

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

**CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS**  
**53rd WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

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

*Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls*  
*Saturday, 25 January 2020*

Three different groups were on board the ship that brought Saint Paul to Rome as a prisoner. The most powerful group was made up of soldiers under a centurion. Then there were the sailors, upon whom naturally everyone on board depended during the long voyage. Finally, there were the weakest and most vulnerable: the prisoners.

When the ship ran aground off the coast of Malta, after having been at the mercy of a storm for several days, the soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to ensure that no one would escape, but they were stopped by the centurion who wanted to save Paul. Although he was among the most vulnerable, Paul offered something important to his traveling companions. While everyone was losing all hope of survival, the Apostle brought an unexpected message of hope. An angel had reassured him, saying to him: "Do not be afraid, Paul; God has granted safety to all those who sail with you" (*Acts 27:24*). Paul's trust proved to be well founded, and in the end all the travellers were saved. Once they landed at Malta, they experienced the hospitality, kindness and humanity of the island's inhabitants. This important detail provided the theme of the Week of Prayer that concludes today.

Dear brothers and sisters: this account from the Acts of the Apostles also speaks to our ecumenical journey towards that unity which God ardently desires. In the first place, it tells us that those who are weak and vulnerable, those who have little to offer materially but find their wealth in God, can present valuable messages for the good of all. Let us think of Christian communities: even the smallest and least significant in the eyes of the world, if they experience the Holy Spirit, if they are animated by love for God and neighbour, have a message to offer to the whole Christian family. Let us think of marginalized and persecuted Christian communities. As in the account of Paul's shipwreck, it is often the weakest who bring the most important message of salvation. This was what pleased God: to save us not with the power of this world, but with the weakness of the cross (cf. *1 Cor 1:20-25*). As disciples of Jesus, we must be careful not to be attracted by worldly logic, but rather to listen to the small and the weak, because God loves to send his messages through those who most resemble his Son made man.

The account in Acts reminds us of a second aspect: God's priority is *the salvation of all*. As the angel said to Paul: "God has granted safety to all those who sail with you". Paul insists on this point. We too need to repeat it: it is our duty to put into effect the paramount desire of God who, as Paul himself writes, "desires everyone to be saved" (*1 Tim 2:4*). This is an invitation not to devote ourselves exclusively to our own communities, but to open ourselves to the good of all, to the universal gaze of God who took flesh in order to embrace the whole human race and who died and rose for the salvation of all. If we, with his grace, can assimilate his way of seeing things, we can overcome our divisions. In Paul's shipwreck, each person contributed to

the salvation of all: the centurion made important decisions, the sailors put to use their knowledge and abilities, the Apostle encouraged those without hope. Among Christians as well, each community has a gift to offer to the others. The more we look beyond partisan interests and overcome the legacies of the past in the desire to move forward towards a common landing place, the more readily we will recognize, welcome and share these gifts.

We thus arrive at a third aspect that was at the centre of this Week of Prayer: *hospitality*. In the last chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke says, with regard to the inhabitants of Malta, "The natives showed us unusual kindness" (v. 2). The fire kindled on the shore to warm the shipwrecked travellers is a fine symbol of the human warmth that unexpectedly surrounded them. Even the governor of the island showed himself welcoming and hospitable to Paul, who repaid him by healing his father and later many other sick people (cf. vv. 7-9). Finally, when the Apostle and those with him departed for Italy, the Maltese generously resupplied them with provisions (v. 10).

From this Week of Prayer we want to learn to be more hospitable, in the first place among ourselves as Christians and among our brothers and sisters of different confessions. Hospitality belongs to the tradition of Christian communities and families. Our elders taught us this by their example: there was always something extra on the table of a Christian home for a passing friend or a person in need who knocked on the door. In monasteries a guest is treated with great respect, as if he or she were Christ. Let us not lose, indeed let us revive, these customs that have the flavour of the Gospel!

Dear brothers and sisters, with these thoughts I offer my cordial and fraternal greetings to His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to His Grace Ian Ernest, the personal representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to all the representatives of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities gathered here to conclude together the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I greet the students of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, who are visiting Rome to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic Church. I welcome too the young people of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches who are studying on a scholarship from the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with the Orthodox Churches, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, to whose members I extend my greetings and gratitude. Together, without ever tiring, let us continue to pray and to beg from God the gift of full unity among ourselves.

POPE FRANCIS

## ***GENERAL AUDIENCE***

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 22 January 2020*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,*

Today's catechesis is in keeping with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme, *hospitality*, was prepared by the communities of Malta and Gozo, starting with the first passage in the Acts of the Apostles which tells of the hospitality shown by the people of Malta

to Saint Paul and his travelling companions who had been shipwrecked with him. I referred to this event in the catechesis of two weeks ago.

Let us thus continue from the dramatic experience of that shipwreck. The ship on which Paul was sailing was at the mercy of the elements. They had been adrift at sea for 14 days, and since neither the sun nor the stars were visible, the travellers felt disoriented and lost. Below them the sea lashed violently against the boat and they feared the vessel might break from the force of the waves. From above, they were whipped by wind and rain. The force of the sea and the storm was terrifying and indifferent to the fate of the passengers: there were more than 260 people [on board].

But Paul who knew that it was not so, speaks. Faith tells him that his life is in the hands of God who had resurrected Jesus from the dead and who had called him, Paul, that he might carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. His faith also tells him that, according to what Jesus had revealed, God is a loving Father. Therefore Paul addresses his traveling companions and, inspired by faith, announces that God would not allow one hair of their head to be lost.

This prophecy comes true when the vessel runs aground on the coast of Malta and all the passengers reach land safely. And there they experience something new. In contrast to the brute force of the stormy sea, they witness the "unusual kindness" of the dwellers of that island. These people, who are foreign to them, are attentive to their needs. They light a fire so that they can warm up, they offer them shelter from the rain and food. Even though they had not yet received the Good News of Christ, they manifest God's love with practical kind actions. Indeed spontaneous hospitality and thoughtful gestures communicate something of God's love. And the hospitality of the Maltese islanders is rewarded by the miracles of healing that God works through Paul on the island. Thus, just as the people of Malta were a sign of God's Providence for the Apostle, so was he a witness to the merciful love of God for them.

My dearest ones, hospitality is important. And it is also an *important ecumenical virtue*. First of all it means recognizing that other Christians are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are brothers and sisters. Some might say: "But he is Protestant, he is Orthodox ...". Yes, but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not a one way act of generosity because when we welcome other Christians, we welcome them as a gift that is given to us. Like the Maltese — these Maltese were good — we are rewarded because we receive what the Holy Spirit has sown in these brothers and sisters and this also becomes a gift for us because the Holy Spirit too sows his graces everywhere. Welcoming Christians from another tradition means firstly showing God's love to them because they are children of God — our brothers and sisters — and moreover, it means welcoming what God has done in their lives. Ecumenical hospitality requires the willingness to listen to others, to pay attention to their personal stories of faith and to the respective history of their communities, communities of faith with another tradition that is different from ours. Ecumenical hospitality involves the desire to know the experience that other Christians have of God and waiting to receive the spiritual gifts that follow from that. And this is a grace. To discover this is a grace. I think of the past, of my land for example. When evangelical missionaries arrived, a small group of Catholics would burn their tents. Not this: it is not Christian. We are brothers and sisters, we are all brothers and sisters and we have to show hospitality to each other.

Today, the sea that shipwrecked Paul and his companions is once again a place of danger to the lives of other passengers. All over the world, men and women migrants face risky voyages to flee from violence, to flee from war, to flee from poverty. Just like Paul and his companions, they experience indifference, the hostility of the desert, rivers, seas... They are often not allowed to disembark at ports. But unfortunately, sometimes they are also met with far worse hostility from mankind. They are exploited by criminal traffickers: today! They are treated like numbers and like a threat by some government leaders: today! Sometimes the lack of hospitality drives them back like a wave, to the poverty or the very dangers they had fled.

As Christians we must work together to show migrants God's love revealed by Jesus Christ. We can and we must bear witness that there are not just hostility and indifference but that every person is precious to God and loved by him. The divisions that still exist among us prevent us from fully being a sign of God's love. Working together to exercise ecumenical hospitality, in particular to those whose lives are most vulnerable, will make us all Christians— Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, all Christians — better human beings, better disciples and a more united Christian people. It will bring us closer to unity which is God's will for all of us.

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