

**Homily of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the  
70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the World Council of Churches  
Saint Peter's Cathedral, Geneva, 17 June 2018**

*"Fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the same promise in  
Jesus Christ through the Gospel" (Eph. 3:6)*

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

This year we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the World Council of Churches, this fellowship of Churches "which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek(s) to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

We celebrate a long common pilgrimage on the path to unity, Christian witness, and the commitment to justice, peace, and the preservation of creation.

We give thanks to God, who has guided our steps, and we implore his protection and support to continue together on the same path, with the same zeal and fervor.

Ninety-eight years ago, shortly after the end of the devastating First World War, a voice was raised in the Christian East, calling on the Churches of the entire oikouménè to show mutual trust between themselves and to no longer regard themselves as strangers, but as relatives and dear ones in Christ, as "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the same promise of God" (Eph. 3:6). This voice also invited the Churches to join hands in healing the deep wounds caused by the war, wounds which reflected a total disregard for the most

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<sup>1</sup> "Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches."

elementary principles of law and humanity and which threatened the very foundations of the Christian faith.

This voice was the Encyclical which the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople sent out in January 1920 "To all the Churches of Christ in the World," proposing to them the creation of a "League of Churches" (Κοινωνία τῶν Ἐκκλησιῶν) based on the model of the League of Nations, which had been created here in Geneva in the same year by President Wilson. According to the late Visser't Hooft, first general secretary of the World Council of Churches, this Encyclical "rang the bell of our assembly." It should perhaps be mentioned, for history's sake, that this pioneer of ecumenism made this comment right here, in the Cathedral of Saint Peter, in November 1967 during the visit to the World Council of the Churches of our illustrious predecessor, Patriarch Athenagoras I of eternal memory.

This "League of Churches" proposed by Constantinople finally took on flesh and bones 28 years later in 1948, and was named the "World Council of Churches." It was created through the fusion of the inter-Christian movements on "Faith and Order" and "Life and Action". Both were also very active beginning in 1920: the former in the theological domain and the latter in the area of practical Christianity.

Throughout the seventy years of its existence, the World Council of Churches – this structured and well-organized expression of the contemporary ecumenical movement – was certainly one of the means chosen by the Lord to draw humanity's attention to the "new commandment" of love which He has given us (Jn. 13:30), also called "the royal law" (Jam. 2:8) in the Epistle of James, and to encourage through His Church respect for the precepts of reconciliation, peace, justice and solidarity which He preached.

This long period of seventy years witnessed the accumulation of a wealth of experience by the member Churches of the Council and by the

many ecumenical partners and companions on the shared path toward coexistence, mutual understanding and cooperation, and toward progress on the path of dialogue and coordinated action. This occurred despite the occasional challenges and theological or socio-political crises – or even institutional or financial ones.

Today, we must look to the future and continue our common pilgrimage toward unity, justice and peace. As an instrument of its member Churches, the Council, which not only engages in theological dialogue but also demonstrates solidarity and mutual love, must join forces more closely in order to reach out more effectively to human beings who suffer today in so many ways. It is essential that dialogue goes hand in hand with witness in the world and actions that express "the ineffable joy" of the Gospel (1 Pet. 1:8), excluding any act of confessional antagonism. In this spirit, it is important that we Christians, inspired by the shared basic principles of the Gospel, strive to give an attentive and supportive answer to the thorny problems posed by today's world. As the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened in Crete in June 2016, affirmed, the local Orthodox Churches that are members of the World Council of Churches participate fully and equally in the bodies of this institution and contribute by all means at their disposal to promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation in addressing major socio-political issues<sup>2</sup>.

This activity in the world must be based on our shared prototype of the new man in Christ – an ecclesial experience and vocation that the faithful must live out. Thus, by words and deeds, in ways visible and invisible, the World Council of Churches must proclaim through its witness Christ, and Christ alone.

Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon notes that very often the oikouménè is wrongly regarded as a mere synthesis of various beliefs

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<sup>2</sup> "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World," §17.

and religions that exist in the world. However, as Metropolitan John adds, it is necessary to pay more attention to another reality, to the fact that "the oikouménè is also a way of bringing together different Christian spiritualities, a different vision of the future," and that "the catholicity of the Church is not simply a way of bringing together cultures and nations as they exist in their current state of relations," but also a way of uniting "historical identities and traditions, so that they can be transcended in the unity of the body of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

It should not be forgotten that catholicity and unity are profoundly related since they describe God's work in history and in the world, which aims at bringing humanity together through the miracle of Pentecost. This miracle is performed by the Paraclete, the Spirit of God. Of course, we believe that "the Spirit blows where it wills" (Jn. 3:8) and knows no limits. However, as our master at Bossey, Professor Nikos Nissiotis, said so well, we also believe that this very Spirit "acts through that which he established, the Church, by showing through his work the new era that is unfolding in history, and by pointing to its ultimate fulfillment at the end of time."<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit was sent to guide us "into all the truth" (Jn. 16:13), to manifest the saving work of Christ and to lead the Church toward the Kingdom of God. Indeed, God grants us strength through his Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith and so that we might be rooted and grounded in love (see Eph. 3:17-18). This essential biblical affirmation is of the utmost importance in any ecumenical discussion on the unity of the Church and on the solidarity of all humanity.

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<sup>3</sup>John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, "Action and Icon-Messianic Sacramentality and Sacramental ethics," in: Th. Wieser (ed.), *Whither Ecumenism? A Dialogue in the Transit Lounge of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 63.

<sup>4</sup>Nikos A. Nissiotis, "The Pneumatological Aspect of the Catholicity of the Church," in: Reinhard Groscurth (ed.), *What Unity Implies: Six Essays after Uppsala*, World Council of Churches Studies 7 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1969), 19.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

The World Council of Churches was founded with the aim of promoting the unity of Christians. Unfortunately, since its foundation, many differences and unforeseen difficulties have arisen. In spite of them, we continue our dialogue in order to surmount these difficulties, overcome our misunderstandings, erase our prejudices, and bear witness more authentically to the Gospel message. Dialogue does not imply a renouncing of one's ecclesial tradition. Instead it signifies a change in our state of mind and attitude, what we call "repentance" in the language of spirituality, in Greek *métanoia*, which means "to see things from a different perspective." In this sense, dialogue is the beginning of a long process of mutual understanding that requires much patience and openness. We are aware that the movement to restore the unity of Christians is taking new forms in order to respond to new situations and to deal with the current challenges of the world.

Ahead of us lie tasks that are particularly important and delicate, which we must fulfill together. The fundamental difficulty of the main traditions present in the World Council of Churches – the Christian East and the Churches of the Reformation – is the need to redefine the nature of this institution and to mark the limits of the "oikouménè", in which the Council is called to bear witness and serve. Here the contribution of ecumenical partners and companions are always welcome. We are pleased with the constructive cooperation between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, and with the joint efforts to respond together to the major questions and challenges of our times.

Let us have no illusions! The Churches have so far been unable to overcome their divisions and achieve the much-desired unity. Therefore, they cannot claim that they easily bring together all of humanity, consisting of different cultures and faiths. Nevertheless, our constructive and fraternal collaboration within the World Council of Churches

strengthens us in our quest for unity and in our witness to the universality of the Gospel, which has enabled us until now to contribute at various levels to promoting peace in the world and a culture of solidarity among humanity. But let us never forget that the fruit of unity cannot ripen without divine grace. This is why our Holy and Great Council rightly reminded us that "while the Orthodox Church dialogues with other Christians, she does not underestimate the difficulties inherent in this endeavor; She perceives these difficulties, however, on the path towards a common understanding of the tradition of the ancient Church and in hope that the Holy Spirit, Who 'welds together the whole institution of the Church,' will 'make up that which is lacking.'"<sup>5</sup>

With this trust in the Holy Spirit, the Orthodox Church continues to bear its witness to the Christian world that is still divided, and to the contemporary world marked by various crises and divisions. Its commitment to witnessing to the world is nourished by its theandric character, which is not of this world. As the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church affirmed in its invitation to the entire Christian world: "The Church lives not for herself. She offers herself for the whole of humanity in order to raise up and renew the world into new heavens and a new earth (cf. Rev. 1:21). Hence, she gives Gospel witness and distributes the gifts of God in the world: His love, peace, justice, reconciliation, the power of the Resurrection and the expectation of eternal life."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World," §8.

<sup>6</sup> "Encyclical," Introduction.