

(English translation)

Palermo (in the Cathedral), 17 January 1998

A Spirituality for Dialogues

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Your Excellency, your excellencies, religious and civil authorities, ladies and gentlemen and many, many brothers and sisters, and friends of mine, we meet here all together in this splendid Cathedral today, January 17, the first day of the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In different parts of the world, Christians of different Churches and communities are joining in prayer to obtain from the Father of us all the visible unity of the one Church of Christ.

But, we must also remember that today's event is dedicated, by the Catholic Church in Italy, to a reflection on Judaism – as was mentioned – that is, on the roots of our Christian faith. But I will say more on this further on.

Allow me now to especially address the Christians.

To pray for the unity of Christians, unity that is a gift and therefore to be expected from Heaven. Unity, however, that demands from all Christians a particular attitude without which we cannot receive this gift. This is one of the considerations taught to us by the Christians of the Churches... which engaged the Christians of Europe's Churches to work on the recent Second Ecumenical Assembly of Graz, in Austria held last 23 - 29 June. There was a crowd gathered there (we are talking about 10,000-12,000 people), representative of Ecumenical Europe: Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists and still many others.

What attitude, they asked themselves, should we have in order to obtain more easily, and in a shorter time, unity among everyone? And there was affirmed the need to have and live an *ecumenical spirituality* not only among the leaders of the Church - where there is already a dialogue of charity, through mutual gifts - as witnesses of a re-found fraternity, not only among experts and those who work to further a theological dialogue, but an *ecumenical spirituality* lived out by all the Christian people, without which, as our history teaches, everything is compromised on our ecumenical journey.

Therefore, today, I would like to offer some line of this *ecumenical spirituality* as it was proposed in Graz.

This is not the first time that we speak and wish for an *ecumenical spirituality*. The World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, for example, and others, are looking for an *ecumenical spirituality*.^[1]

In Italy a Waldensian pastor affirmed that "the absence of an ecumenical spirituality makes our task of reconciliation (of the Churches) much more difficult and burdensome."^[2]

But is there a spirituality of that sort within reach today?

We may be aware that there are praiseworthy efforts to reach this objective. Perhaps they are known to us, perhaps not, because serious things, the things of God usually grow in silence. But if they are the effect of the Spirit, then unity is not only a dream or a utopia: it is a real possibility.

However, we might still ask ourselves: what should be the key points, the essential cornerstones of what could rightly be called an *ecumenical spirituality*?

Considering that the Church is a divine as well as a human reality, a first key point has to be God: and, given that this spirituality is a *spirituality of communion*, God as he is: Love (1 Jn 4:8). If we Christians, who are now at the dawn of the third millennium, take a fresh look at our 2,000 year history, and in particular at the history of the second millennium, we cannot help but be saddened to see that it has often been a series of conflicts, of quarrels and of mutual incomprehension, which in many places have torn the seamless tunic of Christ that is his Church.^[3]

Who was to blame? Certainly it was because of historical, cultural, political, geographical and social circumstances. But it was also because amongst Christians there was a lack of what should be one of their specific unifying features: love. That is what happened.

And so today, as we seek to put right all that was wrong, and to find new strength to start again, we must focus our attention on the source of our common faith, the great revelation of God Love.

In these times it is God Love who, in a certain way, must reveal himself anew to the heart of each individual Christian, and to the Church that we compose. God Love, above all, must once again reveal himself in each one of us... to each one of us, in the meantime.

How could we think of loving others with fruit to reach a fuller communion among Churches, if we ourselves don't feel profoundly loved, and if we Christians don't have in ourselves the certainty that God loves us?

The fact is that even though, through faith, we know that God is love, often we don't think of it and we live as though we were alone on this earth, as orphans. We live as though we did not have a Father caring for us in everything and through everything. A Father who counts even the hairs on our head, who knows all about us, and who wants to make everything work together for our good, whether it is the good that we do or our wrong doing that he permits, if we are on the right path.

To set out to live an *ecumenical spirituality*, what is needed is that we can make our own, with total conviction and honesty, the words of John the evangelist: "... we believe in love" (1 Jn 4:16). But God does not only love us as individual Christians, he loves us also as the Church. And he loves the Church for the times when throughout history it has acted according to the design that God had for it. But also, and here we see the wonder of God's mercy, he loves the Church for the times when, because Christians became divided from one another, it didn't correspond to his design, providing now they seek full communion again in the divine will.

It is this very consoling conviction which made Pope John Paul II, trusting in the One who brings good from evil, give the following answer when he was asked: "Why did the Holy Spirit permit all these divisions?" While recognizing that it could have been because of our sins, the Pope added: "Could it not be that these divisions have also been ... a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth (emerged in the different Churches – I add) would not have otherwise come to light..."[4]

Therefore to believe in God, who is Love, for us and for the Church: this is the starting point. But, if God loves us, we cannot remain inactive before such divine goodness. As true children we must return his love and here too we must do so as individuals and as Church.

As individuals we do so by acting as Jesus did: he loved the Father, wanting the Father's will in the place of his own. Now, the divine will is written above all in Holy Scripture, especially in the New Testament for us.

It is a duty for those who want to commit themselves to unity, and therefore it is a key point of a possible *ecumenical spirituality*, to live out the words of the Gospel, one by one.

Cardinal Bea said that the more Christians live the Word, the more it makes them similar to Jesus and thus more similar and united to one another.[5]

Christians should make all the words of Sacred Scripture their own; in particular the words which sums up the Law and the prophets: love of neighbour (see *Mt* 22:40). Only the person who loves others with the same charity as God's will be an authentic Christian today. And here I would like to pause. We will never repeat it enough: Gospel love, that we owe our neighbour, is a special love. It has its own unique qualities: for example, it aims to see Christ in every neighbour. At our final judgement, He will count as done to Him what good or evil we have done to others.

This charity also goes out towards all people. Christians do not distinguish between those who are beautiful or ugly, nice or difficult, white or black, compatriot or foreigner, American or African, Christian or Buddhist, and so forth. They love everyone.

This charity always takes the initiative; Jesus loved us first when we were still sinners. We should not expect to feel loved, we have to love everyone, by taking the initiative.

This charity makes us love each person as ourselves, making us one with brothers and sisters: in sufferings and in joys...

And the Churches too should love with this same love.

Jesus prayed "Father, may they all be one" (see Jn 17:21). And instead we are always ready to forget his testament, and to scandalise the world with our divisions, the world we should be winning over for him.

During the centuries each Church has, to a degree, become set in its ways, because of the waves of indifference, lack of understanding and even of mutual hatred. What is needed in each Church is a supplement of love; or rather Christianity needs to be invaded by a torrent of love.

So we need love and mutual love between Christians, and mutual love between the Churches. The love that leads people to put everything in common, each Church becoming a gift for the others, so that we can foresee in the Church of the future that there will be just one truth but that it will be expressed in different ways, seen from different viewpoints, made more beautiful by the variety of interpretations.

In his book "Crossing the Threshold of Hope" Pope John Paul II writes. "It is necessary for humanity to achieve unity through plurality, to learn how to come together in the one Church, even while presenting a plurality of ways of thinking and acting, of cultures and civilizations."^[6]

It is not that one Church or another will have to "die" (as is sometimes feared), but each Church should be reborn as new in unity. Living in this Church in full communion will be something marvellous, as fascinating as a miracle, which will attract the attention and interest of the whole world.

Mutual love, however, is truly evangelical, and therefore valid, only if it is practised in the measure wanted by Jesus: He said: "Love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends" (see Jn 15:12-13). To give our life, and He gave it for us.

But how did Jesus give his life? In his passion, Jesus did not only suffer during the agony in the garden, when he was scourged, crowned with thorns and when he was crucified, but he also suffered in that climax of suffering which he expressed in the cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). It was a suffering which, as theologians and mystics affirm, was his greatest trial, his darkest night.

Now, in order to reach the goal of building full communion in mutual love, it seems necessary today to reflect on and to mirror our lives especially in that suffering. It is understandable. If Jesus was called to overcome the sin of the world and, therefore, the division of people cut off from God and, as a result, divided amongst themselves, he could only fulfil his mission by experiencing in himself the extreme depths of separation: the separation of He, God from God, by feeling he was forsaken by the Father.

But Jesus, by re-abandoning himself to the Father ("Into your hands I commit my spirit" - Lk 23:46) overcame that immense suffering and brought people once more into the bosom of the Father and into the mutual embrace. But if this is so, it is not difficult to see in Him, in Jesus forsaken, the brightest star that can shed light on our ecumenical journey. He is the pearl that we need to discover in order to bear great fruit.

An *ecumenical spirituality* will be fruitful in so far as those who dedicate themselves to it see in Jesus crucified and forsaken, who re-abandons himself to the Father, the key to understanding every disunity and to re-establishing unity.

For a productive ecumenism we need hearts touched by Him, who love Him, choose Him and who know how to see his divine image in every disunity they encounter, and who find in Him the light and the strength not to get stuck in the traumas and in the cracks of division, but always to go beyond and find a solution, all possible solutions.

Mutual love leads then to achieving unity.

When unity is lived it has an effect, which is also, so to say, a key point for a living ecumenism. We are speaking about the presence of Jesus amongst people gathered in his name. He said “Where two or three are united in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). And this is already a strong bond between us and helps us on the journey towards visible unity! Jesus present between a Catholic and a Waldensian who love one another, between Anglicans and Orthodox, between an Evangelical-Lutheran and a Methodist.... This presence of Jesus is a gift which also lessens the pain of waiting for the day when we will all share together his presence in the Eucharist.

And another key point of an *ecumenical spirituality* must be a great love for the Holy Spirit. This year we must make an effort to better know the Holy Spirit, Love Personified, who binds in unity the Persons of the Blessed Trinity and is the bond between the members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Then, we must not forget Mary, who was proclaimed by the Council of Ephesus, a Council we share, as Mother of God, Theotokos. A mother always helps her children to come together.

And we need to love the Church as communion and, especially us Catholic Christians, to love the Holy Father whose Petrine Ministry serves the unity of the Church and, with it, to love the Church hierarchy.

An *ecumenical spirituality* lived in this way can produce exceptional fruits.

But we can foresee that it will have one effect above all. Since it is communitarian it will bind into one all those who live it, so that there will be solidarity amongst them and they will be, in a certain way, already one. They will realize that they form, so to speak, one Christian people that, together with all that is being done in so many other ways through the action of the Holy Spirit in this ecumenical age, they can be a leaven helping to bring full communion among Churches. In fact it will be the living out of a fourth ecumenical dialogue, in addition to the dialogues of charity and of prayer and the theological one. It will be the *dialogue of the people*. Not a people formed only of laity, of course, but the whole people of God.

It is a dialogue which will enable us to discover more clearly, and more effectively, the rich heritage already shared by Christians, including Baptism, Sacred Scripture, the first Councils, the Fathers of the Church, etc. This dialogue will enable us to give greater value to this heritage and to live it together.

We are eager to see this people and already here and there it can be glimpsed, and we long to see it in every Church.

As you can readily understand, a *spirituality of communion* not only helps bring unity among Christians, but also opens up dialogue with people of other religions. This dialogue is one of the most demanding and urgent challenges to us at the dawn of the third millennium.

And here, first of all, we wish to remember Judaism and the Jewish people, to whom – as we mentioned – today the Catholic Church in Italy is dedicating a special day of reflection entitled: “What is humankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them” (See Psalm 8:5), which has as its theme the unique and essential role of the human being in their tradition.

The Biblical proclamation that the human person is made in the image of God is not found in any other religious traditions except for Judaism and Christianity, and this implies the supreme and intangible dignity of the human person. Therefore, we find in the Judaic tradition the roots of what today are defined as “human rights.”

What should we say about these brothers and sisters of ours that John Paul II called our “elder brothers and sisters”?

We Christians will never wholly understand what it means to share with them our common faith in the one God of Abraham. If we travel the road of a deeper reconciliation with them, we will then be able to glorify God together, to thank Him, ask Him forgiveness “side by side” (*Zeph 3:9*), all together as His creation, as His children and therefore, as brothers and sisters among us.

Together with them, we can allow ourselves to be enlightened and nourished by the heavenly treasures we hold in common, contained in the Jewish Bible, almost identical to our Old Testament. We can have great hope for the good of humanity, because of our deep fraternal communion with them. Together with them, we can double our witness of God the Creator of the universe to the whole world. But we need to get to know each other better, to work together and even live moments of prayer in common – such as today – to render real and visible a profound unity of spirit that exists notwithstanding all our differences and wounds of the past, which often Christians were guilty of inflicting.

In recognizing the other person as a brother or sister in his/her diversity, we can become always more aware of the fact that even the roots of our specific Christian faith are found in this people, because Jesus was Jewish, Mary was Jewish, Peter and Paul and the other first apostles were Jewish.

This same Abrahamic faith also links us with the Muslims – even though with them the relationship is very different. We too have wonderful experiences of deep and fruitful dialogue with them.

In addition, if we Christians love as this spirituality teaches us, we will have an ulterior light to see and discover in other faiths the presence of the “seeds of the Word,” as the Council calls them.^[7] The non-Christian faiths, in fact, “often reflect a ray of that Truth that enlightens all men and women.”^[8] And this discovery can foster closeness and mutual understanding.

As it is true that almost all religions have the so called “Golden Rule”, which in different ways, says: “Do to others what you would wish done to you; do not do to others what you would not want done to you”, which is reciprocal love, it will be possible to establish with them, on the basis of the Golden Rule, a relationship of mutual love.

Then there is the dialogue with those who have non-religious convictions, which can be very deep because it is based on mutual respect for real values such as peace, freedom, life, human rights, ecology, and so forth.

And there is the dialogue between peoples.

And unity between the human person and nature.

A *spirituality of communion*, then, and unity is the keynote that can sum it all up, which is certainly not uniformity. If we put unity into practice we will see the world change direction, like a film running backwards. There are so many traumatic divisions, so many crises, so much disintegration on our planet, which remains immersed in indifference, in secularisation and materialism.

With this new life we can turn back, while still going forward. Humanity will rediscover the unity God had in mind when he created it. This is my wish for you today, above all for those of us who would love to commit to living this spirituality of reconciliation and dialogue. (Applause) ...(*Gen Rosso Song: "Seeds of Peace"*)

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[1] See Consultation on 'A Spirituality for our Time' of the World Council of Churches held in Romania, 1994.

[2] R. bertalot, La riconciliazione nei dialoghi fra le Chiese, "Studi Ecumenici", July – September 1996, p.359.

[3] See Bishop Chiaretti and Pastor Tomasetto in the preface of the Italian edition of the "Working Paper" 1995 for Graz, p.8.

[4] JOHN PAULL II, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope", 1994, p.167.

[5] See message of Bea for the inauguration of the small ecumenical town (1968) at Otmaring (Germany), published in G.BOSSI, *Qui vivranno insieme cattolici e luterani*, "Città Nuova", 1968 n.14, p.35.

[6] JOHN PAUL II, op.cit., p.167.

[7] See Vatican II, *Ad Gentes 11*: "semina Verbi in eis latentia".

[8] See Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate 2*: The non-Christian faiths "...often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men and women