

World Council of Churches  
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Plenary Commission on Faith and Order  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
28 July – 6 August 2004*

**THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH: ECCLESIOLOGY PROJECT  
REFLECTIONS, COMMENTS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE**

Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima

The following comments and reflections on the current Faith and Order ecclesiology project, "The Nature and Purpose of the Church", do not enter into a discussion of the specific details of the text of the study itself, but rather refer to the project as a whole and in particular to its future perspectives within the ecumenical endeavour.

This study on Ecclesiology, presented here still in draft form and yet in a "penultimate" stage, justifies precisely the efforts made by the Faith and Order Commission, after a long period of consultations and meetings of the drafting group, in order to revise the existing text. This revision process primarily aimed to find ways of clarification of various historical, theological and ecclesiological issues existing between the various Church traditions and Church teachings. The study also aims at bringing the churches closer together, moving toward the ultimate goal of an understanding of an ecclesiological "communion", of conciliar fellowship and the understanding of the purpose and the nature of the Church. In this perspective consultations were held during the past years in order to clarify the still existing difficult issues which are still considered to be church-dividing. These consultations on the Sacramental Character of the Church, on Authority and Authoritative Teaching as well as on the Ministry and Ordination in the Community of Women and Men in the Church brought positive insights for the revision process. However, through these consultations and in spite of a certain degree of improvement of the text, there still remain church-dividing issues which need to be examined further.

Rather than responding to the text theologically, I shall point to its importance and great significance as a document in relation to the existing theological multilateral and bilateral dialogues, and to present its ecclesiological implications for the ongoing process between churches and various denominations toward a reconciled unity in a reconciled diversity.

The text emerges from a host of different dogmatic teachings from various church traditions and confessional denominations. Following the customary definition, which the ecclesiology study is using directly or indirectly, the purpose of the study is to promote mutual understanding, achieve a convergent ecclesiological "communion" in the purpose and nature of the Church, in true faith and love, and to reconcile the hostilities and divisions of the past.

Today various bilateral dialogues or theological conversations in the ecumenical forum have increasingly borne considerable fruits. An atmosphere of mutual appreciation, friendship and fellowship has also already become a reality during the past decades. But has this development also led to a deeper mutual theological and ecclesiological understanding or resulted in any better achievements? Have the profound differences between the various churches and confessional families been clarified theologically in the ecumenical conversations and dialogues? Does this text respond to this question of visible result? This is a legitimate question. At least at first sight, there is a discrepancy between the degree of theological agreement and the actual fellowship that the different traditions have found in the ecumenical movement.

The retrospective of an ecumenical century presented in the present text has been rather positive. This is not only because of the involvement of eminent theologians from various Church traditions in the drafting and revision process, but because of the courage of the different partners to deal with such a difficult theological issue and finally to reach a convergence stage.

There seems to be widespread recognition of the particular ecumenical impact and significance of the past century. Thus, it is in gratitude to God's gracious guidance through the Holy Spirit that this short and incomplete retrospective should conclude with this ecclesiological study. Yet, such a conclusion can also only be provisional in the sense that the ecumenical calling of world Christianity continues in the new century, the third millennium. The churches cannot be satisfied with praising an ecumenical century and continuing to live in peaceful coexistence.

It is God's and the world's challenge and call to the churches to move on in order to become a reconciled communion in a not yet reconciled world. The credibility of Christianity as a reconciling force within a world threatened by religious, ethnic, and social antagonisms is at stake. The ability of Christianity to develop and present common moral values and orientations to millions of people in search for such is a pressing and urgent task. So, too, is the churches' effective contribution to public discourse on the future of humanity and to the development of common Christian social-ethical concepts for a more just and peaceful world. A clear, common Christian witness to the basic convictions of the Christian faith remains an ever-more urgent task in response to growing religious pluralism and materialistic secularism. The decisive importance of inter-religious dialogue and understanding should be recognised also by all Christian traditions as a common contribution to the understanding and stability within the larger human community. In order to face these and other tasks together and effectively, the efforts toward church unity must continue. Theological dialogue, both multilateral and bilateral, remains the essential presupposition of such efforts.

The Christian world is still in "schism". There is little ontological unity, and little agreement, among those who "believe in Jesus' name", who confess Christ Jesus as God and Savior, who put their trust in him and proclaim, by word and deed, their ultimate allegiance to Him as their Lord. There are, in fact, numerous Christian bodies which claim the name of the Church for themselves - and they are out of communion with one another, sometimes in open and bitter antagonism. Today, the unity of faith has fallen apart in many cases. Even the unity of love has cooled. The body of Christ has been utterly disrupted. Only the hope of unity has not been fully lost, and perhaps this is the only token of unity still left in a divided Christendom.

The Orthodox participating in the ecumenical movement are now challenged by an appeal and invitation to find ways by which there could be "an ecclesiological space for the others and how they could recognise the others, and how this could be possible". The same question addresses itself to the other churches who speak of themselves as "part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" and how they relate to the Universal Church. Christians have to begin to know the "truth", the "aletheia" of the Good News, to believe and to love the Ecclesia, the Church of Christ, to embrace it even in difficult circumstances and painful moments of its history, to suffer, witness and confess it, to defend it even if martyrdom be the cost. The analogical communion is the real participation in the Kingdom of God, not yet fulfilled, but already present among us.

At its 1978 Bangalore meeting, the Faith and Order Commission affirmed: "Many say that true unity requires the gathering of all in each place into one eucharistic community; there would be no room for a continuing life of the confessional traditions. Others say that unity according to Christ's will does not necessarily require the disappearance, but rather the transformation of confessional identities to such a degree that unity in full sacramental fellowship, common witness and service, together with some common structural institutional expression becomes possible. While the first view is rather connected with the concept of "organic unity", those proposing the concept "unity in reconciled diversity" hold the second. The two concepts are not seen as alternatives. They may be two different ways of reaching to

the ecumenical necessities and possibilities of different situations and of different church traditions". Today, in the ecumenical field the choice is not between style and ecclesiological ethos or institution and task, but rather between different aspects of the one task, which is to be in one communion of faith and conciliar fellowship. In the many critical situations we have faced in the ecumenical movement, the question has constantly been: to what extent must we give priority to the task of maintaining the fellowship between the Churches and to keep alive the main issue of priority which is the unity of the Church; and to what extent is the other responsibility bearing a clear witness against the injustice of the world?

For its life in unity, the Church requires a process of reception. Subsequently, in the past, "conciliarity" found expression in various forms: local synods, in regular regional synods of bishops, in assemblies and councils, of the Christian Roman Empire, etc. Perhaps among these various forms a basic distinction needs to be drawn between regular gatherings required for governing the Church and gatherings, called for special reasons.

The practice of conciliar life continued in the separate traditions until today. Each Church developed its own mode of representative gathering. The Eastern Churches, due to their peculiar historical tradition, experience the conciliarity of the synodical system in an institutional form and action. They rely on the unaltered and also uninterpreted teaching of the Ancient Councils. The Western Churches created new forms of conciliar assemblies: the papal councils which developed out of the Roman Episcopal synod under the influence of the increasing dominance of the idea of primacy; the reform and union councils of the late Middle Ages; the synods as ecclesial representative on the basis of the Reformation understanding of Scripture and Community. In the twentieth century almost all Churches have experienced a revival of conciliar life. Under the pressure of the many new and unexpected challenges of a changed world, they have felt acutely the need of consultation and guidance.

The question then arises quite naturally: Can the different practices of conciliar life not converge and become one? Some voices in the ecumenical movement raised, years ago, the question: Can the ecumenical movement not be understood as the anticipation of a future common practice of conciliar life, as the place where each church purifies its own approach and prepares itself for that future conciliar event which, one day, may bring together the representatives of all churches and which will proclaim the Gospel in new appropriate ways?

The Nairobi Statement underlines that all local churches need to form one fellowship across local, national, ethnic and linguistic boundaries. They share in the same faith and need to recognize each other as churches belonging to Christ. The term "conciliar fellowship" presupposes not a static but a dynamic understanding of unity. The Church is a living human-divine institution or "organism" which requires from all its members constant attention, care and participation in order to remain faithful in faith and in eucharistic communion.

Concluding these thoughts and reflections on the Ecclesiology study, a question still remains. Is there still an "ecclesiological ethos" and a style within the life of World Council of Churches, or are we still in search of such a form of existing together? After a century of the ecumenical movement's existence, and fifty-six years after the formation of the World Council of Churches, it could be said that the ethos which emerged from the churches' participation in the fellowship of togetherness needs to be clarified by the churches themselves in the perspective of the new developments in the WCC, and in view of the proposals in the Special Commission's report. This presupposes that the Churches have to re-appropriate their tasks and goals towards the koinonia/communion in an Eucharistic fellowship of the same Body and Blood of Christ, where at the same time they still remain divided. It is our hope and we are optimistic that by God's grace we will continue together, and this ecclesiology project will become a major ecumenical instrument for the fulfilment of the Lord's prayer.

The study project on Ecclesiology has to continue, even if there is a possible publication of the new text for the Assembly, but Faith and Order has to take up this study again after the Porto Alegre Assembly in order to deepen the reflections on ecclesiological issues which are now beginning to emerge in ecumenical endeavours – like the Church: local and universal, one and diverse in relation to our ecumenical pilgrimage and baptism.

The questions that need to be raised for all of us as member of this Plenary Commission are:

What do we expect from a such study on Ecclesiology? What are these expectations in relation to the other studies? What will happen to this study after the Porto Alegre Assembly? Do we envisage a text similar to BEM? Do we need another ecumenical text on ecclesiology? And, if so, what for?