

Churches seek peace and justice through dialogue in Assisi

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At an interfaith gathering in Assisi, called by Pope Benedict XVI, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit said, "The cross is not for crusades but a sign of God's love embracing everybody". He praised the role of "young change makers" in pursuit of peace and called faith leaders to engage in dialogue by addressing conflicts and accepting "the other".

Tveit was speaking on a "Day of reflection, dialogue and prayer for peace and justice in the world" on 27 October, an interfaith meeting called by the pope titled "Pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace".

The event brought religious leaders from diverse backgrounds, and is a continuation of a tradition initiated by Pope John Paul II, who held this meeting in the town of Assisi 25 years ago.

Following the example of Francis of Assisi, Tveit highlighted the role of "young change makers".

"Francis was a young man when he surrendered his life to God. His passion for the goodness of creation and example of radical daring for peace show the significance of faith and the courage of young people," he added.

"Peace in the world requires the perspectives and the contributions of young people. A great obstacle to a just peace today is the high level of unemployment among young people all over the world. We need the vision and the courage of young people for the necessary changes, as we see how they lead processes of democratization and peace in many countries today."

Representing the 349 member churches of the WCC, Tveit stressed the need for a "safe space" for all religions to engage in a dialogue, while not shying away from addressing the conflict.

"People are suffering due to clashes of interests as a consequence, since conflicts around Jerusalem are not solved. This city, holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, is a visible symbol of our longing, our highest desires, our love of beauty and our desire to worship God. But it is also a powerful reminder of how this best can also go wrong."

Tveit goes on to say, "Let us as religious leaders pray for justice and peace for Jerusalem and for all who live there. In a mysterious way, Jerusalem does not simply unveil these realities about the human condition but also challenges us at the same time to address them."

Tveit was accompanied by Clare Amos, WCC programme executive for Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation, who considers Assisi a significant event with a potential for dialogue contributing to peace and justice in the world.

“It is very good that this gathering is seen as a pilgrimage. We come together here sharing a pilgrim spirit of humility, and like all pilgrims we travel in the hope that we will be transformed through our journey, and that we will eventually return to our everyday situations with renewed vision and determination to work for both truth and peace,” said Amos.