



**A greeting from the World Council of Churches on the 600th anniversary of
the death of Jan Hus**

July 2015

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding the shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” - *Hebrews 12: 1-2*

Renewal of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church was at the heart of Jan Hus’s vocation as a servant of God. In an era of deep divisions in the Church, most obviously between Rome and Avignon but also in the manifold political intrigue of Christendom, Hus called his followers to proclaim the One Church as the mystical body of Christ made up of the chosen people of God.

The World Council of Churches gives thanks to God for the life and witness of Jan Hus. He raised important questions in the early 15th century, and he was willing to take daunting risks in the hope of joining his opponents in a brave attempt to seek and serve the truth.

Jan Hus is rightly seen as a founder of his nation. This distinction arises from his ability to discern between his temporal allegiance to the country of his birth and his eternal calling to the kingdom of God. Church and state were separate realms for Hus, and a confusion of the two could lead to corruption among religious leaders. He knew citizenship and patriotism were important qualities in this life, but he taught that the Christian’s ultimate devotion is to the Church of Jesus Christ.

With an eye towards unity and reconciliation, Jan Hus agreed to engage his most powerful critics in dialogue. Despite an assurance of safe conduct to the Council of Constance, he was arrested upon arrival there and soon became the victim of judicial murder. The humanist Poggio Bracciolini, a sometime papal secretary, denounced this treachery on the part of the highest religious authorities. In his dying, Jan Hus brought gross institutional injustice to light.

Over six centuries, the legacy of Jan Hus has encouraged renewal in many Christian traditions and in the search for Church unity. His memory has continued to serve God and the people of God.

Pope John Paul II, now recognized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, formally apologized on 18 December 1998 in Prague for the decision of that 15th-century court at Constance to hand over Jan Hus to secular authorities who condemned and executed him along with his courageous defender Jerome of Prague. The late 20th-century pope expressed

his "deep regret for the cruel death imposed upon him." While calling for a review of the theological dispute that came to a head during the Council of Constance in 1415, John Paul II acknowledged that "independently of the theological convictions he defended, Hus cannot be denied integrity in his personal life and commitment to the nation's moral education."

Last month in Rome, Pope Francis echoed the words of his predecessor and called upon Jan Hus's descendants in the faith to join all Christians "in answering the call of Christ to continual conversion, which we all need," expressing the profound hope that "we can move forward together on the path of reconciliation and peace."

Christians of many traditions have come to recognize in Jan Hus a great theologian and a martyr whose witness speaks clearly to us today. For some, the face of someone thought by spiritual ancestors to be an "enemy" comes into clearer focus. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once addressed these words to an ecumenical consultation on common memory:

"The imagery of a 'cloud' of witnesses is curiously apt here. Those who by God's grace shape our discipleship are a great multitude whose faces are often hidden from us. It is good that we are able to identify some of those faces – the familiar and obvious ones in our own lives and in the life of our own community, and also the unexpected faces, the strangers who, we begin to see, have been brought into our individual and corporate lives by God for our health and salvation; and in identifying some of these faces, we are reminded of those other faces we cannot see, both past and present. And we turn to our Christian brother and sister in another Christian confession with new eyes and new expectations – new penitence as well, since we are faced with the reality of how we consciously and unconsciously ignore, avoid and even violently reject God's gift when it comes in unfamiliar form."¹

The World Council of Churches pays tribute to the sacrifice of Jan Hus and renews its commitment to the path of renewal, reawakening, dialogue, justice and peace.

"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." – *Hebrews 12: 12-13*

¹ Rowan Williams address at the 2008 Faith and Order consultation at Bose Monastery in Italy on the topic "A Cloud of Witnesses: Opportunities for Ecumenical Commemoration" (WCC Publications, 2009).