



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL

CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS 55th WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

Tuesday, 25 January 2022

[Multimedia]

Before sharing a few thoughts, I would like to express my gratitude to his Eminence Metropolitan Polykarpos, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to His Grace Ian Ernest, the personal representative in Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to the representatives of the other Christian communities present. I likewise thank all of you, dear brothers and sisters, for coming here to pray. In a particular way, I greet the students from the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey who are deepening their knowledge of the Catholic Church, the Anglican students from Nashotah College in the United States of America, and the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox recipients of scholarships from the Committee for Cultural Collaboration with the Orthodox Churches. Let us make our own the deep desire of Jesus that we may be “one” (*Jn 17:21*) and, by his grace, advance along the path to full unity!

On this path, the Magi can help us. Let us consider this evening their journey, which had three steps: it began from the East, passed through Jerusalem, and at last came to Bethlehem.

1. First the Magi set out “from the East” (*Mt 2:1*), for that is where they first saw the star. They set out from the East, from where the sun rises, yet they were in search of a greater light. These wise men were not content with their own knowledge and traditions; they *desired something more*. Hence, they embarked on a risky voyage, driven by a restless search for God. Dear brothers and

sisters, may we too follow the star of Jesus! May we not let ourselves be distracted by the glittering lights of this world, brilliant yet falling stars. May we not follow the fashions of the moment, shooting stars that burn out. May we not follow the temptation of shining with our own light, concerned only with our own group and our self-preservation. Let us fix our gaze on Christ, on heaven, on the star of Jesus. Let us follow him, his Gospel, his invitation to unity, without worrying about how long and tiring may be the road to its full attainment. Let us not forget that by looking at the light, the Church – our Church – on the path of unity, continues to be the “*mysterium lunae*”. Let us desire to journey together, supporting one another, as did the Magi. Traditionally, the Magi have been portrayed with colorful robes that represent the various peoples. In them, we can see reflected our own differences, our different Christian traditions and experiences, but also our unity, which is born of the same desire: to look to heaven and to journey together on earth.

The East also makes us think of Christians living in various regions devastated by war and violence. It was the Middle East Council of Churches that prepared the resources for this Week of Prayer. These brothers and sisters of ours confront any number of difficult challenges, yet by their testimony they give us hope. They remind us that the star of Christ shines in the darkness and never sets; from on high, the Lord accompanies and encourages our steps. Around him, in heaven, there shine together, without distinction of confession, a great band of martyrs; they indicate to us here below a clear way, the way of unity!

2. From the East, the Magi arrive in *Jerusalem*, their hearts burning with desire for God. They tell Herod: “We have observed his star and its rising, and have come to pay him homage” (v. 2). From the desire of heaven, however, they are brought back to earth and its harsh realities: “When King Herod heard this”, the Gospel tells us, “he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 3). In the holy city the Magi did not see reflected the light of the star, but experienced the resistance of the dark forces of this world. Nor does Herod alone feel threatened by this new and different kingship, uncorrupted by worldly power: *all Jerusalem* is troubled by the message of the Magi.

Along our journey towards unity, we too can halt for the same reason that paralyzed those people: confusion and fear. The fear of a newness that upsets our usual habits and our sense of security; the fear that others may destabilize my traditions and long-established patterns. Yet deep down it is the fear lurking in every human heart, the fear from which the risen Lord wishes to liberate us. On our journey of fellowship, may we never fail to hear his words of encouragement: “Do not be afraid” (*Mt* 28:5.10). Let us not fear to put our brothers and sisters ahead of our own fears! The Lord wants us to trust one another and to journey together, despite our failings and our sins, despite the errors of the past and our mutual wounds.

Here too, the account of the Magi encourages us. Precisely in Jerusalem, the place of disappointment and opposition, where the path shown by heaven appeared to collide with walls erected by man, they discovered the way to Bethlehem. They learned it from the priests and scribes, who pored over the Scriptures (cf. *Mt* 2:4). The Magi found Jesus not only from the star,

which had meantime disappeared; they also needed the word of God. Nor can we Christians come to the Lord without his living and effective word (cf. *Heb* 4:12). That word has been given to the entire people of God to be welcomed and prayed over, so that it can be meditated upon together, by the whole people of God. Let us then draw near to Jesus through his word, but let us also draw near to our brothers and sisters through the word of Jesus. His star will rise anew on our journey, and he will give us joy.

3. That is what happened with the Magi, once they arrived at their final destination: *Bethlehem*. There they entered the house, knelt down and worshiped the child (cf. *Mt* 2:11). So their journey ended: together, in the same house, in adoration. In this way, the Magi foreshadowed the disciples of Jesus, many yet one, who at the conclusion of the Gospel fell down in worship before the risen Lord on the mountain in Galilee (cf. *Mt* 28:17). In this way, they also become a prophetic sign for us who long for the Lord, our traveling companions along the paths of the world, seekers through sacred Scripture of the signs of God in history. Brothers and sisters, for us too, the fullness of unity, in the same house, will only be attained through worship of the Lord. Dear brothers and sisters, the decisive stage of the journey towards full communion requires ever more intense prayer, it requires worship, the worship of God.

The Magi, however, remind us that worship demands something else of us: first, we must fall to our knees. That is the way: bending low, setting aside our own pretenses in order to make the Lord alone the centre of everything. How many times has pride proved the real obstacle to communion! The Magi had the courage to leave behind their prestige and reputation in order to humble themselves in the lowly house of Bethlehem; and as a result they found themselves “overwhelmed with joy” (*Mt* 2:10). To humble ourselves, to leave certain things behind, to simplify our lives: this evening, let us ask God for that courage, *the courage of humility*, the one way to come to worship God in the same house, around the same altar.

In Bethlehem, after they had fallen down in adoration, the Magi opened their treasure chests and there appeared gold, frankincense and myrrh (cf. v. 11). These gifts remind us that, only after we have prayed together, only in the presence of God and in his light, do we become truly aware of the treasures that each of us possesses. They are treasures, however, that belong to all, and are meant to be shared. For they are gifts of the Spirit, destined for the common good, for the upbuilding and unity of his people. We come to see this by prayer, but also by service: when we give to those in need, we make our offering to Jesus, who identifies with those who are poor and on the margins (cf. *Mt* 25:34-40); and he makes us one.

The gifts of the Magi symbolize the gifts the Lord desires to receive from us. God must be given the gold, that which is most precious, because the first place must always go to God. It is to him that we should look, not to ourselves; to his will, not our own; to his ways, not our own. If the Lord is truly in the first place, our choices, including our ecclesiastical choices, can no longer be based on the politics of this world, but on the will of God. Then there is the incense, which recalls the

importance of prayer, which rises up to God as a pleasing fragrance (cf. *Ps* 141:2). May we never tire of praying for one another and with one another. Finally, there is the myrrh, which would be used to honour the body of Jesus taken down from the cross (cf. *Jn* 19:39), and which speaks to us of care for the suffering flesh of the Lord, reflected in the wounds of the poor. Let us serve those in need. Together, let us serve the suffering Jesus!

Dear brothers and sisters, let us take from the Magi directions for our own journey, and do as they did, returning home “by another road” (*Mt* 2:12). Like Saul before his encounter with Christ, we need to change course, to invert the route of our habits and our ways, in order to find the path that the Lord points out to us: the path of humility, fraternity and adoration. O Lord, grant us the courage to change course, to be converted, to follow your will and not our own; to go forward together, towards you, who by your Spirit wish to make us one. Amen.