

Pope's WCC Visit... New Move or Impasse?

Religious News Service

Did Pope Paul's visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva mark a new high point in ecumenical relations or did it show how far those relations still have to go? The historic occasion can and will be read both ways.

The question is especially important since some theologians, among them the eminent Father Karl Rahner, S.J., have suggested that the ecumenical movement may be at a standstill. Other theologians point out more measurable gains in social initiatives than in areas of doctrine and structure.

Had the Pope's hour at the Ecumenical Centre, home of the Protestant-Orthodox WCC, been a success or a failure, some reports had claimed. It would still have had significance.

The return of a courtesy — World Council officials have often noted the Vatican's aloofness would have underscored the mutual trust and appreciation among Christians in the 1960s.

Pope Paul expressed regret over the divisions in the church and voiced hope for "restoration of unity among all Christians." He said the World Council was a "marvelous movement" of the scattered children of God searching to regain unity. That search began in the late 19th Century and was formalized with the WCC's establishment in 1948.

The visit was an occasion for celebrating the unprecedented joint Christian outreach to people in need which has blossomed in recent years. This was dramatically symbolized by an anonymous \$100,000 gift left at the Centre for Pope Paul to present to the WCC for medical relief.

Yet there were overtones of reservation, recalling lines of demarcation not yet fully bridged. A service of common prayer was held in the auditorium, with top officers of the World Council's policy-making Central Committee and Cardinal Willembrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, taking part. And the Lord's Prayer was said collectively.

No joint prayers, however, were said in the chapel, in noticeable contrast to Pope Paul's meetings with Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in Istanbul and Rome. The Pope meditated alone in the Geneva Centre's chapel.

The distinction in the instances may be that while the Pope and Patriarch had formally lifted ancient excommunications no such rapprochement has taken place or probably can between Protestant and Catholic Churches. The Orthodox Churches are now major members of the WCC but it has a strong Protestant identity.

Also, the Pope firmly identified himself as the successor to the Apostle Peter, counted as the first Pope on the basis of traditional association with Rome and on the text of Matthew 16:18-19:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

"Our name is Peter," Pope Paul said at the WCC headquarters. "Scripture tells us which meaning Christ has willed to attribute to this name, what duties he lays upon us; the responsibilities of the Apostle and his successors."

He added that Peter's other titles of "fisher of men" and "shepherd" mean that the pontiff is not isolated from collaboration, fellowship and "recomposition of unity" from the non-Catholics. "The name Paul which we have assumed sufficiently points out the orientation which we have wanted to give to our Apostolic ministry," said the Pope. St. Paul was an evangelist who went to peoples of many lands.

This explanation of the nature of the Pope's ministry does not, for most Protestants, smooth the sharpness of the phrase. "We are Peter." The papacy is one of the thorniest issues in ecumenical conversations.

Despite the enormous improvement in Catholic-Protestant interaction, Protestant denominations are reluctant to contemplate a reunited Christianity with Pope as shepherd, much less as successor to Peter, infallible in matters of faith and morals.

Retired United Methodist Bishop Fred B. Corson has described a unified church with the Pope as "chief spokesman" but that is far removed from the Catholic definition of the papacy.

At the 1968 Lambeth Confer-

N.H. Senate Seeks School Aid Ruling

Concord, N.H. — (RNS) — New Hampshire's Senate will call on the state supreme court for a ruling on five measures now before it that involve state aid to private and parochial schools.

The senators have asked the court to rule on the constitutionality of the proposals, a move permissible under New Hampshire law.

ence, composed of the world's Anglican bishops, a statement claiming most members would accept the Pope "as having a primacy of love" was removed from a document on unity. Retained were observations on the "substantial divergences" between Anglicans and Catholics on teaching authority, infallibility, Mariology and some moral issues.

The Pope's Geneva remarks on Catholic membership in the World Council held disappointment for both those Catholics and WCC participants who would like to see the affiliation in the near future. It was

clear that the pontiff finds this a question demanding more time.

"In fraternal frankness," he said, "we do not consider that the question of the membership of the Catholic Church in the World Council is so mature that a positive answer could or should be given. The question still remains a hypothesis. It contains serious theological and pastoral implications. It thus requires profound study and commits us to a way that honestly recognizes could be long and difficult."

There has been wide acknowl-

edgement of the theological and administrative problems, and reluctance to see Catholics in the council is not confined to Vatican City. Some Protestants are hesitant about Catholics in the WCC without a council organizational reshuffle.

The 235 WCC constituent Churches currently have voting power, based on size, in General Assemblies. Catholic entry with this set-up could mean a virtual control, analysts have noted. No specific proposal for alternative structures have been publicly discussed.

Theological points of impor-

tance include the Sacraments, the nature of the church, the ministry, ecclesiastical authority and the role of the laity. Agreement on some of these, or at least lesser diversity within greater unity, is not impossible, perhaps easier than consensus or organizational matters.

Said the WCC general secretary, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake to Pope Paul:

"Your visit here... signifies the growth of the ecumenical movement, through which Christ is gathering His church in our century. This house it-

self is both a reminder of the divisions in the Christian community and a sign of growing fellowship among the Churches. This fellowship is not primarily based on the efforts of men but seeks to be a response of the Churches to the action of the Holy Spirit."

Given the Pope's primacy in Catholicism and the WCC's broad Protestant and Orthodox participation, some of the ecumenical implications of the pontiff's visit to the WCC may be summarized:

• The day has been reached when the Pope can visit, in

the Reformation bastion of Geneva, the representatives of 235 Protestant and Orthodox Churches; the greeting is "brother."

• World Council members and the Vatican are pursuing and will increase efforts to champion justice, peace, human welfare and common attention to such issues as Christian relations with non-Christian religions.

• The movement may have slowed but it has not stopped. Some questions — Roman Catholic WCC membership — are postponed, but not closed.

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