



INSPIRATION & GENESIS



OF THE EXTRAORDINARY ACTION OF PRAYER BY THE CHURCH FOR RECONCILIATION, UNITY AND PEACE

EXTRAORDINARY
ACTION OF PRAYER



RECONCILIATION
UNITY & PEACE

A VIGIL OF PRAYER AT THE HOLY SEPULCHRE IN JERUSALEM

The extraordinary prayer of the Church for Reconciliation, Unity and Peace and its intentions are the fruit of a vigil of prayer held between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. on Saturday, November 19, 2005, in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the very place where Christ died and rose again. On that evening and not without difficulty, a few lay persons joined members of two Italian monastic communities who are regularly present at the Holy Places on Saturdays.

In this place, so significant for the Christian faith, the vigil of prayer was a moment of deep and intense prayer, of extraordinary emotion. On that night particularly, for an open soul, and by grace, the Love of Christ on Golgotha was perceptible in its omnipotent strength and its infinitely moving gentleness, surpassing all understanding, transfiguring all suffering. Facing the Love of the crucified Christ, one could only rejoice, "death, where is your victory?" The Love of Christ overwhelmed the soul, it filled the whole Basilica, and extended far beyond.

Upon leaving the Sepulchre, one of the monks accompanied the small group of lay persons, who were uncertain of their way, to their hotel. While traveling through the old town of Jerusalem, they shared with one another their common perception: *the urgent necessity for a great intercessory prayer by the whole Church*, a constant prayer rising from the heart of all Christians. They immediately agreed on three intentions, the inspiration of which is described below. Although they knew one another for only a few hours, the monk and the lay persons greeted one another as if they were very dear, old friends. They agreed that the meeting of that evening would continue every Saturday, for at least one hour of common prayer, beginning at 7 p.m. (in the Holy Land) for the three intentions they had discussed.

Since that date (November 19, 2005), wherever they are, the members of this small group have been faithful to this commitment to prayer; the prayer lives on in their heart, and it is fruitful. Others joined them very quickly. They do almost nothing; it is as if the force that moves them acts even in spite of them. In this way, the prayer has begun spreading.



THE INSPIRATION OF THE INTENTIONS

The urgent necessity for a great intercessory prayer by the whole Church was perceived, first of all, for peace, which is beyond the reach of human strengths (John 14: 27), particularly in Jerusalem, in the Holy Land, and in the Middle East (where people despair of ever reaching it), but also within the Church. The lack of peace in the Church, its centuries-long division, is not only a counter-testimony to Christ's message, it is also and especially a negative spiritual reality. This very grave sin weakens the Church, and thus also the world.

The necessity of a great prayer of intercession was thus also perceived with regard to Jerusalem's failure to assume its essential vocation, in accord with its God-given name of "city of peace", city of "peace of justice" (Ez 29: 5, 4). The Holy City, which should be a laboratory of peace and unity, presently appears instead as a city of walls (how thick they are!), a city of divisions. The Mother Church, the "Mother of all Churches," who was formed in Jerusalem with the effusion of the Holy Spirit, should be the privileged Church through whom a new path of unity precedes. In no other place, in fact, are Christians present to one another in such a reduced perimeter so as to easily gather for exchange, dialogue, and prayer, and so as to be able to know, appreciate and love one another. Does Christ himself not designate Jerusalem as the particular place where the Apostles must "stay until they have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24: 49), the privileged place "beginning from which" the Church is to start its course (Luke 24: 47)?

The third perception of the group was that Unity is expressed in an essential manner in the community of prayer: it is primarily a spiritual truth. To pray together, at the same time, with the same intentions, *united in a common time of prayer, in communion with our common God*, is to accept to enter into the dimension of eternity that frees us from evil. It is therefore very important that the churches unify the dates of the Christian celebrations (and foremost the celebration of Easter, the feast of our great hope), so that this communion and this spiritual reality might again be achieved in the Church. What a prayer would be that prayer of the Church fully One in the Spirit, celebrating, with one heart and one voice, her Creator!

The three intentions of the extraordinary prayer represent the essence of these common and shared perceptions. They are "stating points" for the great intentions of Reconciliation, Unity and Peace. They are inspired by the conviction that we need to concentrate our strengths, in face of objectives that surpass us. They are an act of faith in the Divine Mercy, who well knows our limited forces. They integrate a prophetic and an eschatological dimension, constantly prophesied in the Scriptures for the Holy City. They are closely linked to God's promises.



THE INSPIRATION OF JOHN PAUL II AND OF THE GREAT PRAYER FOR PEACE OF ASSISI

The extraordinary prayer of the Church for Reconciliation, Unity and Peace also relates to the great prayer for Peace of Assisi started at the initiative of John Paul II. Gathering representatives from all religions of the world, the prayer of Assisi is founded on the conviction that great graces are obtained from God when human action is preceded by a particular intercessory effort, both in terms of amplitude and intensity¹. The prayer for Reconciliation, Unity and Peace shares with the Assisi prayer both a certitude regarding the efficacy of an intense prayer of intercession by all believers, and the essential intention of peace.

Also, the idea that Jerusalem must answer to its vocation of « city of peace » is one of the key intuitions of John Paul II:

« While approaching the great Jubilee, I also wish to recall the particular place that Jerusalem occupies in the hearts of believers. May the Holy City, the centre of the Christian world, but also the common patrimony of all monotheistic believers, be for all men of good will a crossroad of peace, a bright sign of peace that comes from God! May this unique vocation of the Holy City radiate in the whole region and find in Catholic believers generous witnesses and fervent prophets, but most of all, authentic builders of peace. »²

Whereas in Assisi, due to different religious approaches, people were *together to pray* simultaneously³, Christians can *pray together*, not only at the same time, but also in a common prayer, professing the same faith in the God of Jesus Christ.



FIRST DEVELOPMENTS

The prayer for Reconciliation, Unity and Peace first developed in December 2005 with the spontaneous participation of additional persons. During Christmas night 2005, the apostolic nuncio of the Vatican to the United Nations strongly encouraged the small group of prayer: "Above all, do not stop praying!" In the spring of 2006, a cardinal present in Jerusalem confirmed his private participation in the prayer initiative, invoking the "urgent necessity of the intercessory prayer". In October 2006, the initiative received the support of *Catholica Unio Internationalis*, an organisation of the Holy See active in sustaining Catholic and non-Catholic Churches in the East, and of its sister organisations, *Oeuvre d'Orient*, *CNEWA* and *Pro Oriente*, during the General Assembly of *Catholica Unio* that was held in Salzburg during that period of the year. In early January 2007, the project was more formally put into writing in Jerusalem, at Gethsemane, and assumed the form of the present proposal – with the help of a Franciscan friar and a biblist, and later that of a theologian. The project was then presented to the members of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of the Holy Land gathered in Nazareth for the week of prayer for the Unity of Christians in January 2007. At the same time, the initiative was informally encouraged by an important ecclesiastical authority in Jerusalem. It was then presented, as of March 2007, to representatives of other Churches – catholic and non-catholic – in the East and in the West, seeking advice and participation. In this context, numerous expressions of support were offered for the prayer's diffusion. In particular, it was said that "these intentions are very strongly regarded in the East, especially among the youth." At Easter 2007, various communities present in Jerusalem joined the prayer, some invoking the "beauty of the intentions", some "the fact that there is no longer enough prayer in Jerusalem." A short time thereafter, a prayer group for peace, founded 17 years earlier by a Jewish woman converted to Christianity, announced its intention to participate in the Saturday appointment. Several members of other religious communities, through some of their representatives, theologians, and members of the clergy of other Churches, continue to manifest interest in the project, and occasions for diffusing the prayer are incessantly renewed. The project has been translated into various languages, thanks to the help of volunteers who spontaneously offered to do so.



A GREAT INTERCESSORY PRAYER FOR OUR TIME , WITHIN EVERYONE'S REACH

Intentions of the extraordinary prayer of the Church are to be considered as "starting points", the common prayer's ultimate scope is Reconciliation, Unity and Peace within the Church and in the world, and particularly in the world through the Church. The whole Church is, in this way, called back to its primary mission, as willed by Christ. It is hoped that the accomplishment of the promises and prophecies related to the Holy City in Jerusalem, as prophesied, will precede their accomplishment in the entire world.

The extraordinary prayer also arises therefore, in its broader vision, as a great intercessory prayer for our time, being spontaneously born in the hearts of Christians inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is a fundamentally joyful prayer, because the participants adhere, by the very nature of the prayer, to the Unity for which Christ prayed (John 17: 21) and which is itself a source of Joy.

This prayer is within everyone's reach, because participation therein requires only that one recalls this intention of prayer on Saturdays (at 7 p.m. in the Holy Land, or at 6 p.m. local time, throughout the rest of the world) and that one actually pray, even if for only one minute. Most important is that all Christians do participate with one, united soul.

¹ The event of Assisi, on October 27, 1986, was the object of an important sign : on that day, no victims were registered on all war scenes in the entire world. Stanislas Dziwisz, « Une vie avec Karol, Entretiens avec Gian Franco Svidercoschi – Mémoires du secrétaire de Jean-Paul II », Le Seuil, 2007, page 246.

² Excerpt of the letter of John Paul II to Cardinal Nasrallah-Pierre Sfeir, Patriarch of Antiochia of the Maronites, for the occasion of the first Congress of Oriental bishops and patriarchs (May 9-20, 1999).

³ Stanislas Dziwisz, « Une vie avec Karol, Entretiens avec Gian Franco Svidercoschi – Mémoires du secrétaire de Jean-Paul II », Le Seuil, 2007, page 247.