always been the distinguishing trait of Christian *koinonia* (cf. *Acts 2:42*), and the force drawing others to join the community of believers so that they too might come to share in the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (*Eph 3:8*; cf. *Acts 2:47*; *5:14*).

Globalization has humanity poised between two poles. On the one hand, there is a growing sense of interconnectedness and interdependency between peoples even when – geographically and culturally speaking – they are far apart. This new situation offers the potential for enhancing a sense of global solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of mankind. On the other hand, we cannot deny that the rapid changes occurring in our world also present some disturbing signs of fragmentation and a retreat into

individualism. The expanding use of electronic communications has in some cases paradoxically resulted in greater isolation. Many people – including the young – are seeking therefore more authentic forms of community. Also of grave concern is the spread of a secularist ideology that undermines or even rejects transcendent truth. The very possibility of divine revelation, and therefore of Christian faith, is often placed into question by cultural trends widely present in academia, the mass media and public debate. For these reasons, a faithful witness to the Gospel is as urgent as ever. Christians are challenged to give a clear account of the hope that they hold (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15).

Too often those who are not Christians, as they observe the splintering of Christian communities, are understandably confused about the Gospel message itself. Fundamental Christian beliefs and practices are sometimes changed within communities by so-called “prophetic actions” that are based on a hermeneutic not always consonant with the datum of Scripture and Tradition. Communities consequently give up the attempt to act as a unified body, choosing instead to function according to the idea of “local options”. Somewhere in this process the need for *diachronic koinonia* – communion with the Church in every age – is lost, just at the time when the world is losing its bearings and needs a persuasive common witness to the saving power of the Gospel (cf. *Rom* 1:18-23).

Faced with these difficulties, we must first recall that the unity of the Church flows from the perfect oneness of the triune God. In John’s Gospel, we are told that Jesus prayed to his Father that his disciples might be one, “just as you are in me and I am in you” (*Jn* 17:21). This passage reflects the unwavering conviction of the early Christian community that its unity was both caused by, and is reflective of, the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This, in turn, suggests that the internal cohesion of believers was based on the sound integrity of their doctrinal confession (cf. *1 Tim* 1:3-11). Throughout the New Testament, we find that the Apostles were repeatedly called to give an account for their faith to both Gentiles (cf. *Acts* 17:16-34) and Jews (cf. *Acts* 4:5-22; 5:27-42). The core of their argument was always the historical fact of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the tomb (*Acts* 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30). The ultimate effectiveness of their preaching did not depend on “lofty words” or “human wisdom” (*1 Cor* 2:13), but rather on the work of the Spirit (*Eph* 3:5) who confirmed the authoritative witness of the Apostles (cf. *1 Cor* 15:1-11). The nucleus of Paul’s preaching and that of the early Church was none other than Jesus Christ, and “him crucified” (*1 Cor* 2:2). But this proclamation had to be guaranteed by the purity of normative doctrine expressed in creedal formulae – *symbola* – which articulated the essence of the Christian faith and constituted the foundation for the unity of the baptized (cf. *1 Cor* 15:3-5; *Gal* 1:6-9; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2).

My dear friends, the power of the *kerygma* has lost none of its internal dynamism. Yet we must ask ourselves whether its full force has not been attenuated by a relativistic approach to Christian doctrine similar to that found in secular ideologies, which, in alleging that science alone is “objective”, relegate religion entirely to the subjective sphere of individual feeling. Scientific discoveries, and their application through human ingenuity, undoubtedly offer new possibilities for the betterment of humankind. This

does not mean, however, that the “knowable” is limited to the empirically verifiable, nor religion restricted to the shifting realm of “personal experience”.

For Christians to accept this faulty line of reasoning would lead to the notion that there is little need to emphasize objective truth in the presentation of the Christian faith, for one need but follow his or her own conscience and choose a community that best suits his or her individual tastes. The result is seen in the continual proliferation of communities which often eschew institutional structures and minimize the importance of doctrinal content for Christian living.

Even within the ecumenical movement, Christians may be reluctant to assert the role of doctrine for fear that it would only exacerbate rather than heal the wounds of division. Yet a clear, convincing testimony to the salvation wrought for us in Christ Jesus has to be based upon the notion of normative apostolic teaching: a teaching which indeed underlies the inspired word of God and sustains the sacramental life of Christians today.

Only by “holding fast” to sound teaching (2 *Thess* 2:15; cf. *Rev* 2:12-29) will we be able to respond to the challenges that confront us in an evolving world. Only in this way will we give unambiguous testimony to the truth of the Gospel and its moral teaching. This is the message which the world is waiting to hear from us. Like the early Christians, we have a responsibility to give transparent witness to the “reasons for our hope”, so that the eyes of all men and women of goodwill may be opened to see that God has shown us his face (cf. 2 *Cor* 3:12-18) and granted us access to his divine life through Jesus Christ. He alone is our hope! God has revealed his love for all peoples through the mystery of his Son’s passion and death, and has called us to proclaim that he is indeed risen, has taken his place at the right hand of the Father, and “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead” (*Nicene Creed*).

May the word of God we have heard this evening inflame our hearts with hope on the path to unity (cf. *Lk* 24:32). May this prayer service exemplify the centrality of prayer in the ecumenical movement (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8); for without it, ecumenical structures, institutions and programs would be deprived of their heart and soul. Let us give thanks to Almighty God for the progress that has been made through the work of his Spirit, as we acknowledge with gratitude the personal sacrifices made by so many present and by those who have gone before us.

By following in their footsteps, and by placing our trust in God alone, I am confident that – to borrow the words of Father Paul Wattson – we will achieve the “oneness of hope, oneness of faith, and oneness of love” that alone will convince the world that Jesus Christ is the one sent by the Father for the salvation of all.

I thank you all.