



## **Relationships between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church**

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1948 as a fellowship mostly of Anglican, Protestant and some Orthodox churches, with most Orthodox churches joining the WCC in the early 1960s. At the time, although certain Roman Catholics were involved in promoting Christian unity, the Roman Catholic Church as such was not part of the organized ecumenical movement.

Official contacts between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC date from the early 1960s, following the decision by Pope John XXIII in 1959 to convene the Second Vatican Council (which met in Rome from 1962 to 1965) and the creation the following year of a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity as a preparatory commission for the Council. There were official Roman Catholic observers for the first time at the WCC's Third Assembly in New Delhi, and the WCC sent two observers to the four autumn sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The official participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement was strengthened by the promulgation in November 1964 of the Second Vatican Council's decree on ecumenism called *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Latin for "Restoration of unity"). This decree described the ecumenical movement as being "fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit" for "the restoration of unity among all Christians" who "invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour" — an allusion to the WCC Basis which speaks of the WCC being a "fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour."

In July 1968 at the WCC's Fourth Assembly in Uppsala, for the first time, two Roman Catholics addressed plenary sessions of a WCC assembly. The economist Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson) pressed for the common witness of all the churches in response to the crises in world hunger and development, justice and peace. In his address about collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, the Jesuit Roberto Tucci raised the question as to whether the Roman Catholic Church could one day become a member of the WCC.

However, despite a shared commitment to common witness within the one ecumenical movement, the Roman Catholic Church decided in 1972 not to seek WCC membership in part because of the disparities between the structure, self-understanding and size of the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC and its member churches.

While the World Council of Churches (WCC) is a fellowship of independent churches, most of them organized on a national basis, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) understands itself as one church with a universal mission and structure of teaching and governance as an essential element of its identity. WCC members do not take direct juridical responsibility for WCC studies, actions, and statements, while the Roman Catholic Church sees itself as a family of local churches with and under the bishop of Rome, and its structures of decision-making on the world and national (through the bishops' conferences) levels differ from those of the WCC's member churches.

Although the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, there is official cooperation at various levels:

- A Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC was set up in 1965 as a forum for exploring collaboration and cooperation, and has met regularly since then.
- Roman Catholics have taken part since 1968 as full members in the work of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, which promotes the visible unity of Christians by dealing with theological questions that divide churches;
- There are also Roman Catholics as full members of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME).
- From 1968 to 1980, a joint committee on society, development and peace (SODEPAX) based in Geneva developed practical and theological studies on social communication, education for development, mobilization for peace, and working with peoples of other world faiths;
- The Roman Catholic Church sponsors a faculty appointment and spiritual support at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute;
- Through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue, the Roman Catholic Church also works with the WCC team on interreligious dialogue and cooperation;
- The Roman Catholic Church and the WCC are among the Christian bodies that support the work of the Global Christian Forum, which gathers leaders coming from all streams of Christianity.

Issues on which the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church have worked together include:

- the nature of ecumenism and methods of ecumenical dialogue;
- common prayer at ecumenical gatherings;

- seeking a common date for Easter;
- collaboration in common witness and mission in the context of religious freedom, witness and proselytism;
- the place of the church in society;
- Christian responsibility in international affairs, especially in the promotion of peace and justice among peoples and nations;
- collaboration in social service, in emergency and development aid and in medical work;
- cooperation of men and women in church, family and society;
- ecumenical formation, laity and clergy training; mixed marriages between Christians.

Roman Catholic representatives have also participated as members of the Commission on Faith and Order in the formulation of the WCC's two convergence documents: *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* (1982) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013).

Pope Paul VI visited the WCC headquarters in Geneva on 10 June 1969. This was followed by a visit by Pope John Paul II on 12 June 1984. The visit by Pope Francis on 21 June 2018 will be the first time a papal visit has been organized specifically to the WCC.

(This background briefing draws on a short history of the Joint Working Group between the WCC and Roman Catholic Church by one of its members, Fr Thomas Stransky CSP, Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem, and published as an appendix to the Seventh Report of the Joint Working Group, December 2001, available online at

[http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/jwg/doc/e\\_jwg\\_n7da.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/jwg/doc/e_jwg_n7da.html)).