



A message of condolence from the World Communion of Reformed Churches following the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) joins with Catholics and believers from other Christian churches in mourning the death of Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, who died on 31 December 2022 at the age of 95. The WCRC remembers Pope Benedict as a brilliant theologian and a dedicated ecumenicist who put the integrity of the Christian faith at the centre of his pontificate.

In the 1960s, Joseph Ratzinger participated in the Second Vatican Council, in which the Roman Catholic Church embraced the commitment to the unity of the Church. Since this landmark event, the WCRC has engaged in four rounds of ecumenical dialogue that have produced remarkable insights that have contributed to a better understanding between Roman Catholics and Reformed and opened the door for common witness to the world. The report of the latest dialogue, “Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice,” is a reflection of this growing consensus. In 2023, the WCRC will open a Reformed Ecumenical Office in Rome in this ecumenical spirit.

In the engagement with the Roman Catholic Church during Ratzinger’s leadership of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and his pontificate, the WCRC highly respected his commitment to the integrity of the Church, which also shaped his understanding of ecclesial unity. For Pope Benedict, faith was not a matter of negotiation. Instead, his dedication to the truth of the Gospel made him point to the differences when he saw that consensus had not yet been reached. The declaration *Dominus Jesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000, was an example of this demanding clarity. The declaration reserves the word “Church” for bodies that have preserved a “valid episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery” and concluded that since Protestant understandings were suffering from defects, their structures were not churches in the proper sense but had to be named “ecclesial communities.”

For Reformed Christians, this declaration and other statements by Pope Benedict were disappointing. At the same time, we realize that the clarity of these assessments opens opportunities for ecumenical engagement: If we realistically expect that Reformed and Catholic understandings of the Church will not be reconciled in the near future, our commitment to ecumenical unity calls us to affirm the unity that we already have discovered in theological dialogue and shared witness and live it out in a common vision. In Reformed understanding, the Church is called to continuously reform according to God’s Word. This understanding of the Church is always provisional. It strives for the divine truth but is never intimidated by the shortcomings and limitations of the human process to respond to it. Disagreements on doctrinal matters, therefore, call for deeper discernment but must never hamper our commitment to participate in God’s mission.

Despite all the differences in understanding, Reformed Christians could, therefore, resonate when Pope Benedict, during his apostolic journey to Germany in 2011, called upon the Church to “detach from worldliness.” Being the Church is not defined by the institutional structure or cultural and political influence but by our response to divine calling, “bearing witness to the primacy of God’s love according to the Gospel through word and deed, here and now.”

Hanns Lessing
Acting General Secretary
on behalf of the Collegial General Secretariat