

**Words of Gratitude on the Occasion of the
Public Lecture by Rev. Prof. Ioan Sauca
Former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches**

University of Fribourg, Aula Magna, 23 February 2023, 5.15 pm

Kurt Cardinal Koch

Dear Professors, dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening to all of you. Allow me first of all to express my sincere gratitude to the University of Fribourg, whose commitment to promoting the ecumenical spirit within the Catholic Church and beyond is well known. Its Institute for Ecumenical Studies, founded in 1964 on the inspiration of the Second Vatican Council, has been a pillar of theological research for almost sixty years and contributes to the training of new generations of ecumenists from various Churches and ecclesial communities. I would also like to thank Professor Barbara Hallensleben for inviting me to say a few words in honour of the main speaker from a Catholic perspective. I gladly accepted this invitation not only because Father Ioan and I have known each other for a long time, but above all as a sign of gratitude for his unwavering commitment to the purpose of Christian unity for so many years.

In evaluating his mandate, the former WCC general secretary, who left his position only two months ago, proposes to answer the question: “What future for the ecumenical movement?” I am convinced that it would be difficult to find someone as well prepared and as competent as Professor Sauca to address this topic. Indeed, since his youth he has been professionally dedicated to the service of Christian unity by serving the ecumenical movement in various capacities, in particular in the World Council of Churches in Geneva where, for more than three decades, he held various responsibilities, culminating in his position as General Secretary ad interim. He had to perform much of this task during the pandemic. However, this did not prevent the Council from continuing its mission successfully, opening itself up to new ways of working and even praying online, which, instead of restricting it, allowed the ecumenical community to grow. As General Secretary, he was also primarily responsible for the preparation and conduct of the last Council Assembly, which took place last autumn in Karlsruhe, Germany. As head of the Catholic delegation, I can witness that Father Sauca was a true *spiritus movens*, demonstrating the spiritual and human resources of a great ecumenical leader. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the last months of his mandate, Father Sauca has been the author of various initiatives aimed at the peaceful resolution of the war in Ukraine and at reconciliation within the Orthodox Church, which is suffering from an internal split in that country.

While his own Christian identity is strongly rooted in the Orthodox tradition, Father Sauca is an open-minded ecumenist who knows how to integrate the gifts of the various ecclesial traditions into his vision of unity. Of course, such reconciliation between different Christian traditions can only emerge by moving together on the path of a unity already experienced despite what still separates us. In this regard, I would like to mention the phrase that was chosen as the motto of Pope Francis’ ecumenical pilgrimage to Geneva and Bossey in 2018 – *Walking, praying, working together* – because it seems to reflect Professor Sauca’s vision of ecumenism. The Church of Christ is a community of disciples called to walk together in common prayer and action so that Christ’s will that all his disciples be one may be realised (cf. John 17:21).

Here at this university, it is also worth recalling Father Sauca’s merits in the field of education and ecumenical formation of young theologians from all Churches. Indeed, for more than twenty years he was director of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey where he also taught missiology and ecumenical theology.

Furthermore, I would like to mention Father Sauca's contribution to the development of relations with the Catholic Church. In various positions of responsibility within the Council, Father Sauca has always promoted close collaboration between the various departments of the WCC and different dicasteries of the Roman Curia and other structures of the Catholic Church at the global, regional and national levels. For many years Professor Sauca was a member of the Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the WCC, whose main purpose is to promote the collaboration of both partners in the field of pastoral and practical ecumenism. As a great expert of Catholic spirituality, Father Sauca is a personal friend of various movements and communities that have arisen within the Catholic Church, such as the Focolare, Sant'Egidio and Chemin Neuf. I would also like to mention his numerous visits to Rome, both individually and with students from Bossey or as a member of various WCC delegations, as well as his meetings with Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, which remain tangible signs of the goodwill and development of the cooperation between the WCC and the Catholic Church that has intensified considerably over the last decades.

Let me conclude, dear Father Ioan, by praying for many blessings from God on you and your family in this new period of your life and by encouraging you to draw on your considerable experience and wisdom in the ecumenical field to continue to serve the quest for Christian unity.