

Introduction to the press conference 15 May 2018 in the Ecumenical Centre to present the visit of Pope Francis to the World Council of Churches, 21 June 2018,

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The visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to the World Council of Churches in the year of our 70th anniversary, is an historical milestone in the search for Christian unity and for the cooperation between the churches for a world with peace and justice. The event opens new avenues for the relations between the Roman Catholic Church as a church worldwide and the World Council of Churches and all our 348 member churches in more than 120 countries – representing 560 million Christians. This visit to the WCC is one of the strong contributions of Pope Francis to the work for unity, justice and peace. This is a unique opportunity to share our gifts of fellowship with one another and with all our churches around the world. The relationships locally and globally will not be the same after this event. Therefore, we in the WCC are immensely grateful to His Holiness Pope Francis that he accepted our invitation to come to the WCC this year. We are also grateful that he comes at a time when the Central Committee of the WCC is here in Geneva, together with several ecumenical partners. They represent churches in all continents and contexts.

This event conveys some strong messages to the churches and to the world. It is possible to build relations of trust, cooperation, and even love over divisions caused by historical conflicts and events, bridging different religious convictions and practices. It is possible to have a wider horizon than our own church or people. It is possible to share a vision based on our Christian faith that brings us together and makes us able to do a lot together for the world. One of the principles in the ecumenical movement has been that we should do together what we can do together. Thus it was easy to agree on a shared motto for this day of the Pope visiting the World Council of Churches: “Walking, praying, and working together”.

This reality manifested in this anniversary of the World Council of Churches and in this event has not come easily or quickly. The establishment of the WCC 70 years ago happened after the churches and the peoples of the world had experienced two world wars that had led to millions of deaths. On all sides there were Christians fighting against Christians. The dignity and the right of every human being was undermined. The churches saw that a new beginning of reconciliation must happen. Years before, already in 1920, a vision for a council of churches to manifest the shared Christian faith and calling that can unite the churches was expressed by the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch. A conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910 appealed to the churches to be united for the sake of the common Christian witness and mission.

These and other significant events within the ecumenical movement that led to establishing the WCC, have also been driving the one ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches was founded by Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches. More have been included in the membership since then, but the relations to the Roman Catholic Church only developed significantly after the Second Vatican Council. It has then developed as a comprehensive and mutually accountable cooperation in many fields of work.

This particular event with this visit comes in a time when there are strong forces dividing and polarizing the one human family. Some of these dividing and provoking actions are driven by unreconciled relations and conflicting interests, some of them are even nurtured or driven by claims of having an agenda supported by religious faith. In this time it is even more important to show signs of hope, focusing on the image of God in every human being, caring for the marginalized and oppressed, for all people to be respected and included in processes that bring justice and peace.

The visit shows how much we have a shared Christian faith and a shared commitment to work for a better world for all people, taking caring of the one planet earth, our common home. The remaining differences that sometimes still causes difficulties for good cooperation between our churches locally or internationally, are not an obstacle to do more and move forward together towards more unity and common service in the world.

This is what we are commemorating in different events this year - and on the 21st of June. This is what we commit ourselves to continue by walking, praying, and working together.