The Holy See

ECUMENICAL PILGRIMAGE OF HIS HOLINESS FRANCIS TO GENEVA
TO MARK THE 70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE
FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

ECUMENICAL PRAYER

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

WCC Ecumenical Centre (Geneva)
Thursday, 21 June 2018

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have heard the words addressed by the Apostle Paul to the Galatians, who were experiencing conflict and division. Groups were fighting and hurling accusations at one another. It is in this context that the Apostle, twice in the space of a few verses, invites us to “walk in the Spirit” (cf. *Gal* 5:16.25).

Walking. We human beings are constantly on the move. Throughout our lives, we are called to set out and keep walking: from our mother’s womb and at every stage of life, from when we first leave home to the day we depart from this earthly existence. The metaphor of walking reveals the real meaning of our life, a life that is not self-sufficient but always in search of something greater. Our hearts spur us to keep walking, to pursue a goal.

Walking is a discipline; it takes effort. It requires patience and exercise, day after day. We have to forego many other paths in order to choose the one that leads to the goal. We have to keep that goal constantly before us, lest we go astray. Remembering the goal. Walking also demands the

humility to be prepared at times, when necessary, to retrace our steps. It also involves being concerned for our travelling companions, since only in company do we make good progress. Walking, in a word, demands constant conversion. That is why so many people refuse to do it. They prefer to remain in the quiet of their home, where it is easy to manage their affairs without facing the risks of travel. But that is to cling to a momentary security, incapable of bestowing the peace and joy for which our hearts yearn. That joy and peace can only be found by going out from ourselves.

That is what God has called us to do from the beginning. Abraham was told to leave his native land and to set out on a journey, equipped only with trust in God (cf. *Gen* 12). So too Moses, Peter and Paul, and all the Lord's friends were constantly on the move. But Jesus himself set us the greatest example. He is himself the Way (cf. *Jn* 14:6). He left his divine state (cf. *Phil* 2:6-7) and came down to walk among us. Our Lord and Master, he became a wayfarer and a guest in our midst. When he returned to the Father, he granted us his Spirit, so that we too might have the strength to walk towards him. As Paul tells us: to walk in the Spirit.

In the Spirit. If we human beings are constantly on the move, and by closing our hearts to others we deny our very vocation, this is even more true of us Christians. For as Paul emphasizes, the Christian life involves an unavoidable decision. We can either walk in the Spirit along the path opened up by our baptism or else we can "gratify the desires of the flesh" (*Gal* 5:16). What does this last expression mean? It means thinking that the way to fulfilment is by acquiring possessions, selfishly attempting to store up here and now everything we desire. Rather than letting ourselves quietly be led where God would have us, we go our own way. It is easy to see the result of this tragic loss of direction. The thirst for material things blinds us to our companions along the way, and indifference prevails in the streets of today's world. Driven by our instincts, we become slaves to unbridled consumerism, and God's voice is gradually silenced. Other people, especially those who cannot walk on their own, like children and the elderly, then become nuisances to be cast aside. Creation then comes to have no other purpose than to supply our needs.

Dear brothers and sisters, today more than ever the words of the Apostle Paul challenge us. Walking in the Spirit means *rejecting worldliness.* It means opting for a mindset of service and growing in forgiveness. It means playing our part in history but in God's good time, not letting ourselves be caught up in the whirlwind of corruption but advancing calmly on the way whose signpost is the "one commandment: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (v. 14). The path of the Spirit is marked by the milestones that Paul sets forth: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (v. 22).

We are called, together, to walk along this path. This calls for constant conversion and the renewal of our way of thinking, so that it can conform to that of the Holy Spirit. In the course of history, divisions between Christians have often arisen because at their root, in the life of communities, a worldly mindset has seeped in. First, self-concern took priority over concern for Christ. Once this

happened, the Enemy of God and man had no difficulty in separating us, because the direction we were taking was that of the flesh, not of the Spirit. Even some past attempts to end those divisions failed miserably because they were chiefly inspired by a worldly way of thinking. Yet the ecumenical movement, to which the World Council of Churches has made so great a contribution, came about as a grace of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1). Ecumenism made us set out in accordance with Christ's will, and it will be able to progress if, following the lead of the Spirit, it constantly refuses to withdraw into itself.

It might be objected that to walk in this way is to operate at a loss, since it does not adequately protect the interests of individual communities, often closely linked to ethnic identity or split along party lines, whether "conservative" or "progressive". To choose to belong to Jesus before belonging to Apollos or Cephas (cf. *1 Cor* 1:12); to belong to Christ before being "Jew or Greek" (cf. *Gal* 3:28); to belong to the Lord before identifying with right or left; to choose, in the name of the Gospel, our brother or our sister over ourselves… In the eyes of the world, this often means operating at a loss. Let us not be afraid to operate at a loss! Ecumenism is "a great enterprise operating at a loss". But the loss is evangelical, reflecting the words of Jesus: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (*Lk* 9:24). To save only what is ours is to walk according to the flesh; to lose everything in the footsteps of Jesus is to walk in the Spirit. Only in this way does the Lord's vineyard bear fruit. As Jesus himself teaches, those who store up riches for themselves bear no fruit in the Lord's vineyard, only those who, by serving others, imitate the "mindset" of God, who never stops giving, even to the gift of his very self (cf. *Mt* 21:33-42). Such is the mindset of Easter, which alone truly bears fruit.

Looking at our own journey, we can see a reflection of ourselves in some of the experiences of the early communities of Galatia. How difficult it is to overcome hard feelings and to foster communion! How hard it is to leave behind centuries-old disagreements and mutual recriminations! It is even more formidable to withstand the subtle temptation to join others, to walk together, but for the sake of satisfying some partisan interest. This is not the "mindset" of the Apostle, but that of Judas, who walked with Jesus but for his own purposes. There is only one way to shore up our wavering footsteps: to walk in the Spirit, purifying our hearts of evil, choosing with holy tenacity the way of the Gospel and rejecting the shortcuts offered by this world.

After so many years of ecumenical commitment, on this seventieth anniversary of the World Council, let us ask the Spirit to strengthen our steps. All too easily we halt before our continuing differences; all too often we are blocked from the outset by a certain weariness and lack of enthusiasm. Our differences must not be excuses. Even now we can walk in the Spirit: we can pray, evangelize and serve together. This is possible and it is pleasing to God! Walking, praying and working together: this is the great path that we are called to follow today.

And this path has a clear aim, that of unity. The opposite path, that of division, leads to conflict and breakup. We need but open our history books. The Lord bids us set out ever anew on the path of

communion that leads to peace. Our lack of unity is in fact “openly contrary to the will of Christ, but is also a scandal to the world and harms the most holy of causes: the preaching of the Gospel to every creature” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1). The Lord asks us for unity; our world, torn by all too many divisions that affect the most vulnerable, begs for unity.

Dear brothers and sisters, I have desired to come here, a pilgrim in quest of unity and peace. I thank God because here I have found you, brothers and sisters already making this same journey. For us as Christians, walking together is not a ploy to strengthen our own positions, but an act of obedience to the Lord and love for our world. Obedience to God and love for our world, the true love that saves. Let us ask the Father to help us walk together all the more resolutely in the ways of the Spirit. May the Cross guide our steps, because there, in Jesus, the walls of separation have already been torn down and all enmity overcome (cf. *Eph* 2:14). In him, we will come to see that, for all our failings, nothing will ever separate us from his love (cf. *Rom* 8:35-39). Thank you.

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