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Conferenza Stampa di presentazione delle iniziative per le celebrazioni del 70° anniversario del Consiglio Ecumenico delle Chiese (World Council of Churches)

Alle ore 13.00 di oggi, nella Sala Stampa della Santa Sede, si è tenuta la Conferenza Stampa di presentazione delle iniziative per le celebrazioni del 70° anniversario del Consiglio Ecumenico delle Chiese (World Council of Churches).

Sono intervenuti l'Em.mo Card. Kurt Koch, Presidente del Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione dell'Unità dei Cristiani e il Rev.do Olav Fykse Tveit, Segretario generale del Consiglio Ecumenico delle Chiese.

Pubblichiamo di seguito l'intervento del Card. Kurt Koch:

Intervento del Card. Kurt Koch

Relations between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches

The visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva during the year of the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), will be a sign of recognition of a unique contribution of the WCC to the modern ecumenical movement. It will be an expression of the personal commitment of the Holy Father to the goal of Christian unity as expressed in many occasions. In visiting the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, Pope Francis will follow the steps of his two predecessors Paul VI, who visited the WCC in 1969 (10th June), and John Paul II who did the same in 1984 (12th June). The visit will be an occasion to give thanks to God for a longstanding and rich collaboration which the Catholic Church maintains with the WCC for more than half a century. Indeed, our relations began during the preparation of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II committed the Catholic Church to the modern ecumenical movement and opened a new page in the history of our relations with the World Council of Churches generating a spirit of rapprochement and mutual understanding. Although the Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, various dicasteries of the Roman Curia and different Catholic organizations or religious communities collaborate closely with its different programmatic areas. There is a sustained collaboration in the field of justice and peace, human rights, works of charity and humanitarian aid, especially regarding migrants and refugees, protection of creation, the youth, interreligious dialogue, mission and evangelism. The most developed is the collaboration between the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), which also takes place through various channels.

One of the most important is the Joint Working Group (JWG). Since its establishment in 1965, JWG has been a catalyst for fruitful collaboration in fields of doctrinal dialogue, ecumenical formation, mission and evangelism, youth, justice and peace, and new emerging questions relating to the life of modern societies. In 2015, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, celebrated here in Rome, also with the participation of the Secretary General of the WCC, the Holy Father in his message encouraged the Catholic Church and the WCC to explore new ways of testifying together to our real, even though still incomplete, unity.

Catholics are also members or consultants of various commissions of the WCC. The most important of them is the Commission on Faith and Order (Fa) which addresses questions concerning apostolic faith and the structure of the Church, as well as ethical and social issues over which Christians continue to be divided. In 2013, the Commission published a remarkable convergence statement on ecclesiology entitled 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision'. It was the result of many years of work by theologians representing almost all Christian traditions with an important contribution from Catholic theologians. Since then, the PCPCU has been involved in the process of preparing an official Catholic response.

For the last 50 years this rich collaboration is exemplified in the joint preparation and publication of the annual resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Another WCC group which includes Catholics as full members is the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). Established in 1961, the CWME continues the tradition of the international missionary movement, which in the first half of the 20th century made an important contribution to fostering unity among Christians. The next Conference on World Mission and Evangelism entitled "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship" will be held in Arusha, Tanzania, in a week from now. A delegation of almost thirty Catholic missionaries and evangelists, both religious and lay, will attend the Conference.

There also exists a fruitful cooperation between the PCPCU and WCC in the area of ecumenical education and formation. For many decades a Catholic professor sponsored by the PCPCU has been a full-time faculty member of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, near Geneva, which is attached to the WCC. Each year the PCPCU also offers two full scholarships to Bossey for non-Catholic students. In January of each year, students and staff of the Institute come for a one-week study visit to Rome organized and sponsored by the PCPCU. The program includes visits to various dicasteries of the Roman Curia, encounters with representatives of religious orders and with Catholic lay movements, visits to theological faculties and guided tours to important places of Christian history. The culmination of the program is an audience with the Holy Father and the participation of the group in the ecumenical vespers presided by the Pope on the closing day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The collaboration also includes other *ad hoc* initiatives between the PCPCU and the WCC.

WCC 70th Anniversary

This important Anniversary creates an opportunity not only for the member churches but also for the ecumenical movement as such to mark the achievements of the WCC in bringing churches closer to each other by walking, praying and working together. The ecumenical pilgrimage of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva expresses his desire to be personally associated in marking the Anniversary on behalf of the entire community of the Catholic Church. This ecumenical gesture will signify the continuous willingness of the Catholic Church to promote good relations with member churches and ecumenical partners of the WCC and to continue to respond together to the challenges of our time.

Motto of the Visit of the Holy Father to WCC

The motto of the visit "Walking - Praying - Working Together" echoes the theme of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which was adopted by the last assembly of the WCC as a *leitmotiv* of all its current activities. It also reflects what has been defined by Pope Francis as an "ecumenism of walking together". On several occasions the Holy Father encouraged the churches to journey together in witnessing to their faith and in facing our contemporary challenges. When walking together on the way towards full visible unity, Christians can appreciate better their common heritage and become more aware of what they already share. At the same time, they can

better address the differences which still need to be overcome, especially regarding doctrinal or moral issues. Even though resolving theological divergences is essential for the goal of unity, ecumenism does not only consist in theological dialogue. It also must include collaboration for those who are in need, and for the many victims of wars, injustice, and natural disasters. As Pope Francis observed in an address to the Secretaries of Christian World Communions: *“All together, we must help. Love for our neighbor. This is ecumenism. This is already unity. Unity in journeying with Jesus”*.² Theological dialogue and practical collaboration are important for achieving the goal of full unity. But they are not sufficient. An essential part of our ecumenical journey must be prayer. As the Holy Father said: *“The journey is simple: it consists of prayer, with the help of others. Praying together: the ecumenism of prayer, for each other and all for unity”*. He also remarked that there is still another form of ecumenism that characterizes our time: that of blood. Those who persecute Christians do not ask if they are Lutherans, Orthodox, Catholics, Reformed or Pentecostals. They only recognize them as Christians. Therefore our journeying together needs to embrace ecumenism in prayer, ecumenism in dialogue, ecumenism in action and ecumenism in suffering including the ecumenism of blood.

Program of the Visit of the Holy Father to WCC

The one-day visit is scheduled for Thursday 21st June 2018. The detailed program is still being discussed. It is expected that upon his arrival to Geneva, the Holy Father will meet shortly with the President of the Swiss Confederation for a courtesy visit. He will then visit the Ecumenical Centre. The visit to the WCC headquarters will include a time for ecumenical prayer in the chapel of the Centre and the Holy Father will also attend a special session of the Central Committee commemorating the Anniversary. Upon the invitation from the Swiss Bishops' Conference, the Holy Father will also celebrate a Holy Mass for the Catholic community of Geneva and other pilgrims. The return to Rome is planned for the evening of the same day.

Conclusion

For more than half a century, the relations between the Catholic Church and the WCC can be described as a “common journey” or “pilgrimage”. Despite different visions on some doctrinal, moral or social issues, this ecumenical pilgrimage continues as both partners still affirm their commitment to the search of full visible unity. It is hoped that the visit of the Holy Father to the WCC during its 70th Anniversary of its foundation will strengthen our ecumenical collaboration in achieving the will of Jesus that they all may be one, that the world may believe (Jn 17:21).

1. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150623_messaggio-world-council-of-churches.html.

2 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/12/161012a.html>.

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