

Global Seminar Sustainable Development and the Future of Work in the Context of the Jubilee of Mercy

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary

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Your excellencies, dear colleagues and friends, dear sisters and brothers, church leaders, representatives and leaders of different faith communities, dear leaders and representatives of movements, trade unions, employers organisations, comrades!

How can religion promote “mercy as process” in “the service of womankind and mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need”? Our discussion here can contribute through many perspectives, but it should also lead to critical and constructive questions back to religion itself. An analysis of the realities of today helps us to formulate a somewhat provocative question: What is the most important criterion for the relevance of religion today? I would offer one answer that takes religion as well as the realities of today seriously into account. I formulate it as a question:

Is religion able to bring *hope* to people of today?

Hope requires both an analysis of realities and defining of what is wrong and what needs to be changed, and a vision of what goes

beyond what we see, and actions according to this vision. In other words: Hope includes both critique and change.

This leads us back to the Second Vatican Council and the final speech of Pope Paul VI.¹ He evoked the spirit of the great Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which stated in its first sentences: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. “

To be able to share hope, religion has to address the reality of people, as it is. Even more, religious leaders, communities, and not least statements or initiatives, need to be based on a sharing of the realities in which people live. This is also a red thread in the way Pope Francis has announced the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

Representing the World Council of Churches, and therefore most of the other Christian families—Orthodox, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and my own Lutheran church family—I would like to pursue the question of mercy and decent work from two perspectives drawn from the Reformation, whose anniversary we will soon observe. The remarkable development of dialogue and common service which we have seen in the ecumenical movement during the last decades brings us in this year to one of the very significant expressions of the year of mercy and of growing ecumenical spirit. Lutheran churches together with Pope Francis will have a solemn act of commemoration of the Reformation on 31 October this year in Lund, Sweden. The time has come to show what we share in our

¹ Pope Francis quotes Paul VI in point 4 (second page) of *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy - https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html

Christian faith, and what we can and should do together in the service to the world.

The first of the 95 theses Luther nailed to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517 was: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” He continued by arguing that the hope of a human being is based on the true grace and mercy of God alone, and, which is often forgotten, he argues that repentance and even penitence can only happen if it is a serious and lifelong attitude and *process*. The reality of sin cannot be dealt with by simple exchange; mercy is not for sale. Sin cannot be ignored, compensated for by our money, by religious activity, not even by church authority per se, nor by any other exercise or abuse of power, but only by real repentance, by real change that includes the whole person and the whole of one’s life in all its dimensions.

Conversely, in the context of this conference, I will develop this insight by recognizing that, likewise, there is no way to deal with the realities of economics and politics and the global realities of today without dealing with the reality of sin. We cannot get away from the injustice, the inequalities, the poverty, the conflicts and wars by ignoring them or delegating them to religious or political institutions or power games. From the perspective of mercy, these challenges and problems have to be dealt in the same double manner. That is: Only God can forgive us our sins, only God can give us the hope that overcomes sin and death, only God can really make us able to leave the reality of sin and guilt behind us. We cannot make ourselves righteous.

However: Only through real and continuous repentance, through openness to change, and through participation in the transformation needed, can hope evolve. In our personal lives and in the structures of injustice in which we live, the inequality, oppression, and exclusion in which we live can become part of the hope that the world and this planet need.

Furthermore, in the light of the theme of this conference, let me add that the hope that religion should offer is both for the poor and the needy *and* for the privileged and the powerful to be liberated from their prisons of representing the injustice and oppressions of this world.

The theological point I am making here can be summarized in asking simple questions - critical questions as well – to ourselves as persons of religious commitment and to our religious communities: Are we really contributing to the hope of people and life on this planet? Are we offering the mercy we need ourselves?

The other perspective from Martin Luther that is very significant to me as we discuss work, is the belief in God as creator. It is important to see work not only as means for sustaining life and ensuring survival but also as a form of human participation in God's movement of love and mercy, which sustains and renews all God's creation. We are called to be co-workers with God from the very beginning of our creation and to see our work as a calling from God, in every honest work. There is a God-given dignity to human beings, and also to our work, whether it is paid or not. In this perspective, work should be honoured and paid for and organized according to the dignity we should recognize in one another as human beings and according to the dignity of work itself. So we affirm work as an essential dimension of

human dignity and the care for life – our lives, the lives of others, the lives of all living beings and of planet Earth as our common home. Thus our Christian faith compels us to underline that labour is an expression and an affirmation of our common humanity, which unites us with all people on Earth, irrespective of religion, culture, or other identity markers that might separate us from each other in one human family.

As the general secretary of the WCC, I am motivated by remembering this truth again and again to go on our pilgrimage for justice and peace for humanity and creation. After the WCC's last assembly, in 2013 in Korea, we have called this journey of faith a *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. Under this aegis, we look at justice and peace as signs of God's reign to come in the midst of our lives here and now. And we reach out with our hands to others who want to join us on this way, following their own convictions, visions, and hopes.

A concrete example of this approach is our joint project with the International Labour Organization on *Advancing Peace through Social Justice*, which we have undertaken together with Christian and Muslim partners in Egypt. I am glad to see representatives from Egypt here among us who have shared with you already more information on the project, which is addressing the massive youth unemployment in the country. This is one example among others that religion should express itself in something practical and concrete that can offer hope today. It comes as an expression of our faith. Pilgrimage is not for settling in my own well-being and in my comfort zones; it is for embarking on the faith journey into those areas where God is struggling together with people of today for justice and peace. Even pilgrimages to holy places should help us to see how God has at work

in us, encouraging us to change, leading us toward transformation of ourselves and of the world.

Not only in this project but in many other areas of our work, we have learned that work itself and life conditions of workers can only be sustained with the community's support and a deep sense of caring, solidarity, and shared life. Where that is not the case, labour is reduced to a mere means of survival, which then can be seen just as a kind of commodity to be sold and bought on the labour market. Therefore, I am very grateful for and supportive of the voice of the ILO and its commitment to the right to work. Even more: the decent work agenda articulates and calls for the basic conditions that are necessary to affirm the dignity of human beings in the world of labour and to move from labour as slavery and mere toil to work that is creative and dignified and marked by responsibility for each other and our common home. This is indeed a service to humankind to which the church must lend its support. This is a partnership the churches need to understand to fulfil its role of offering hope.

A genuine and concrete example of this ecclesial work can be seen in a text that I read recently during a visit to the United Methodist building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. The 1908 Social Creed of the then-Methodist Episcopal Church stands, as it says:

- For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life,
- For the protection of workers from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries and mortality,
- For such regulations of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community,
- For a living wage in every industry.

These concrete needs are, unfortunately, not outdated, neither in the U.S.A. nor in other parts of the world. They represent a Christian and, I would say, a religiously based understanding that work and decent work are genuine issues of human life that require the attention and commitment of the churches.

I read the text as a way to take the call to repentance as embracing all dimensions of life and the whole of life. I also read the text as words from some who believe in the transformative potential of faith. I read it as a tremendous word of hope for workers of that time: someone cared for their lives and their rights and their dignity.

That approach needs to be continued; it is not a finished agenda. Repentance and transformation are a lifelong task. Religion and religious communities can really announce and serve the hope of human beings. To make that happen, I am sure religions and religious persons and churches will need to join with all of the rest of us.

We all need mercy.