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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the 11th Assembly of the
World Council of Churches
on 31 August 2022
in Karlsruhe**

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the first time in more than 50 years, the Assembly of the World Council of Churches is convening in Europe again. It is therefore an honour and a delight for me as Federal President to extend a warm welcome, also on behalf of our country, to all of you who have travelled from all corners of the globe to come to Germany.

This is the first time that the World Council of Churches is meeting in Germany. We are grateful that you have accepted the invitation to come here and hope that we will be good hosts. This event is intended to be a celebration of faith, of interaction, of exchange. It is rare for us to host guests who are so different but who are nonetheless connected by a deep sense of unity. Welcome!

Here in Germany we remember with thankfulness that the German churches were actually permitted to attend the very first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 and were welcomed as members on an equal footing. After the horror that the German Reich unleashed on the world, after the war, after the systematic persecution and murder of Europe's Jews – after all these unspeakable crimes, that was not something that could be taken for granted.

The fact that the World Council of Churches accepted the German churches as members shortly after the Second World War, even before the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, does not mean that it turned a blind eye to this guilt. But its acceptance helped pave the way for a new start. To this day, we are grateful for this!

Ladies and gentlemen,

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The logo of this 11th Assembly consists of four symbols: the circle, the way, the cross and the dove.

The circle traditionally represents the whole world, the earth. And it is impressive that participants have travelled from more than 120 countries; they represent 352 churches from all corners of the world, "from every nation under heaven", as Acts describes the occasion of Pentecost.

Presbyterians from the Hudson River in New York and Presbyterians from the Amazon in Brazil, Maori Anglicans from the "Land of the Long White Cloud" and high-church Anglicans from the green hills of England, Orthodox Christians from the Ethiopian Highlands and Zwinglians from the foot of the Swiss mountains, members of the Reformed Church, Lutherans and Anglicans all from the same city of Johannesburg, Protestant Christians not affiliated with any specific denomination from small church communities in China, Lutherans from the Usambara Mountains and Reformed Church members from the Bergisches Land region, Methodists, Quakers and Mennonites from all points of the compass, men and women from the entire spectrum of Orthodox Christianity. It is almost like it was in Jerusalem that first Pentecost, when people from all parts of the known world heard the Christian message and were filled with the Spirit.

This vibrant diversity was one of Christianity's defining characteristics from the outset. From the beginning it was not uniform; regional and also national distinctions still frequently emerge, alongside the denominational differences. And the churches then go different ways, and these differences constantly have to be withstood, through theological reflection but also through practical brotherly and sisterly love.

The second symbol of the Assembly logo is therefore the way. We each have our own individual path to pursue, but our communities, our churches are also always on the move. We are never finished, we can never say we have finally arrived. Over the course of the centuries, our churches have gone down very different routes. To some extent that is dictated by the external circumstances, by the historical, political and economic conditions. But it also depends on the specific way in which a particular community understands, interprets and practically applies a Christian message.

During this process, some have on occasions followed the wrong path, often going in destructive and dangerous directions. At the start of my speech, I talked about the experiences of our church in Germany.

Let me remind you of the murderous antisemitism incited among and by Christians over centuries – in Germany, but not only here. One of the greatest current responsibilities of the Christian churches all over the world is to take a stand against antisemitism. We need to be aware

that antisemitism can assume many forms. Yet it always remains an ideology of hatred with a history of annihilation.

The security of the Jewish community – in Germany, in Israel, in the nations of the world – must be one of the tenets of all religions. We must never allow religion, which is intended to build up, encourage and edify people, to become a means to humiliate others, a tool of hatred and violence.

The heads of the Russian Orthodox Church are currently leading their members and their entire church down a dangerous and indeed blasphemous path that goes against all that they believe.

They are justifying a war of aggression against Ukraine – against their own and our own brothers and sisters in the faith. We have to speak out, also here in this room, in this Assembly, against this propaganda targeting the freedom and rights of the citizens of another country, this nationalism, which arbitrarily claims that a dictatorship's imperial dreams of hegemony are God's will. How many women and men and children, too, in Ukraine have become victims of this hatemongering, this hatred and this criminal violence!

Carpet bombings and targeted attacks on civilian buildings, on apartment blocks, on hospitals, on shopping centres, on stations and public spaces, war crimes taking place in full view of the world: here, today, we cannot remain silent on this issue. We must call it by its name, indeed we must denounce it, and last but not least as a Christian community we must express our commitment to the dignity and the freedom and the security of the people of Ukraine. I would like to take this opportunity to convey a specific and heartfelt welcome to the delegations from the churches in Ukraine – and I hope that from this gathering they will be able to take strength and support to their suffering churches and congregations back home.

There are also representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church here today. The fact that they are here is not something we should take for granted in these times. I expect this Assembly not to spare them the truth about this brutal war and the criticism of the role of their church leaders. Yes, time and again Christians are called to be bridge-builders. That is and remains one of our most important tasks. But building bridges requires willingness on both sides of the river; a bridge cannot be constructed if one side tears down the pillars that support it. In the run-up to the Assembly, the opinion was expressed that dialogue at least should be made possible. Yes, but dialogue is not an end in itself. Dialogue must bring to light what is happening. Dialogue must draw attention to injustice, must identify both victims and perpetrators – and their henchmen. Yet dialogue that does not move beyond pious wishes and vague generalisations can, in the worst case, become a platform for vindication and propaganda. What sort of dialogue will we engage in here? That is the choice this Assembly has to make, and Germany's

stance – I am speaking here also on behalf of the Federal Government – is clear.

Today I also want to remind you that hundreds of Russian Orthodox priests have engaged in public resistance and taken a stand against the war despite the threats by Putin's regime. I now also want to address these brave individuals, whose example reminds us of the responsibility of the religions for peace: even though you cannot attend this Assembly and speak to us today, we hear you! May your voice also find an echo in this Assembly.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has aligned itself with the crimes of the war against Ukraine. This totalitarian ideology, disguised as theology, has led to the complete or partial destruction of so many religious sites on Ukrainian territory – churches, mosques, synagogues, educational and administrative buildings belonging to religious communities. No Christian who is still in possession of their faith, their mind and their senses will be able to see God's will in this. It all fundamentally contradicts the third symbol of the Assembly logo, the cross.

The cross is the symbol of commitment to the innocent Man of Sorrows, the wrongly condemned one who died on it, which unites all Christians. It can never be a secular sign of domination, though it has often been exploited as such over the course of history.

The cross remains the crucial sign of Christian identity across the entire Christian community. It stands for compassion and mercy, for prioritising the poor, those who suffer, all those in need. Yet compassion should not only take the form of charity, it can and must also have political consequences, it can and must also prove its worth in the fight for justice, in the commitment to giving a voice also to the marginalised – whether individuals or entire groups. Whoever prays for themselves "Give us, this day, our daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer also has an obligation and the right to work or fight to ensure that everyone has enough to eat and a humane way of making their living. Our Catholic sisters and brothers here in Germany once said that the Kingdom of God is not indifferent to global trade prices.

I am aware that when so many different churches are gathered here, they will have very diverse priorities with regard to social and ecological issues.

Here there are poor churches and rich churches, there are churches that are persecuted by the state, churches that are politically tolerated, churches that are free to go about their work in public. Here there are minority churches and churches that strongly shape the politics and culture of their country. There are churches from regions affected by conflict and civil war.

Some are already directly experiencing the consequences of climate change, for others, the glaring disparity between poor and rich is their chief concern.

Elsewhere, sexual abuse is a huge problem within society and the church which for far too long was trivialised, concealed and covered up.

In still other places, land seizure and mafia-like structures are threatening basic livelihoods. The consequences are often child trafficking, forced prostitution, slavery; and it is always the poor who are most severely affected by all this.

Some churches are grappling with very difficult ethical issues, such as questions concerning the beginning and end of life, birth control and euthanasia. Others are chiefly concerned with central medical issues, such as how to protect people from Aids or from other diseases, or how to ensure that everyone has access to a fair healthcare system.

I know that churches everywhere are doing outstanding work to overcome the various challenges. Often, they are the only source of support and point of contact in places where state structures are non-existent or inadequate.

This gathering of Christians from all over the world is a unique opportunity for everyone. I hope that you will all be able to benefit from your interaction here

- to listen to the needs of others,
- to ask for help yourselves,
- to learn from one another,
- to experience and to show support and solidarity.

We know that protracted injustice is itself a form of violence – and it constantly and repeatedly engenders new violence, terrorism and war. Only justice – ecological, economic and political justice – can lead to peace. “The work of righteousness will be peace”: this old message from the prophet Isaiah still applies and must guide our actions.

Finally, the fourth symbol of this 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches is the dove. It is firstly a symbol of peace, which so many people lack and for which we so fervently yearn.

In many traditions it is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

But above all it is the messenger in the Old Testament that Noah sent out to see whether the flood waters had receded, whether the universal catastrophe was coming to an end.

For us today, this dove should be both a warning and a symbol of hope.

A warning to do everything in our power to ensure that the human-induced disaster of unchecked climate change does not come to pass.

Many people are already suffering from the impact of unmistakable climate change harbingers – and representatives of these people are here in Karlsruhe today and can provide first-hand accounts of what is happening. In this context, we Christians have a special responsibility, for creation has been placed into our hands, into our care, for us to protect. Our freedom to use the earth, its treasures and gifts, cannot and must not be unbounded. The rich and the industrialised countries and their churches have a particular responsibility in this area.

Yet the dove can and should also be a symbol of hope. If we do what we can – indeed, what we have to do! – then land will re-emerge: our common land, the inhabitable earth on which we can all rightfully live.

Brothers and sisters – I can say that this afternoon here in Karlsruhe, as a Christian among Christians –

I wish you all a fruitful and successful 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, one that will be characterised by exchange but also by prayer, by dialogue but also by clarity and resolve, by shrewd analysis but also by a willingness to act, by insight into what has to be done but also by hope.

All the very best, and God bless you.