

Tribute to Father Ioan Sauca

Conference at the University of Fribourg, February 23, 2023
Metropolitan Job of Pisidia

Your Eminence, Reverend Secretary General, Reverend Father, Dear Professors, Dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My first encounter with Father Ioan Sauca dates back to the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, in February 2006, 17 years ago! It was there that my journey in the World Council of Churches began, as a delegate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and where I was elected as a member of the Central Committee. Father Ioan already enjoyed the reputation of having straightened out the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, of which he was the director. His experience and advice were invaluable to me as the young dean of the Saint-Serge Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris at the time. He invited me in the months that followed to give a first lecture at Bossey, and that is how I became not only familiar with this famous ecumenical institution, but also a friend of Father Ioan.

Since then, our paths have crossed many times. Before listening to him this evening on his vision of the future of the ecumenical movement, I would like first of all to testify that Father Ioan embodies what a true ecumenist must truly be: a man rooted in his own tradition, knowing perfectly the theology of his Church, and open-minded to other Christian traditions, able through dialogue to listen to other harmonics and to understand dissonances. One such ecumenist is indeed Professor Sauca, until very recently Acting General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

In this regard, allow me to share with you “the prophecy of Job”, not that of the biblical figure, but my own. Three years ago, in February 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began, an information meeting was held for the staff of the Ecumenical Center in Geneva. I participated as then the permanent representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the WCC. Reverend Olav Fykse Tveit was set to step down as General Secretary at the end of March 2020. Fr. Sauca was to take over from him on an interim basis as the central committee could not meet to elect the next General Secretary. At the end of the meeting, I whispered in his ear: this pandemic is here to stay: you will find yourself in this position for an indefinite period! And in truth, what was supposed to last only a few months lasted almost three years! In fact, it was not until June 2022 that the central committee was finally able to meet to elect Reverend Jerry Pillay.

Thus, Father Ioan had to manage “on an interim basis” of almost three years, in unpredictable conditions due to the pandemic and its successive lockdowns and complex and sometimes contradictory health measures, the administration of the World Council of Churches, having to face with the preparation of the 11th Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Karlsruhe, the internal tensions of the Orthodox world, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and all the controversies surrounding the homilies and positions taken by the Patriarch of the Church of Russia. In this tense and difficult period, Father Ioan knew how to accomplish his task as a true ecumenist: as a theologian rooted in his own tradition, as a man who listens and dialogues, and above all, as a fervent defender of Christian unity. I personally admire the courage and wisdom with which he was able to organize the inter-Orthodox pre-assembly consultation which, against all odds, brought together in Paralimni (Cyprus) all the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox member Churches of the WCC in a spirit of brotherhood and of unity. Father Ioan was thus able not only to maintain all the Orthodox member Churches within the WCC, but also to protect the fragile cohesion of this fellowship.

Before having the joy to listen to you talking to us about the future of the ecumenical movement, let me confess that it is this model of you precisely that I will always keep in mind, dear Father Ioan, and to thank you, for teaching us by your example!