

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT?

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Dear professors, dear students from Fribourg, Bossey and Chambésy, ladies and gentlemen, I feel deeply honoured but also humbled by this special event and would like to express my most sincere thanks to the University of Fribourg, its Institute for Ecumenical Studies and, in particular, to Prof. Barbara Hallensleben, who invited me to deliver this public lecture and to engage with you in reflection and dialogue.

My thanks also go to their Eminences Cardinal Kurt Koch and Archbishop Job Gethcha, as well as to Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, the WCC general secretary, for their kind words.

In her invitation, Prof. Hallensleben asked me to take stock of my long experience as a WCC staff member, Bossey professor and director, and, more recently, as the first Orthodox acting as general secretary of the WCC and, from that experience and learning, to draw a conclusion on my view of the future of the ecumenical movement.

The story is 28 years long, with ups and downs, struggles and achievements, working with faith and hope in particularly difficult moments of crises and challenges. One day I may write memoirs and a full story; for today, I will focus just on some highlights.

Executive Secretary for Orthodox Studies and Relationships in Mission (1994-1998)

I joined the WCC in 1994 as Executive Secretary for Orthodox Studies and Relationships in Mission. It was four years after the fall of the Berlin wall when the churches in the former Soviet Bloc got their freedom and were rediscovering their missionary role and vocation. The WCC's focus on mission and evangelism at that time was from the perspective of the "Gospel and Culture Study Process," initiated at the Canberra assembly in 1991. It came from the famous but very controversial presentation of the South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung on the Holy Spirit, which many perceived as syncretistic, shamanistic, and pantheistic. When she defended her theological concepts as coming from her own cultural context but expressing the same reality, the question was raised on the limits to inculturation and diversity. That debate gave birth to the Gospel and Culture Study process, which was concluded in 1996 at the Salvador Bahia World Mission Conference in Brazil.

As WCC Orthodox staff member responsible for Mission and Evangelism, I had to engage the Orthodox families in the Gospel and Culture Study process and prepare them for input to the coming World Mission Conference. I remember that, in those days, many were still suspicious of any liturgical expressions from the younger churches or from contexts other than the traditional ones from the North. Some still viewed drums and liturgical dances in worship as foreign to Christian tradition; among those, the Orthodox were the most vocal. In that context, I decided to organize the pan-orthodox pre-conference meeting in Ethiopia.

Representatives of both Eastern and Oriental churches attended. I remember vividly that, for many, that context was a discovery, an eye-opener, and a puzzlement. The Ethiopian church is also an Oriental Orthodox Church but not European or from the Middle East. Therefore, its theological content was the same throughout centuries, but the liturgical expression was very African, enculturated in African soil. Liturgical dance with beating drums is part of their liturgical prayer. And that way of praying had been there much longer before the Council of Chalcedon where the schism in the Orthodox family occurred.

The final statement of that meeting is significant, as it affirmed theologically the validity of all cultures to receive and express the Gospel and concluded that no culture or nation is irreversibly and automatically Christian and no state or empire should be identified with the Church.

At the World Mission Conference in Salvador Bahia, the Orthodox contributed very actively, and I see the Orthodox impact on the final report, particularly in two points:

- a) There was a hot debate on the issue of accepting that values of the Gospel can be found in all cultures since God had been present in all cultures and among all people before the arrival of Christian missionaries. Some came up with the concept of “the gospel before the Gospel.” In the moment of impasse in the plenary discussions, the Orthodox raised the Early Christian concept of the “seeds of the word” - *logoi* present in creation without being pantheistic. That formulation has been adopted as the theological basis for valuing and relating cultures to the Gospel.
- a) The second Orthodox input in that conference was on the issue of mission and proselytism in the context of responsible relationships in mission. Following the fall of the Communist system in Eastern Europe and freedom of worship and proclamation, even some WCC member churches organised mission crusades in traditionally Orthodox countries and had strategic plans on how many converts they were to make. That provoked lots of tensions and protests from the Orthodox. In preparation for the conference, I helped organise meetings with the participation of those “visiting missionaries” and the local churches and debated the matter. At the conference, a statement on mission and proselytism, which I helped draft, was adopted.

Since this issue was very sensitive among the Orthodox and many others in the WCC fellowship, I continued it further. Between 2000 and 2006, I organised seminars in Bossey on “Building bridges between Orthodox and Evangelical/Charismatic Tradition.” Indeed, many Orthodox from Eastern Europe have converted to Evangelicals or Pentecostals. At the same time, most converts to Orthodox churches in the USA and the West came from Evangelicals and Pentecostals. My question was what was missing in one tradition that people were looking for in another, and what was the complementarity between those traditions that these exchanges took place. The meetings, the debates, the exchanges, and the results were fascinating. The presentations and the reports of those meetings were published in a book.

Bossey professor and director in time of crisis (1998 – 2022)

Following a crisis in the Bossey faculty and a “riot” of the students, the WCC general secretary, Konrad Raiser, asked me in 1998 to leave the position in Geneva and join the Bossey faculty to try to bring peace and reconciliation. And from that time until my retirement, I have committed my life and work to the formation of younger generations of church- and ecumenical leaders from all over the world: 25 generations of students.

In 2001, I was appointed Bossey director following the rather unexpected departure to the USA of my predecessor, Prof. Heidi Hadsell.

I took that responsibility in the context of another deep crisis. The project to renovate the Bossey chateau and its facilities had started under the leadership and strong support of Konrad Raiser. An initial amount of 6 million CHF was taken from the bank with the expectation that donations would soon cover that amount. But the donations to cover it never arrived, and I took over the director position with a deficit of 6 million francs. The Scholarship Fund

was in the red; the number of student applications had reduced drastically; Orthodox students had been almost absent for about four years, and the faculty had very few teaching staff. WCC had its own financial difficulties and could no longer cover the large expenses of Bossey. For some time, I was my own director, without any professor and continued the formation in Bossey with the help of visiting professors who offered their services without being paid.

With the full support of the Bossey board of that time, I was responsible for imagining a new vision and strategy to revive Bossey and make it sustainable. I want to mention the name of Robert Welsh from the Disciples of Christ USA, the moderator of the board, who was a pillar and strong supporter in forming what came to be called the “new Bossey.”

We soon discovered that the students coming to Bossey were no longer satisfied with only an experience but wanted a recognised academic diploma when they returned home. In that context, I approached the University of Geneva, reorganised the teaching by establishing four academic chairs (Ecumenical Theology, Missiology, Social Ethics and Biblical Hermeneutics), adapted a new curriculum taking into account the expressed expectations from the students (interfaith components, eco-theology, organic farming, development studies, gender justice, racism etc.), proposed study plans, and followed the University of Geneva requirements in selecting adequately academically-recognised teachers that had to be accepted and accredited by the university.

Soon after this restructure, churches and ecumenical partners became very interested in the new Bossey: we had three offers of teaching staff secondments (United Evangelical Church USA, which supports the chair of Social Ethics; EKD – the chair of Ecumenical Theology; and a joint partnership of CWM, UEM, and CEVAE seconding the chair of Missiology). The Vatican has continued seconding a Bossey staff position since 1967, and nowadays, the Catholic professor in Bossey is responsible for teaching in the chair of Ecumenical Biblical Hermeneutics.

The Scholarship Fund has continued to grow. In most of the years, we even ended with a positive balance. The number of student applications has grown to three times more than the maximum number we could accept on our premises. The number of Orthodox applications, including students from churches who left the WCC, such as Georgia or Bulgaria, has constantly increased, and the credibility of Bossey has grown among the member churches. The number of Roman Catholic students has also increased, particularly in the last few years.

My proposal to the board to also accept applications of students coming from Evangelical and Pentecostal churches was approved. About one-third of the student body today comes from these constituencies. Once they returned home, they became advocates of ecumenical cooperation, and their work could explain why most applications for membership of the WCC today come from these churches.

I am glad that I could leave behind a strong faculty, with a healthy Scholarship Fund, a solid cooperation with the University of Geneva, and great interest and commitment of the member churches to the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey and its ecumenical formation.

However, Bossey is also an old historical chateau with its premises, rooms, kitchen, and many staff. The costs involved went beyond what the student scholarships could cover, and WCC no longer had the resources to cover such huge expenses. Bossey has thus become a significant financial burden for the WCC, and there were even discussions on its future in the nineties. Some even proposed to close and sell it.

In that context, it became clear that a new strategy had to be found and that Bossey should become a self-supporting project, generating its own income, at least for the maintenance of the buildings and the salaries of the support staff. I brought a proposal to the board to open Bossey to the larger public, to use its facilities as a conference centre where other groups could come and organize their seminars, to offer the possibility for outside people to come and book its rooms as in a hotel; to use its restaurant and garden for other events such as weddings, private events, etc. In the concept paper, I tried to convince the board that it was possible to combine economy (income generation) with formation and spirituality. The board agreed, and we started implementing the new vision. Interestingly, as soon as people learned about the “new Bossey,” some were very excited, but others, among them some of our major donors, expressed concerns and disapproval. I was personally challenged for transforming Bossey into a hotel, for changing its nature and purpose, and for sacrificing formation and spirituality for income generation. It was not an easy debate. I had to convince them that spirituality and education can and should go together well with attempts to make Bossey a self-sustaining project. For the most sceptical ones, I had to come up with examples from the early Christian communities showing that economy, or the monitoring and administration of goods, was not perceived as a sin but rather a sacred service in the church. Even the early monastic communities, which had poverty as a vow for spiritual life, had a person entrusted through the imposition of the hands of the bishop to manage the goods of the community. That person has been called *oikonomos*. In some churches, this title survived until today.

Another interesting debate, which gave us a good lesson, was deciding on the image Bossey should have to the outside world if we wished to make people come to us. Some had the idea that if we portrayed Bossey as too “churchy” and spiritual many would not come. Thus, in the beginning, after the renovation of the main hall, the only image on the walls and at the reception was that of a credit card: how to pay one’s expenses.

We debated the issue at length on the board, and I strongly insisted that we cannot dilute or sacrifice our identity but should instead be honest and open about it. As a result, when entering the lobby today, one can see a big icon on the wall portraying Christ the Vine with its many branches and explaining the vision and goal of Bossey.

What has been the learning? The house is full; the hotel is fully booked most of the time, groups from outside come and organise their seminars in Bossey, and private events and weddings, including people from other faith communities, are held at Bossey. The remark of the Orthodox Jewish rabbi from Geneva of those days, who used to come and spend his *Shabbat* in Bossey, confirmed our decision. He once told me, “I come here because I trust Bossey. Here, you clearly show who you are but do not impose your values or identity on anybody. Those who hide or dilute their identity to please others are not fully honest and have a hidden agenda.”

Nowadays, Bossey is known and appreciated as a conference centre but, particularly, as a Christian institute for ecumenical formation. The hotel’s activities, meeting rooms, events, formation, and chapel function side by side in complete harmony. Financially, the income generation came to the point of breaking even, at times even with a small surplus. Bossey continues to be a success story.

Deputy general secretary (2014 – 2020)

From 2014 to 2020, I served the WCC as deputy general secretary, responsible for the programme on Unity, Mission, Church and Ecumenical Relations, while continuing to be a professor and director at the Bossey Institute. In that capacity, I coordinated Faith and Order, Mission and Evangelism, Worship and Spirituality, Youth, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, and Church and Ecumenical Relations. I was not aware in those days that all those responsibilities were preparation for another demanding responsibility which came during the world crisis of COVID-19.

Acting general secretary (2020 – 2022).

Following the departure of the former general secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, at the end of March 2020, I was appointed interim general secretary and then acting general secretary until the election of a new general secretary, which was to take place in about three months. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the election could not take place, and my tenure lasted for almost three years until the end of 2022.

During these years, we all faced the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has taken countless lives, including many members and leaders of our churches and many ecumenical friends. This pandemic has reminded us of our shared vulnerability and has created a strong sense of solidarity among the churches as a fellowship and with the entire human family. At the same time, the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities, especially for vulnerable groups.

The pandemic disrupted the liturgical and pastoral life of many of our churches. However, while it may have separated us physically, it has brought us closer together spiritually. We have learned new ways of working and of using digital and online technologies to meet. On 1 February 2023, the WCC Communication team received the top honour from Geneva Engage for engagement with the world's social media during the pandemic, confirming the committed work we have achieved.

One of the most demanding responsibilities during these three years was the preparation for the assembly. When I took over, the preparations were still underway, and comments and questions on the very essence of the assembly theme continued to come from partners and member churches, particularly those living in minority situations in Asia, but also Europe and the USA. Since the theme was centred on the love of Christ, it was questioned to what extent such a theme becomes exclusivist, for Christians alone, or triumphalist, and how it could open ways for dialogue and cooperation with the world and the people of other faiths.

The initial approach emphasized the compassionate love of Christ, and both the Biblical texts that were selected and the proposed worship followed that direction. Yet, that approach did not answer the serious theological questions raised above or explain theologically how the love of Christ was meant for others than the Christians.

Based on the Trinitarian theology—which has been developed, articulated, and agreed upon in WCC documents over decades—I advised and directed the international theme group to place the love of Christ in the context of the love of the Triune God for the whole world that was fully manifested in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ (the concept of recapitulation – *anakefaleo* as developed by St Irenaeus of Lugdunum and others).

When one speaks about the love of Christ, one speaks about the kenotic and indiscriminate love of God in Christ for the whole of creation. This is the very essence of our faith. Taking this direction, we also reaffirmed the direction of the *Common Understanding and Vision* (CUV) of the WCC, which stated that reconciliation and unity are God's final purpose in Christ for humankind and creation (Colossians 1:19), exemplified in Christ's compassion for the suffering in Matthew (9:35-39) and many other passages of the four gospels. This perspective opened solid theological ways for dialogue and cooperation with the world. And this I consider to be my concrete contribution to unpacking the assembly theme and setting the new direction with input from Orthodox and Early Church perspectives.

I emphasized the importance to the structure of the assembly worship and, in particular, its theological articulations since, from experience, I have learned that the most appreciated but also the most divisive part of assemblies was the worship. I was glad to see the outcome of the Karlsruhe worship, as I heard only words of affirmation and appreciation.

The most important learning for me during this tenure, but also a surprise and an eye-opener, came from the socio-political challenges that our churches live in today and their expectations from the WCC. They expect WCC to have a strong prophetic voice and speak out on their behalf when they are voiceless or to help them when they need support. Most requests for help were related to healing wounds, bringing about reconciliation, and building bridges towards unity, justice, and peace. I have travelled to Ukraine and Russia and met with church leaders and people to create dialogue links that lead towards a just peace and the end of violence, war, and atrocities. Delegations from both churches came to the assembly, but the need to start a dialogue remains a painful necessity, especially once the war ends. Church leaders from both sides acknowledged that only WCC could play such a role.

I have travelled to the Holy Land, met the presidents of both Israel and Palestine, and church leaders and people and strengthened the recently consolidated WCC Jerusalem Liaison Office that is meant to bring justice, reconciliation, and healing there.

I travelled to Lebanon and Syria and witnessed the bleeding wounds of the people there, showing the solidarity of the WCC fellowship and the commitment to continue helping and accompanying them.

At the request of the member churches, I travelled to Korea to strengthen their cooperation with and commitment to the WCC and to reignite their internal fellowship. The visit was very fruitful as all the churches came together on that occasion in sharing and celebration.

I initiated the dialogue with the Methodist Church in Cuba, which due to some misunderstandings, left the WCC membership. I was invited to attend their general assembly with the hope that they may come back, but due to the preparations for the assembly, that visit could not take place. But the door for dialogue has been opened, and I pray and hope that it continues and that they may soon return to the WCC fellowship.

In preparation for the assembly, I tried to bring reconciliation and harmony among the divided Orthodox families, both Eastern and Oriental. Following an earlier tradition, I organised the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly meeting in Cyprus. The participants referred to it as a historic meeting. Fifty participants representing both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox families participated. Despite divisions and tensions within the two families, all participated with a spirit of dialogue, love, and communion. All prayed together and actively participated in

discussions and drafting the final report and communique. The focus was on the assembly preparations, and theological input was an important asset as we prepared.

Particular attention was also given to discussing some sensitive issues of our time, which might require clear and articulate Orthodox input and contribution at the assembly, such as Israel/Palestine, human sexuality, and the war in Ukraine. A special hearing was organised with the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church, and sincere, honest, and open discussions took place. The final communique, which condemns the war and violence, asking for peace and reconciliation, was agreed upon by consensus.

It was honestly recognised that if the WCC had not invited and convened this meeting, it would have never taken place. The convening role of the WCC was recognised and affirmed with gratitude.

I had amazing interactions with leaders and people of other faith communities based on the common sharing of faith values on human dignity, peace, justice, and reconciliation. I could mention the growth in cooperation with the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), the World Jewish Congress, Al-Azhar and Human Fraternity, Religions for Peace, and Shia branches of Islam in Iran. I was glad to see their representatives attending and addressing the assembly.

From our evaluations so far, I understood that people see the assembly in Karlsruhe as a providential and historical momentum, an important guiding event at a turning point in history and a new beginning for the ecumenical movement of our times.

I will end with a response to a question I was often asked during these years of service: what has the WCC learned during the pandemic, and what was my experience as Orthodox? My response has been to reflect on how we have more deeply encountered our shared vulnerability and shared fate as one humanity.

Fundamentally, we have learned that the real importance of our work as the WCC is grounded in our faith identity, indeed, because of it. I believe the pandemic has strengthened the spiritual dimension of our work and our togetherness as a fellowship of churches. It has been important to affirm of our hope and trust in God, even amid our vulnerability. It helped us overcome the illusory division between activists and pietists, between faith and concrete actions in dealing with world issues based on and because of our faith.

In the past, we said that the WCC was a faith-based organization. Now I would describe the WCC as a spiritual-based organization. The heart of our fellowship is the spirituality we share as the flame that fuels our drive for justice and sparks our work for peace and unity. Over these three years, I have seen how important it is to speak with a spiritual language in WCC statements and speeches, a language that people in the churches can identify with but which is also recognized by people in other faith communities. Despite our different faith identities, when we speak a spiritual language and speak to one another as people of faith, we discover that we have something in common that brings us closer.

Personally, I was deeply moved but also frightened by the heavy moral responsibility I felt I carried on my shoulders as WCC leader, since the WCC staff colleagues, but also church or political leaders, including the partners from other faith communities that I have visited and interacted with called me just "Father." Our member churches and the world expects WCC to make a difference, to be a champion in portraying and implementing God's love in Christ for the whole of creation.

What is the future for the ecumenical movement?

In light of the experiences and learnings I had during the 28 years of activity in the ecumenical movement, I will draw some conclusions to the question on which I was asked to reflect.

In my report to the assembly in Karlsruhe, I concluded: "The path to unity in faith and Eucharistic fellowship as an imperative of the ecumenical movement remains our common goal and vision, but we are still far from this goal." There are still differences and divisions that must be overcome, and new challenges again question the nature of Christian unity today. Yet, even the most critical voices about the WCC now agree that WCC is vitally needed, especially today as a Christian fellowship and that, despite all the differences, we gather based on our common affirmation that Jesus Christ is God and Saviour according to the scriptures, acknowledging that there is but One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In responding to the hardships of our times, we need one another, we depend on one another, and we can only advance if we walk together, not in separation.

Therefore, I would dare to say that if the WCC did not exist, we would have to invent or reinvent it today.

In saying that, I would avoid being either utopianly optimistic or pessimistic. Some speak of an ecumenical winter, while others see it as an ecumenical spring. I would just say that the WCC is vital, and the ecumenical movement will continue, but it will look very different from what we were used to and how it was imagined at its inception.

In analysing the situation of ecumenism today, one must accept that, compared to even the more recent past, institutional ecumenism is in crisis. After half a century of Christian collaboration and search for Christian unity, tendencies towards strengthening confessional identities, dogmatic integralism, and close traditionalism are experienced in all churches. I will mention some of those evident signs:

- Ecumenical enthusiasm and commitment have decreased in many places while strengthening one's confessional identity is being emphasised.
- From the 60s to the early 90s, ecumenism was a reality that penetrated the whole life of the churches: theology, theological formation, and liturgical life. In many churches, it has become a strategic and diplomatic function dealt with from a specialised office based in their external church affairs departments.
- Satisfaction with a "lukewarm" understanding of ecumenical fellowship: cohabitation, cooperation rather than advancement towards greater *koinonia* in faith, worship, and Eucharistic fellowship.
- Ecumenical institutes, in many places, have been closed or enlarged their horizons and transformed into interfaith institutes. (The Ecumenical Institute at Bossey and the Institute for Ecumenical Studies at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Fribourg have become rare examples.)
- National Councils of Churches lost their importance and impact, and, in some places, consultative councils of religions are preferred.
- The term ecumenism has become a sensitive and problematic word. In some contexts, it is equated with an ideological movement of the past. Yet, while ecumenism is questioned or even condemned in some cases, most Christians will still accept the need for inter-Christian cooperation and dialogue. And more recently, the profile of the WCC is being

widely accepted as a unique safe space and open platform for encounters and dialogue towards building bridges of just peace and reconciliation.

The debate on the concept of unity as the purpose and goal of the ecumenical movement

Once widely accepted, the paradigms on unity as developed within the World Council of Churches are under serious questioning today, not only by Christians and churches which are not members of the WCC (such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals) but also by the younger generation of theologians and faithful from churches which have been members of WCC since its foundation.

The contextual realities are very important to understand where we come from, where we are, and where we should go if we desire to strengthen and give a future to the ecumenical dream and vision. There is a need for contextual analysis and reflection on the shaping of the proposed and coined paradigms within the context of the 20th century.

The Commission on Faith and Order emphasized ecclesial unity, faith, and Eucharistic sharing, Life and Work had its paradigm of unity in action, while Mission and Evangelism had the paradigm of unity in witness. These ecumenical initiatives were developed when the need for “bringing the whole world together” was thought to be the solution to all problems of the time (League of Nations, UN, international organisations, Magna Carta, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, internationalism etc.). Consequently, paradigms which reflected and contained the concerns of all these initial movements were developed and had their evolution over the years: organic unity, conciliar unity, unity of reconciled diversities, unity of humankind, unity of the whole of creation, macro-ecumenism (including the relationship with the people of other faiths).

Theologically, while coining the new paradigms, there were proposals and attempts to depart from the Christocentric basis of earlier ecumenical movements criticized as an arrogant Western missionary approach of Christocentric universalism which had the dream of bringing the whole world to Christ in their generation. The earlier strong Christological basis came to be critiqued as being exclusivist, and new proposals were made for a more Trinitarian and pneumatological basis which gives space for a new paradigm that could better express the vision and goal of the ecumenical movement in our times, such as that of the household of life (Konrad Raiser and Leslie Newbegin).

There was also an evident attempt to depart from an ecclesial-centred ecumenism to a more world-centred approach. That shift became evident especially after the 4th WCC Assembly in 1968 in Upsala: many churches from the South became members, social and political issues entered the ecumenical agenda, and the famous Programme to Combat Racism was founded. So, the common action in serving the world became, in some circles, an alternative to the emphasis on the unity of the Church. Faith and Order and Life and Work, with their specific concerns, have equally contributed to the foundation of the WCC and its vision and goals. However, the two approaches came to be presented as somehow mutually exclusive in an either-or discourse.

Much closer to our times, critical remarks on the initial vision and goal of the ecumenical movement as Christian unity started to be expressed, and proposals for new paradigms are being made. According to the well-known Dutch theologians, Witvliet and Hoedemaker, the old dream of unity as the goal of the ecumenical movement died in 1988/1989. In their view,

the initial concept of unity as developed within the WCC was an imperialistic view inherited from the Roman Empire. Nowadays, it came to be perceived as a straight-jacket that controlled and limited diversities. Consequently, both argued in favour of affirming diversities rather than that type of imperial unity.

On the other hand, the new trends within the ecumenical movement and the proposal for a new paradigm were strongly criticised. Pertinent reactions came about by those who would continue to defend and argue for the old ecumenical paradigms with a clear Christological basis and clear statement on unity as the main vision and goal of the ecumenical movement (*The Strasbourg Statement* in 1993, *The Princeton Proposal* of 2003, Michael Kinninmont's *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (2003).

The contextual situation of our time and the need for new ecumenical paradigms

Today's world, marked by post-modern values and mega-trends and concerns, brings new challenges to the older ecumenical paradigms which were coined in a different historical and contextual situation. Some of those challenges could be summarized as follows: there is no one truth but many truths; there is no unity which makes ONE, but there is a cohabitation of different identities; the institutional expressions of any kind of ideas are challenged and rejected (all international institutions are faced with serious challenges, the family institution included, even the idea of universal human rights are deeply challenged and questioned as "western" values imposed on the whole world and the term human dignity preferred instead); international or global replaced with bilateral; Councils of Churches replaced with the "churches together" concept; platforms and forums preferred to councils and other official institutionalized structures.

Therefore, the older paradigms of Christian unity in relation to the major political and social trends of the time, as promoted by the WCC since its beginning, are considered by the younger generation today as arrogant, imperialistic, centralised unity which expects the dilution of identities and differences. Therefore, the need to look afresh and reflect upon our faith and theology to find adequate and meaningful answers and paradigms for the people of our time constitutes a vital priority.

The concept of unity is referred to in the Biblical texts and in the very experience of the early Christian communities. But at least in the first four centuries, it was not seen as ONENESS in all but as *KOINONIA* of diversities in harmony, a reflection of the very existence of the Trinity. There were many confessions of faith or creeds (Apostles, St. Athanasius, St. Kirill of Jerusalem etc.), and each was very Orthodox in its content though not one and identical; there were many liturgies, and each local church had its own liturgy. There were different dates for the celebration of Christian feasts as well as different practices of living out the faith, and those were not seen as reasons for divisions and schisms (the debate between Polycarp of Smyrna and Pope Anicetas on the celebration of Easter; the case of Augustine's mother on differences on fasting in Milan and Rome and the explanation of St Ambrosius etc.). There were many theological expressions of the faith both in the New Testaments and in the Fathers, and they have all co-existed in that *koinonia* which the understanding of unity had represented.

Yet, we are still dreaming of having One date for Easter, of One Liturgy (like the Lima Liturgy), of agreed and signed documents on different theological issues where we all use the same language and concepts, etc.

The Biblical narrative on the descent of the Holy Spirit shows that God's approach is different. The Holy Spirit came personally on each of the Apostles not as ONE cover but as diverse tongues of fire, giving each of them a diverse gift of language. The descent of the Holy Spirit did not make the Apostles ONE in a kind of one "spiritual *Kolkhoz*" but a *koinonia* of diverse gifts. That diversity of gifts and their *koinonia* in unity is expressed clearly in the ancient Christian prayer of invoking the Holy Spirit that is used until today in the Orthodox Church: "who are everywhere present and fills ALL THINGS."

Conclusion and the way forward. The role of ecumenical formation in response to contemporary challenges

In light of the many challenges we face today, searching for a new articulation of appropriate paradigms for the ecumenical movement and understanding of unity becomes imperative. From my point of view, the common sources of our faith from the experience of the Early Church could bring new possibilities for new paradigms of advancing towards the search for the unity that Christ prayed for and was given to us as a mandatory commandment.

The call to unity is not an option; it is imperative and a vocation. It is the very desire of Christ and the heart of the Gospel's message. We either like it or not. It is not a historical imperialistic view; it is not an arrogant desire to unite the world by force, but a spiritual search of bringing together in harmony and *koinonia* God's creation and His people.

The Church and the world cannot be viewed in antagonistic terms or terms of priority. The Church is God's creation, as the world is God's creation too. The Church has no finality in itself. It is not or should not be seen as a human institution. Rather, it is that community filled with and empowered by God's Spirit towards the service and the transformation of the world. Diakonia to the world is an expression of one faith and spirituality. It is not an extra and optional good action. In the Church, the vertical should meet with the horizontal realities. Keeping the cross together gives balance and stability to the ecumenical movement.

The WCC assemblies in Busan and, more recently, in Karlsruhe offered a renewed statement on unity that attempted to bring together all these dynamics and approaches and proposed a new ecumenical paradigm for the future that has been widely embraced in all churches, a "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace." Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and other church leaders extensively use the term and notion of common journey as a new way of describing the ecumenical endeavours of our times.

In Karlsruhe, I proposed to continue the notion of pilgrimage as an ecumenical paradigm for our times, arguing that the image of pilgrimage speaks to our identity. We are a movement and not a static institution. We are people on the way. This very concept has a strong biblical and patristic basis. The first Christians were called "people of the way" (Acts 9:2). We see in the early Christian sources that Christians were called those who walk together (*syn-odoi*), while for St John Chrysostom, the church itself was called a *syn-odos*. The assembly approved having a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity as an overarching concept and paradigm to guide the WCC programmatic work until the next assembly.

Unity in doctrines and commonly agreed theological statements leading to unity in faith and full communion among Christians remains a great desire and goal. However, that is not a precondition of walking together on the pilgrimage of just peace, reconciliation, and unity of

all. Despite differences, by walking and serving together, unity and *koinonia* may be strengthened on the way.

Nicholas Berdyaev has said: "If I have no bread, it is an economic crisis; but if my neighbour has no bread, it is a spiritual crisis." For this reason, the concern for the dialogue with people of other faiths and for affirming religions as instruments of peace, eco-theology, sustainable development, overcoming poverty etc., should also be *sine qua non* issues and concerns in the search for a new ecumenical paradigm that look for the unity God intends for the world.

But to achieve all these *desiderata*, there is a need for education, information, and most of all, for formation. Ecumenical formation of the future generation of church leaders and of the people in the pews is the only key to assuring the stability and strengthening of our faith and communities. As always, but particularly in our times, our ecumenical formation should be a solid pillar in our churches, with strong biblical and theological bases and, while remaining holistic, be imbued with meaningful ecumenical spirituality.

Fr Ioan Sauca