

Pope gets gloves from ecumenical leader to warm relations

by [Luigi Sandri](#)

December 6, 2010

Rome, December 6 (ENInews)--The head of the World Council of Churches in his first official meeting with Pope Benedict XVI has said he wants to strengthen cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the Middle East.

No official statement was released after the 4 December audience at the Vatican, but the WCC general secretary, the Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, told journalists in Rome there had been a "a very open and friendly" conversation.

He noted that at the meeting, he and Pope Benedict had stressed that there are many levels at which the WCC and Roman Catholic Church already cooperate.

Tveit said he asked the Pope: "How can we strengthen the already strong cooperation we have?"

The WCC leader said he had presented to Pope Benedict a wooden box from Syria, as a reminder of the Middle East, and a book of poetry by Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge.

He had also offered the pontiff a pair of Norwegian woollen gloves "because in winter they protect well from the cold. So, in this time, which, according to some people is an ecumenical winter, they are as a symbol of the possibility to go ahead, despite the difficulties, and to continue patiently our work for Christian unity."

The Geneva-headquartered WCC groups 349 churches, principally Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant. The Catholic Church is not a member but has representatives on some WCC committees.

These include the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, which seeks to advance the unity of the Church, and its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. There is also a Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the WCC.

Tveit's visit took place shortly after the Vatican's chief unity official, Cardinal Kurt Koch, was reported as saying there is a crisis of ecumenism because of two "profoundly different mentalities" that shape the way Catholics and Protestants describe the nature of the Church.

Koch was in July named president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Tveit noted that as a theologian from Germany, Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, had belonged in the early 1970s to the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, "so he knows very well a very important dimension of our work".

The Pope showed great interest in how the WCC will "strengthen the work of visible unity between the churches," Tveit said. "He emphasised in a very kind and also a very strong way the importance of the World Council of Churches' work and the ministry I am called to do as general secretary."

Tveit said that from his perspective having the Catholic Church become a member of the WCC is not a pressing issue.

Still, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the WCC, "is much more than the link between Rome and Geneva", said Tveit, a Norwegian Lutheran who took up his WCC post in January.

"The WCC is a fellowship of Churches around the world, and when I travel and meet with the member churches, in many cases they describe to me how they cooperate with the Roman Catholic Church on the local level and national level," he stated.

The WCC leader said he had discussed with the Pope the situation in Sudan, and of the importance of all churches in Africa's biggest country working together to defend peace and justice and to not exacerbate any conflict between Muslims and Christians.

The two Christian leaders also discussed how to support Christians in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, where they are fleeing the country.

"We talked about the situation in Israel and Palestine. And the churches there need to have a united witness. I mentioned the great importance of the Roman Catholic Church there and how it is also contributing to the one ecumenical voice in Jerusalem," Tveit continued.

Tveit said he discussed the possibility of Pope Benedict visiting Geneva in the near future. Pope Paul VI visited the WCC in Geneva in 1969, and John Paul II in 1984.

No date had been scheduled, but Tveit told ENInews he would soon be issuing an official invitation through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

During his visit to Rome, Tveit also preached at the main Methodist church in the Italian capital, and met leaders of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy. Protestants are a small minority in Italy, where 90 percent of its 50 million people belong to the Catholic Church.