

Pope Calls for Christians to End 500-Year Conflict

Pope Francis called on Christians on Thursday to “break down barriers of suspicion and fear” that have divided them since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and to work together to help the most needy.

Francis made a day trip to Geneva to mark the 70th anniversary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), a fellowship of 350 mostly national churches representing Protestant communities and some Orthodox Christians.

Its members represent about 500 million faithful, compared with 1.3 billion for the Roman Catholic Church, which is not a full member of the WCC.

“After centuries of conflict ... charity allows us to come together as brothers and sisters,” he said at the WCC headquarters in Geneva, the city where reformer John Calvin lived in the 16th century.

Francis called on Christians of all denominations to find “the courage to change the course of history, a history that had led us to mutual distrust and estrangement.”

But he said Christians “cannot be reduced to a non-governmental organization.”

The structure of the WCC is similar to that of the United Nations, with representatives from many independent national churches and some of its critics have said it has become overly bureaucratic.

Francis called for more teamwork among Christian denominations to spread gospel values and cooperate more on issues such as fighting poverty and injustice, and defending the environment.

“The credibility of the gospel is put to the test by the way Christians respond to the cry of all those, in every part of the world, who suffer unjustly from the baleful spread of an exclusion that, by generating poverty, foments conflicts,” Francis said.

“The more vulnerable are increasingly marginalized, lacking their daily bread, employment and a future, while the rich are fewer and ever more wealthy. Let us be challenged to compassion by the cry of those who suffer,” he said.

In his address at the WCC headquarters, the pope said Christians who are well off financially should show a united front towards those in need and not feel a privileged class.

“Even more troubling is the conviction on the part of some (Christians) who consider their own blessings clear signs of God’s predilection rather than a summons to responsible service of the human family and the protection of creation,” he said.

The pope later said a Mass for about 40,000 members of Geneva’s Catholic community gathered in an exhibition hall and urged his listeners to go against the tide and give up “all those things that fill our lives but empty our hearts.”

“Life has become so complicated. Nowadays many people seem ‘pumped up’, rushing from dawn to dusk, between countless phone calls and texts, with no time to see other people’s faces, full of stress from complicated and constantly changing problems. We need to choose a sober lifestyle, free of unnecessary hassles,” he said in the homily of the Mass. {eoa}

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