



# World Council of Churches

## The WCC and the Roman Catholic Church Walking, Praying and Working together for Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity



Photo: Paul Jeffrey/WCC



Photo: Albin Hillier/WCC



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## **The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church Walking, Praying, and Working together for Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity**

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is entering a new phase of leadership, with a recently appointed general secretary, the Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, and a central committee, executive committee, and moderators elected at the WCC 11th Assembly.

We express our gratitude for the Holy Father's message to the assembly, particularly the vision that our common mission as followers of Christ is to bring reconciliation to the world and to inspire churches to continue their journey together in a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity.

We do not start anew in this mission, though, but build on former leaders and member churches that helped form the potential to heal and restore a suffering and broken world. To address the current global challenges, the WCC and the global fellowship's strategic plan for the next eight years focuses on unity, vision, justice, peace, and making the world a better place for all humans and all creation.

### **Ever-stronger bonds: WCC and the Roman Catholic Church**

The WCC and the Roman Catholic Church continue to develop ever-increasing levels of collaboration in shared work and shared commitment to the one ecumenical movement.

In 2025 we will celebrate 60 years of collaboration through the Joint Working Group. The title of the 10th report, "Walking, Praying and Working Together: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage," was inspired by the motto of the Holy Father's visit to Geneva in June 2018 in the context of the 70th anniversary of the WCC. It captured the WCC's emphasis on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace after the WCC 10th Assembly in Busan in 2013. It also carried the conviction of Pope Francis that Christian unity can only grow through walking together as fellow pilgrims in Christ's love. The WCC is thankful to the Roman Catholic Church for hosting the Joint Working Group every second year.

We continue to be deeply grateful for the collaboration between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church that helps to generate the ecumenical expression of the Global Christian Forum, bringing together the most diverse expressions of the church to generate greater unity.

As we develop a new cycle of work toward the next assembly, we recognize that our collaboration through instruments like the Commission on Faith and Order and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has borne considerable fruit. Thus, it has become normative to invite the Roman Catholic Church to participate in all WCC commissions and advisory groups.

Our common commitment to young people and formation is realized through the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, where the Roman Catholic Church seconds a faculty

member and provides two scholarships for Orthodox students. The WCC and the Roman Catholic Church have a history of increasing youth engagement, from synodal meetings to hosting the Taizé community, to the Ecumenical Youth Gathering at the WCC 11th Assembly.

We hope to continue the journey and would appreciate the Holy Father's wisdom on how we can also make progress towards mutual Eucharistic hospitality.

### **Good news for and with all people**

The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) looks forward to collaborating with the Roman Catholic Church on several important issues.

The Holy Father has spoken several times since the COVID-19 pandemic about decolonization in the urgent need for transforming the political, social, economic, ecological, ecclesial, and personal spheres. This is crucial for overcoming inequity and building unity, peace, and love. The systemic issues the Pope has named, like climate change, economic inequality, war and violence, and abuse of the vulnerable, all point to the necessity of engaging in this work on decolonization together.

Collaboration is essential in the work of the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network (EDAN), with its emphasis on the intersectionality of disabilities, exclusion, and the rights and vulnerabilities of women and girls.

Evangelism praxis remains an important issue. We must re-examine how we should evangelize in the context of the climate catastrophe; how we should evangelize given the history of violence in the Christian churches.

The recent visit Pope Francis made to the residential schools in Canada and his apology to First Nations peoples resonates strongly with CWME work. Together with African people, people of African descent, and Indigenous People throughout the world, it invited us to frame mission and evangelism around repentance, reparation, and restorative justice.

The CWME would value connection and collaboration with the new Dicastery on Mission and Evangelism.

### **Together for human flourishing**

The vision of full humanity and dignity for all people is at the centre of Christian self-understanding, and it is at the centre of WCC's work on Public Witness and Diakonia.

The history of cooperation between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church in this area includes the joint committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX) from 1968 to 1980. The WCC will recall the Life and Work tradition, in which SODEPAX was incubated, during the Nicaea commemoration in 2025.

Cooperation on ecumenical diakonia can stimulate the agency of those in vulnerable situations, allowing them to escape being trapped and paralyzed by poverty, displacement, oppressive governments, and violent conflict.

Collaboration sharpens the understanding of all the forces that compromise human dignity and can ensure that theological self-understanding and respect for human rights are foundational to our pursuit of human dignity. This could be a further opportunity to reimagine inclusive human development together.

### **Moving from separation to a common life**

The Roman Catholic Church has historically engaged deeply in the work of the WCC Faith and Order Commission on theological themes that help churches to move from separation to common life. Unofficial Catholic observers were present already at the Second World Conference in 1936, and official observers at Montreal in 1963. In 1968, the Holy See formally joined the Commission on Faith and Order and appointed representatives, which continue to this day.

The words of encouragement from Pope Francis during his visit to WCC in 2018, provide much hope for the future of this work. He said that the Roman Catholic Church “acknowledges the special importance of the work carried out by the Faith and Order Commission and desires to keep contributing to that work.”

In recent years, Catholic theologians have contributed to theological explorations, to work on moral discernment in churches, and to the search for a common understanding of the church in the reception of the second Faith and Order convergence document, “The Church: Towards a Common Vision.”

Roman Catholic representatives have served as vice-moderators of the commission, co-conveners of the study groups and, quite recently, as chair of the nominations committee, which prepares the list of members of the next commission.

An international editorial group comprising the Faith and Order Secretariat and Roman Catholic representatives work closely together to produce the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, one of the cornerstones of the ecumenical movement. The text, jointly published by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the WCC, is distributed to the WCC member churches and Catholic episcopal conferences.

### **Ecumenical formation**

The WCC and the Roman Catholic Church share the dream and responsibility for the growth and development of young people in the ecumenical movement.

Rev Dr Andrzej Choromanski served on the Commission for Ecumenical Education and Formation, which guides the work in the programme area.

The annual visit of Bossey students and staff to the Vatican during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity contributes to their ecumenical formation, and students have been inspired and grateful for the acknowledgement from Pope Francis. The

visit is led by the Vatican-seconded Catholic professor of biblical hermeneutics, currently Fr. Lawrence Iwuamadi.

### **A voice for justice, reconciliation, and unity**

Inspiring and innovative communication that is credible, transparent, inclusive, and well-coordinated is key for the global ecumenical movement to grow ever closer as a loving fellowship that acts and prays together for justice, reconciliation, and unity.

### **Interreligious Dialogue**

The WCC unit on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation has been working together with the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue since 1977. We have jointly organized numerous conferences and study processes. Some of the most notable documents are *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* (2011), and, most recently, our joint publications on *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity* (2020) in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and *Education for Peace* (2019).

What unites us is that we affirm and encourage constructive interreligious relations on all levels, from grassroots to leadership level, and that we advocate for vibrant interreligious solidarity to promote justice and peace and affirm the human dignity of all based on the gospel message.

### **Digital Justice**

Pope Francis has noted that the modern means of communication can be “a powerful means of fostering communion and dialogue within our human family,” but they can also become “places of toxicity, hate speech, and fake news.” This concern is shared by the WCC and is verbalized in “A New Communications Paper for the 21st Century: A vision of digital justice.” This paper was accepted by the WCC central committee, which emphasized that communication is critical in our digital age. The WCC statement urged that “technologies are placed at the service of people rather than governments or corporations.”

### **Social media presence**

Social media is one of these technologies with powerful potential but requiring great sensitivity and focus. The WCC’s online engagement with the world via social media was acknowledged by receiving the top honour for a non-governmental organization in international Geneva from Geneva Engage in February.

### **Visiting the WCC**

The interest in the work of WCC, stimulated by the communication about this work, is made visible through requests for visits, also by young Catholics.

Nearly 70 Focolari students visited the WCC in January, receiving an introduction to WCC, a guided tour of the Ecumenical Centre, and exchanging insights and ideas

with WCC staff on the role of communication for visible unity, justice, and peace. The visit concluded with a moment of prayer in the chapel.

Brother Alois, prior of the Taizé Community, and 60 young people from the community visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva in March for a time of prayer and sharing.

Also in March, a group of twelve German and Swiss Catholic journalists met with WCC moderator Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm and the WCC general secretary Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay. This was part of a visit organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to study the work in international Geneva and the UN system.

The WCC is expecting a group of fifty young nuns from Rome. They had followed the visit of the youth group from Taizé on social media and became inspired to pay a visit to the World Council of Churches.

Indeed, we are grateful for the visits of members and groups from the Roman Catholic Church to the Ecumenical Centre and the growing interest shown in the work of the WCC – all signs that we are “walking, praying and working together.”

### **Concern and hope for the future**

In the current time, there are areas of concern but also areas of inspiration and hope for the future.

The war in Ukraine and the devastation it is causing for the world remind us that war is contrary to the will of God and that we have a common calling to be instruments of peace. The war also evokes our common concern for the unity of all churches and communities, but particularly for the Orthodox family of churches at this time. We are taking initiatives to bring together church leaders from Ukraine and Russia to a roundtable dialogue on fostering peace in this context, and we would appreciate the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in these endeavours as well.

We also share the concern about the tensions in Israel and Palestine and in other parts of the world. Together we can raise our voices for dialogue and peace. Our shared prayers for peace in the Middle East can gain strength from collaborative work and witness.

While preparing for the commemoration of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea 325AD, the Faith and Order Commission looks forward to working closely with Roman Catholic Church on organizing the series of events and the Sixth World Conference of Faith and Order. The Nicaea2025 celebration offers an opportunity for strengthening the strategic partnership between WCC and Catholic Church, inviting Christians and churches across the globe to reflect on and live the apostolic faith together today. In the year 2025, western and eastern churches will celebrate a common day for Easter. We look forward to working with the Roman Catholic Church on how we may turn this into a significant opportunity to celebrate Christian unity and witness in a broken and divided world.

The climate emergency calls us to act together for the protection of the environment and the one human family. Here too, we need to support a global civil society discourse on questions globally important for humanity.

The instability, conflicts, wars, and economic distress, also caused by climate change, increase migration and displacement. Together we can explore how to advocate for refugees, especially considering the deaths of refugees in the Mediterranean.

### **On the way together**

As the global fellowship draws together in prayer and hope as we plan for the next eight years, we humbly also ask for your prayers for new possibilities of understanding, encouragement, and hope.

Our prayer is that while we continue “walking, praying and working together,” we may hold hands as we walk, so that the world may know (John 17:21) that Christ’s love moves us to justice, reconciliation, and unity.