

«Vi precede in Galilea,
là lo vedrete» (Mt 28,7)

DELEGATE e DELEGATI in DIALOGO



Convegno nazionale delle delegate
e dei delegati per l'Ecumenismo
e il Dialogo Interreligioso delle diocesi italiane
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The present and future of ecumenism: the view after the 11th WCC Assembly

The recent assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Karlsruhe, Germany, was held under the banner: *Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.*

We gathered at what Archbishop Justin Welby described as a time of 'world crisis'. There has been a drought in East Africa for four years. Climate change has long been making an impact on the poorest people of the world, but now the whole world is waking up to the challenge. There is war in many places, and now in Europe, in Ukraine – a war in which Christians are again fighting Christians. Many people are now becoming migrants; whether because of war, climate or poverty. A global pandemic has shaken up many things in all our lives and made us re-appraise our sense of mutual dependence. Desmond Tutu once said that 'Apartheid was too strong for a divided church'. And we might say now that the challenges we face are too strong if we are divided. The world needs, and Christ prays for, a church that is finding the gift of unity.

There was a very strong sense, at the Assembly, of the needs and challenges of the whole world – and a strong desire to face them. You cannot worship and meet with people from the Pacific islands without discovering how fast the seas are rising. You cannot have discussions with those from African countries without understanding more plainly how skewed are the world's economics and how hard it is in some places even to survive. You cannot talk honestly to Europeans now without sensing how fragile is the peace once secured in the post-war period and also how threatened some people now feel by the coming of migrants. You cannot encounter indigenous people from all over the world or people from black churches in the US without facing clearly the impact of colonialism and racism. But neither can you have these experiences with people from all over the world; from Orthodox churches, Lutheran churches, from Pentecostals and Anglicans, and from Roman Catholic churches too without recognising once more how wonderful is the church of Jesus Christ in all its rich diversity and with its strong calling to unity, to communion.

A gathering of such diversity and expressing the willingness to be together bears witness to the possibility and gift of reconciliation and unity. To sing one another's music, to hear and interpret the Bible together, to queue for lunch together and to pray with one another, to build friendships and understanding, is to discover again the fellowship that is the beautiful body of Christ. And it is to discover that we need one another, each other's gifts and knowledge and wisdom – and that we can love one another even across the most challenging differences. The WCC at its best can provide a safe place, a bridge for building reconciliation. Where else in the world could you have found Christians from Ukraine *and* from Russia (imagine what grace it took to be in the same space together), Christians from Oriental Orthodox churches and from radical Western Protestant communities, older people who can remember 1948 when the WCC was founded and young stewards discovering the world church for the first time, all together for 9 days?

But how is unity to be found and expressed? How can this be more than an assembly of 4,000 people that meets little more than once a decade. And I wonder how unity is to be found where you are, among your communities and your people?

In a time when there are some new kinds of division between Christians it was good to hear, at the Assembly, of the many ways in which we are finding a deeper communion. I was so moved to hear your own Bishop Farrell, for example, say that although the Roman Catholic church is not a full member of the World Council of Churches, the relationship has now moved to be something that should be called a 'partnership'. And the Acting General Secretary of the WCC, Fr Ioan Sauca, told us that the Roman Catholic church is more actively engaged in work within and with the WCC than many of the official member churches! And I am always delighted, as Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, that there are Roman Catholics who are full members of our commission and who contribute significantly to our theological work. *We belong together.*

At the assembly it was good to experience and to feel the commitment, passion and dedication to ecumenism that is present for so many. Though it is differently expressed and lived out, there was no sense at the assembly that ecumenism is, or should be, waning.

There were some there for whom ecumenism is first of all what we might call an 'ecumenism of the hands', an ecumenism that is made evident and real in shared service to a world that is full of need, an ecumenism that is diaconal first of all, that says that whatever our differences are we can serve God together in a needy world. We heard, for example, about the ways in which Christians here in Italy are working together to be alongside those rescued from shipwrecks off your shores or those who have arrived at Lampedusa, with nothing in their own hands. We heard about the ways in which Christians are acting together through organisa-

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tions like Christian Aid and Brot fur die Welt, to bring humanitarian aid – whether to those in Ukraine or those in East Africa. An ecumenism of the hands. Perhaps you have experience of this kind of ecumenism.

There are others for whom ecumenism must first of all be an ‘ecumenism of the spirit’. In what was for me a highlight of the assembly, we heard a very simple address from the Prior of Taize, Brother Alois, who suggested that ecumenism begins in shared common prayer; in listening to the word of God in scripture, in spending time in silence together and in prayers for the world. There are many voices who join with him in saying that they find unity best in the place of spirituality and prayer, in the space ‘in between’ doctrine and practice. We are learning to pray together, and from such communion comes the longing to find a way to a deeper unity.

There are those who are also glad to labour in an ecumenism of thoughtfulness, an ecumenism that wrestles with the *faith* we share and our understanding of what it means to be the church. In the part of the WCC in which I work most, the Faith and Order Commission, we published a document in 2013 called *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. The churches’ responses to that text reveal that we now agree more than we disagree on many aspects of the apostolic faith, on much about our understanding of the sacraments and the imperative to serve God’s people in the world. There is a profound commitment to the goal of visible unity, and a renewed focus on the significance of the whole people of God (not only the ordained), on all the baptised. There is a real, increasing convergence about the need to hold together the local and the universal in thinking about the Church, along with an evangelical passion for proclaiming the gospel together and sharing in the mission of God to the world. Your own Bishop Farrell and Archbishop Job from the Ecumenical Patriarchate both affirmed before the whole Assembly that this Faith and Order work on the church is hugely significant, because it has revealed how much we now hold in common as we express our faith together. An ‘ecumenism of the mind’ is still vital in our search for unity.

There are those who also call for what we might call an ‘ecumenism of the feet’. Since the Assembly before this one, the WCC has been on what we have called a pilgrimage of justice and peace – seeing that what’s important is that we walk together on life’s journey. We are used to meeting around conference tables in dialogues and debates. We meet in our churches to pray together. We work together as we serve the needs of the world. But we need to take time simply to walk with one another, and to be alongside one another, in the midst of life. Guido will say more about this, but I have been part of the pilgrimage and it’s been an important development within ecumenism; finding a way to meet deeply with one another, to celebrate the joys and gifts of our lives, to share the wounds from which we suffer and to rejoice at the ways that injustice is being transformed. It’s a way of ecumenism that takes ecumenism out of the conference room, the church and the social centre and lets us simply walk side by side, attending first to our relation-

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ships. It's also a way of ecumenism that can celebrate the communion we can find already, rather than simply long for the unity we do not yet see fully. It's a way of ecumenism that is dynamic and moving and on the way.

It was plain at the assembly that we are deepening communion in all of these ways. They are not alternatives to each other, and we don't have to choose one. Some people are naturally more gifted at one than the other. You may be more drawn to a particular one yourself. But we need them all. In common service to the world, in common worship, in the search for ways to express our common faith, and in sharing common life, we are responding to the prayer of Christ that we may be completely one.

But the assembly included a plea for something more; an 'ecumenism of the heart'. This is perhaps the gift that can hold all these other different ways together. In his first letter to the Corinthians St Paul wrote of the different parts of the body that need each other and are all to be honoured, even the weakest parts. But then he says that he will show us the best way of all, the way of love. In 1 Corinthians 13 he writes so beautifully about the mystery of love. And the assembly, in its statement about unity (all assemblies have such a statement), urged us towards an ecumenism that is inspired by the love of Christ. St Paul reassured the Christians in Rome that nothing could ever separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The early Christians were known for their great love, and their love may inspire us to love too, to live as those who know that we are loved by God and who have love for each other. It is in response to the love we have seen in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, that we are moved to search together for justice, reconciliation and unity.

There are certainly profound challenges to our unity in these times. There remain questions about the limits of diversity, a need for some common criteria for discernment together particularly about moral questions, as well as a perception amongst some that evangelism is now more pressing in a time of radical church decline in Europe than any search for unity. But can we open our hearts so that Christ's love may breathe new life into the search for full visible communion? The *quality of the relationships between us* is what could inspire our common work towards that full visible communion for which Christ prayed. Unity in apostolic faith, in sacramental life, in ministry, and in the work of sharing in common action together, all need our heads, hands, and feet, the whole of us, to be fully engaged (1 Cor. 12). But all these are stirred by the love of Christ (1 Cor.13), who moves our hearts through the Holy Spirit. This love is not abstract or sentimental, but is embodied, known in the visible and the practical, in the passionate and the truly challenging, able to address the deepest evil and injustice. Love which in private is tenderness in public is justice.

Another highlight of the Assembly was a message given by Azza Karam, a Mus-

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lim woman who is the General Secretary of Religions for Peace. She had the Assembly's complete attention when she challenged us, 'Christ's love – was it meant only for people of the Christian faith?'. She told us that she believes, as a Muslim, that Christ's love is meant for her too and that we should consider how much of Christ's love can be spread when we share it with *everyone*. She urged us not to let ourselves, as churches, be used by any political establishment, but to be the conscience of our nations and to work with people of all faiths for the common good. In a time of religious pluralism, this was a deeply encouraging message. She was saying, as a Muslim herself, that when we as Christians work to show and spread the love of Christ, we do it best by working with people of all faiths. Her speech got a standing ovation – because it was affirming of the churches and of the love of Christ which is God's love for all people.

The Assembly also produced a message to all the churches: **“Come, follow me!”** The message re-affirms that we are on a pilgrimage together, but one that needs all those possible ways in which we find the gifts in one another that deepen communion.

Here is one key passage:

Meeting together in Germany, we learn the cost of war and the possibility of reconciliation; Hearing the word of God together, we recognize our common calling;
Listening and talking together, we become closer neighbours;
Lamenting together, we open ourselves to each other's pain and suffering;
Working together, we consent to common action;
Celebrating together, we delight in each other's joys and hopes;
Praying together, we discover the richness of our traditions and the pain of our divisions.

And a final encouragement was expressed like this:

In our assembly, we have used many words, but from these we have fashioned a new resolve. ... As we reflect on the fruits of our work in Karlsruhe, we invite all to become pilgrims together. For in Christ, all things will be made new. His love which is open to all, including the last, the least, and the lost, and is offered to all, can move and empower us in a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity.

I hope that this gives you some sense of the excitement and gift of the Assembly, but also a sense of the challenges that face us all, and of how we might, by God's grace, face them always together.

