

God Is Love – The Experience of the Just, Compassionate, and Merciful God

Ecumenical Considerations Inspired by Orthodox Spirituality on the Theme of the Karlsruhe Assembly of the World Council of Churches

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Abstract

In 2022, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is to gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, around the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” This article offers reflections on understanding the theme in a holistic way against the background of the work undertaken in the WCC on trinitarian and incarnational theology, and the reconciliation of all in Christ that is expressed in the WCC document “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC.” It goes on to offer reflections from an Orthodox perspective on the just, merciful, and compassionate God that we experience as love.

Keywords

love, God, Christ, Holy Trinity, World Council of Churches

In 2022, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is to gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, around the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”¹ Originally, the assembly was to take place in 2021, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WCC’s governing bodies took the decision to postpone the assembly for one year. As a recent reflection on the assembly theme published by

¹ This is an expanded version of an article that was published in *Una Sancta* 76:1 (2021), 7–18.

the WCC has described it, the assembly will gather following a time of waiting because of the global pandemic, a virus that has exposed and highlighted both the vulnerability of all humankind and the profound inequalities and divisions among us. The world has been awakened to the ugly realities of privilege and oppression, of economic, social, and ethnic injustices.²

The Signs of the Times

Together with the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic is a strong and brutal reminder that human beings belong to creation and have been given the mandate to care for it. The pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities and exposing still further existing structural injustice. Alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemics of ignorance, white supremacy, and hate are deadly, as is the pandemic of injustice. Racism and the politics of fear and hate are dividing and killing people. Other global trends that the assembly needs to address have also been recognized. These include the weakening of democracy through authoritarian politics of fear and hate; the ambiguous consequences of the digital revolution; the increasing militarization of conflict and warfare that is making millions of people refugees and increasing the danger that nuclear or biological and chemical weapons are used; and the growing recognition that we are living in a multireligious world in which Christians engage in dialogue and cooperate more and more with people of other faiths.

These trends are not all new, but taken together – and especially with COVID-19 adding to the situation – they appear to take on the form of an overpowering wall that imprisons the world. Deep and radical changes are needed to bring this wall down, starting with the hope that it is possible to overcome paralysis and breach the wall. The assembly needs to address this situation and speak to the world in clear and direct ways that all may understand. It cannot gloss over the deep, multifaceted civilizational crisis that faces the world. However, the assembly has the chance to explore how Christ's love opens a horizon of hope beyond the wall. Reconciliation and unity are God's final purpose for humankind and creation, and it is indeed God's purpose to move the whole world and the entire cosmos to reconciliation and unity.

Reconciliation and Unity in a Globalized World

During the past two to three decades, there has been fearful talk about globalization. The term “global village” alluded to the possibility of creating a new world that transcends

² See *Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Reflection on the Theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe 2022* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/christs-love-moves-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity-a-reflection-on-the-theme-of-the-11th-assembly-of-the-world-council-of-churches-karlsruhe-2022>.

and dissolves national borders between nations and peoples. Despite its positive connotations, the idea of a global village also gave the impression that cultural and religious peculiarities might soon disappear in a new anonymous identity or “melting pot.” There was also talk of a new global culture superseding specific individual cultures.

The phenomenon of globalization provoked strong reactions, leading to the development of identity politics in many societies, including among Christians. Historically, people in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, for example, have lived for centuries in multicultural and multireligious contexts. Their experience in the past taught them to share their bread with others and to open their homes to those in need. They always defended, preserved, and transmitted their faith to their children, even at the cost of their own lives, and they were not afraid of that which was foreign or different. They learned, in general, to live with others and respect each other. Recent events, however, also show among them signs of changing attitudes and perceptions. There is often a fear of the stranger. We hear proposals to erect protective walls against oppressed people fleeing war and death. We hear calls for stricter surveillance of the seas over which migrants arrive, and on social media we have seen concrete proposals to “capsize” boats carrying migrants if they refuse to turn back.

From a religious point of view, the original vision of unity has often been challenged. The ecumenical movement that arose at the beginning of the 20th century to bring separated Christians together – to engage in dialogue and to work together – hoped to move beyond denominational realities and to achieve the visible unity of the church in a short period of time. There can be no doubt that in the eyes of many in the churches, however, the importance of ecumenism has declined sharply and has given way to growing concern about confessional identity. There is often a burning fear that we will lose our Christian identity and values. And together with this fear is projected the image of a God of “justice” who “rewards” with punishment all those who do evil.

Questions about the Assembly Theme

The theme of the WCC’s assembly in Karlsruhe is inspired by Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, where the apostle speaks of the love of Christ “that urges us on” (2 Cor. 5:14) and suggests that through Christ, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation that we might be ambassadors of Christ’s love (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Against the background of the contemporary challenges facing the world and the churches, some have welcomed the theme as a timely reminder of the core of our Christian faith and of the mission of the fellowship of churches that belong to the WCC.

As the former WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser has pointed out, most of the WCC's assemblies for the first three and a half decades of its existence had a Christological focus,³ beginning with the Evanston assembly in 1954, which had as its theme "Christ – the hope of the world," and culminating in the Vancouver assembly of 1983, which gathered under the theme "Jesus Christ – the life of the world."⁴ At the Canberra assembly eight years later, however, the uncertainties provoked by the end of the Cold War, and the growing awareness of the environmental catastrophe that threatened the whole of the created world, led the WCC to formulate the theme as a prayer to the Holy Spirit: "Come Holy Spirit – renew the whole creation." The themes of the subsequent assemblies in Harare (1998), Porto Alegre (2006), and Busan (2013) had a "theocentric" focus: the Harare assembly issued a call to "turn to God" and to rejoice in hope, while the themes of the Porto Alegre and Busan assemblies were formulated as prayers to God to transform the world and to lead us to justice and peace.⁵

While some have welcomed what they see as a return to a Christ-centred theme as in the earlier days of the WCC after the theocentric focus of the recent assemblies, others have raised questions about the focus on "Christ's love." Does this not mean that by affirming the "Love of Christ" alone, the WCC loses its trinitarian perspective and becomes Christomonistic, narrow minded, and exclusive, thus failing to address the needs of the whole world? Would not a formulation like "Love of God" have better addressed our current situation and have been more inclusive? Others question speaking loudly of Christ's love in a predominantly secular environment, as in Western Europe, or in the multireligious realities of many societies, with the growing importance of interreligious cooperation for the care for life, justice, and peace. How would the theme of the Karlsruhe assembly challenge dangerous identity movements that are sometimes at the origins of communal violence and terrorism and stand for the opposite of the search for unity and reconciliation?

³ For an overview of WCC assembly themes, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies>. On the assembly themes until 1983, see Konrad Raiser, "Jesus Christ – the Life of the World: A Meditation on the Theme of the Sixth Assembly," *Ecumenical Review* 33:3 (1981), 232–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1981.tb03311.x>.

⁴ Konrad Raiser has noted: "Most of the earlier assemblies had themes with a clear Christological focus affirming the fundamental orientation of the 'basis' of the WCC and its confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures. The themes were understood as a proclamation and a missionary witness of the churches to the world." See Konrad Raiser, "The Busan Assembly in the History of WCC Assemblies," lecture at the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute, Busan, 2013, Globethics.net Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/201459>.

⁵ Ibid.

In what follows, I would like to address these concerns in my position both as WCC acting general secretary and as an Orthodox theologian. The question is how we interpret the theme in a holistic way so as not to be exclusivist or narrow. In an attempt to bring into a coherent discourse and structure the theme of the assembly in light of these challenges, I see my contribution to be setting the direction and unpacking the theme in a holistic perspective. This is based on the major work done in the WCC on trinitarian theology over the years (with major Orthodox input) and on incarnational theology and the recapitulation and reconciliation of all in Christ that is expressed in the WCC document “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC” (CUV), presented to the WCC’s 8th Assembly in Harare in 1998.⁶

The Love of Christ Is Holistic, Cosmic, and Inclusive

The very theme of the assembly is based on a Pauline text (2 Cor. 5:14). For Paul, however, speaking of Christ is neither “Christomonistic” nor exclusive, but rather cosmic and universal. When Paul speaks about the love of Christ, he speaks about the love of God manifested in Christ, through incarnation. In Christ, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Out of love for humanity and the whole of creation, through *kenosis* he became human. He assumed all suffering and weaknesses of human nature and of the whole of creation, becoming one of us and identifying with us in order to heal and restore and reconcile humanity and creation with God (Phil. 2). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of God’s plan “for the fullness of time, to gather up [ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι] all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). In Christ, God intended to bring about reconciliation and unity in the realm of the whole of creation: “He himself is before all things, and in [Christ] all things hold together . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:17-20). According to these texts, the purpose of God is reconciliation and unity – not only of one people or of a Christian group, but of the cosmos.

⁶ See T. K. Thomas, “WCC, Basis of,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 1238–39, at 1239, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/theological-and-historical-background-of-the-wcc-basis>. The article points out that the reformulation of the Basis at the WCC assembly in 1961 in New Delhi “underlines the ontological priority of what God in Christ has already accomplished,” and that the “final doxological formula sets the Christocentric affirmation in a Trinitarian setting.” The dynamic character of the reformulated Basis “creates a ‘basis beyond the Basis’” that was evidenced in the CUV document presented to the Harare assembly. On the background of the CUV document, see also Marlin VanElderen, “Common Understanding and Vision: A Survey of the Discussion in the WCC,” *Ecumenical Review* 49:1 (1997), 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1997.tb00262.x>.

St Irenaeus is known as the theologian of the late 2nd century who shaped and articulated the redemptive recapitulation in Christ, based on the biblical texts above. This theology has marked Christian thinking in both the East and the West for almost a millennium. Apart from St Irenaeus, the theology of recapitulation is also found in the writings of other early church fathers such as Hippolytus, Methodius, Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine. In the era of post-patristic thought until today, the East remained faithfully attached to this theology and further articulated it in its liturgical expressions and spirituality. In the West, with a few exceptions, starting with the era of scholastic theology, the emphasis shifted from the redemptive recapitulation of the work of Christ to his person, and the Christocentric emphasis became predominant. The same has been the case with Reformed theology.

Discussions and exchanges within the ecumenical movement helped the revival and re-discovery of this old and common Christian affirmation, which is further developing in our times. At the WCC's assembly in New Delhi in 1961, it was the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler who, in his masterful reflections on the Colossians text, said,

It is here declared that the sweep of God's restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six-times repeated *Ta panta*. Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man who is God with us and not God for us – and all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him.⁷

So in the love of God, in Christ, we see the call for unity and reconciliation of the whole of the cosmos. This is also the perspective that we find in the CUV document. This document speaks of “the conviction that the object of God's reconciling purpose is not only the church but the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation” and a vision that “encompasses the renewal of church and world in the light of the gospel of God's kingdom. In the face of all threats to life it affirms the Christian hope of life for all.”⁸

The love of Christ that is central to the Karlsruhe assembly theme is thus placed within a trinitarian context and develops further the vision of the CUV document. It opens new horizons and possibilities of approach: it will concentrate on what it means for churches and for Christian unity to confront together the many challenges of the world

⁷ Joseph A. Sittler, “Called to Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 14:2 (1962), 177, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1962.tb01999.x>.

⁸ “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches: A Policy Statement,” paras 2.4; 2.8.2; see “The CUV Document,” in *Assembly Workbook: Harare 1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 97–116, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/common-understanding-and-vision-of-the-wcc-cuv>.

we live in and to witness to our common gospel values. But it will not stop there, as the purpose of God's love in Christ is for the whole world.

This naturally requires openness and care for the whole world, for dialogue and cooperation with the people of other faiths or of no faith who share the same values. Looked at from this wider perspective, the assembly theme offers a theologically balanced and inclusive perspective that avoids possible pitfalls of Christian triumphalism and a narrow Christomonistic interpretation.

Christ's Love and Our Response

A second issue is that there is still misunderstanding about the content and the object of the "love of Christ" about which the theme speaks. Is it about Christ's love for us and the world, or about our love for Christ?

Speaking of the love of Christ also means "our" love for Christ and our working in and with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, manifesting our "compassion," taking on and identifying ourselves with the suffering of the world. In this way, the assembly is expected to deal with the ways Christians today respond concretely to the many challenges of our times through a "transforming discipleship." As an "eschatological community," experiencing the values of the kingdom to come as a foretaste, the church is expected to be a vector of unity and reconciliation for humanity and creation, thus remaining obedient to the goal that God's love has in its manifestation in Christ (healing, unity, reconciliation). To have the expected impact and to be credible to the world, Christians must continue their search for deeper unity and reconciliation among themselves and continue their pilgrimage of justice and peace, strengthening their fellowship and also cooperating with all people of good will for the healing of creation.

God's love, mercy, and justice opening the way to reconciliation and unity

In responding to concrete situations and sufferings, the assembly is introducing the love of God in Christ in its planning through the concept of the "compassionate" love of Christ. Narrative texts from the gospel that speak about Christ's compassion have been chosen for the worship and Bible studies.⁹ Even in these cases, some voices questioned using what seemed a sentimental and emotional "cheap" love to deal with problems, rather than engaging in concrete actions and holding love and justice together. However, compassion in a Christological sense is not "pity" but "suffering with," assuming full identification with.

⁹ This section draws upon my chapter "L'expérience de la justice et la miséricorde dans la spiritualité orthodoxe," in *La miséricorde de Dieu sera-t-elle victorieuse?* ed. Philippe Barbarin (Sion: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2016), 73–87.

Overcoming such fears and reactions is not an easy task. It cannot be accomplished with a language of cheap love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of cheap grace and inspired the language of costly rather than cheap reconciliation that developed in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa.¹⁰ As the South African Kairos Document put it, “Any form of peace or reconciliation that allows the sin of injustice and oppression to continue is a *false* peace and *counterfeit* reconciliation.”¹¹ Moving with Christ’s love to reconciliation and unity requires the liberating and transformative mercy and justice God can give. The human response, however, requires *metanoia*, the real transformation of unjust relationships and reconciliation that in many cases is not possible without reparations and restitution in favour of those who have suffered. This applies to churches as well as to people in their search for Christian unity and the unity of the human family.

The relationship between God’s love, mercy or grace, and justice is not a new theme in theology and its relationship with philosophy. In the literature and art of the Middle Ages, the tension between God’s love and justice is quite apparent. It was the great longing for a loving and merciful God who accepts and justifies the sinner that drove Luther to take the steps that brought about the beginning of the Reformation. The problem of justification is a central and recurring theme in Luther’s writings. For centuries, the problem of justification has remained a focal point of division in the Western tradition of the church. It was not until 1999, after a painstaking and thorough study, that the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation reached consensus and healed the wounds of the past by signing a joint document on justification.¹² Since then, other churches of the Reformation have adopted, embraced, and signed this document.¹³

The Orthodox Church did not experience the Reformation and therefore was not directly confronted with the delicate problem of the relationship between God as love/mercy and God as justice. But it must be said that it is thanks to its spirituality, and not to the dogmatic theology of its textbooks, that the Orthodox Church avoided

¹⁰ See, for example, P. G. J. (Piet) Meiling, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa: Through the Lens of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38:3 (2017), suppl. 1, 1–34.

¹¹ “The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church. Revised Second Edition,” in *The Kairos Documents*, compiled and ed. Gary S. D. Leonard (Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010), 55.

¹² “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Church,” 31 October 1999, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-joint-declaration-doctrine-justification-20th-anniversary-edition>.

¹³ These include the Anglican, Methodist, and Reformed traditions.

this dilemma. The logic and discourse of the Greek philosophers greatly shaped the structure and perspective of scholastic theology in the Middle Ages, which influenced and shaped the Orthodox discourse in the Orthodox theology of the textbooks. Thus, the Orthodox Church had difficulty calling God “love.” This axiom remained, rather, a statement without logic and content. From the point of view of ancient philosophers, the apophatic God of Orthodox spirituality was conceived and presented in the textbooks of dogmatic theology rather than according to the criteria of experienced *koinonia* with God in prayer. God was the “existence par excellence” (self-existent), and God’s existence was not conditioned by anything. Consequently, God was impassive. God could not suffer. Any attempt to give God a merciful face of suffering was even considered heresy, such as the heresies of patripassianism (the idea that it is the father who is suffering in Jesus), or theopaschitism (the idea that God can suffer). In such a context, it was normal that the emphasis was on God’s justice rather than on God’s mercy for God’s creatures, using terms such as *justitia legalis*, *justitia distributiva*, and *justitia vindicativa*. Within the framework created by these philosophical concepts, it was difficult theologically to speak of love and mercy. The frescoes of the Middle Ages, with their lavish emphasis on the vengeful punishments and sufferings of hell, vividly demonstrate the theological concept that lay behind them.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his instructive and still topical book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*,¹⁴ has analyzed the main philosophical concepts that have influenced the theological development and the Christian vision of mercy. I summarize them below:

For Plato, mercy (compassion) had a negative character because it could influence judges in their obligation to make the right and just decision.

For the Stoics, compassion conflicted with the Stoic ethical idea of controlling the emotions through reason. It was therefore incompatible with *autarky* and *ataraxia* (self-sufficiency and peace of mind). The Stoics viewed pity as weakness and sickness of the soul, and promoted their ideal of standing still in the face of fate and achieving the state of *apatheia* (no suffering).

Nietzsche created the strong and hard Dionysian type, the superman (*Herrenmensch/Übermensch*). For him, pity is an extension of suffering and he despises it. The Dionysian type is superior in its selfishness and arrogance, not in its altruism. Dionysus is the opposite of the crucified Christ. In his work *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says that God died because of God’s compassion, God’s suffering with mankind.

¹⁴ Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2013); see especially chapter II.

At the other pole were the philosophical concepts of Marx. He believed that “religion is the opium of the people” – in the sense that it was very often used as a kind of ideological protest that brought some comfort but no change. Marx wanted radical change. Stalin went even further and tried to eradicate suffering with violence and totalitarianism. Such philosophical concepts, which gave rise to fascism and communism, devastated the world in the second half of the 20th century.

Let us also look at the philosophical and spiritual foundations of liberalism, which forms the basis of many of our developed and democratic countries. Even in this philosophical system, compassion and mercy do not find a proper place. The principles of Adam Smith, the forerunner of liberal economic theory, are based not on love for people but on the creation of profit. They are based not on altruism but on selfishness; Smith believed that the operation of the free market would bring about social order. In this context, one can understand why the church’s discourse on compassion and mercy does not easily pass the lips of many of our fellow citizens today.

Theologically, it has to be underlined that the justice of God – who is also just by nature – arises from God’s self, that is, from God’s love. God thus manifests justice through love, compassion, and mercy.

Even the very name of God, with its Hebrew nuances, expresses this. For Christian theology, which was more oriented to the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible – the name of God was translated into eminently metaphysical categories: “*Ego eimi o on*” (I am the one who is), supreme existence in itself. The same meaning was adopted by Philo of Alexandria, the Hellenized Hebrew philosopher of the 1st century, who developed the concept of God according to metaphysical criteria. But according to biblical scholars, the Hebrew meaning of JAHVE is more nuanced. His existence is not conditioned by things or sources outside his being, but is relational in itself and directed toward his people and creation. His name could be translated as “I am the one who is there” for the people. The text of Exodus 33:18-19, which reproduces Moses’ dialogue with God, puts it this way: “The Lord said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will show grace to whom I will show grace.’” The God of the Bible, then, is not a metaphysical and static God, but a living and dynamic God. A God who is with his people and for his people. A God who accepts and shares in the sufferings of his people. A merciful God.

In Christianity, the character of God who is loving, compassionate, and merciful is manifested in its fullness in the event of the Incarnation. Out of love for creation, God takes on creation through the flesh. God becomes a human being and takes on all the weaknesses and wounds of humanity and fallen creation, except sin, in order to heal, reconcile, and restore them.

But the theological articulation of this statement has not always been easy. *Kenosis*, that is to say the character of a compassionate and merciful God who out of love took on himself “humiliation” to the point of death to save his people, has found its deep meaning in spirituality, but has had difficulty being accepted when one has tried to affirm it through and within the ancient philosophical parameters mentioned above.

There are many examples. I would like us to recall the experience of the “Scythian monks” in the 6th century. They came from the Romanized province of Scythia Minor, the region of Dobrogea, in what is now Romania. They were connected to the monastic spirituality of their predecessors: St John Cassian, the saint of Marseilles, and Denys the Humble (Dionysius Exiguus), the founder of the modern calendar. Attempting to express this spiritual truth of *kenosis* in theological terms, they proposed a formula that reads in Latin “*Unus ex Trinitate passus est carne*” (One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh). But their formula very quickly caused a great scandal and was initially condemned as heretical and patripassian, even by Pope Hormisdas, whom they had asked for support. Only after years of discussion and reflection was their formula accepted, even though it did not bear their name.

To this day, the second antiphon sung at the beginning of the eucharistic liturgy of St John Chrysostom and St Basil the Great, which seems to have as its author the Emperor Justinian, recounts:

Only Begotten Son and Immortal Word of God,
 Who for our salvation didst will to be incarnate of the holy Theotokos and ever virgin Mary,
 Who without change didst become man and wast crucified, O Christ our God,
 Trampling down death by death, Who art one of the Holy Trinity,
 Glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us.

Although speaking of God’s “suffering” is still sensitive in some theological circles, the great 20th-century Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae dared to re-examine God’s participation in human suffering through his compassion, assuming this suffering through the incarnate Son:

Our Savior’s Passion is the proof of the greatest love of God for men. The Son of God Himself, seeing us sinking down into a meaningless life, a selfish life, a painful lack of unity between us, He came and showed us the way we can get out of this. He made Himself man, but man without sin . . . His love was not only manifested by this humbleness of becoming human and showing us the example of a human, but it was manifested in His sacrifice for us, accepting death on the Cross, for only the one who is willing to die for others is the one who loves fully.

The Passion of Christ is the sign of the greatest love of the Son of God for men when He accepted to become like them and to remain man for ever and ever. He entered the eternity in His state of

sacrifice, He went to the Father's Right hand, He offered sacrifice to the Father for us to give us an example of how we should live and how far we should go with His love, sacrificing one for another.

That is why the Cross is the means through which the Savior raised us, through which He could overcome death, because only by the supreme love manifested in His sacrifice, sacrifice of the only-begotten Son of God, He could overcome death.¹⁵

Overcoming evil with good and manifesting justice with love as a criterion of Orthodox spirituality

Orthodox spirituality as lived out has never had a problem with speaking of a *kenotic*, humble, compassionate, merciful God who participates in the sufferings that arise from human weaknesses and takes them upon himself to heal them. Consequently, the spiritual person who strives to be a theophore, "a bearer of God," acts just like the master they have within them by grace. St Isaac the Syrian asked:

What is a compassionate heart? . . . It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the strength of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his deep mercy his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. That is why he constantly offers up prayer full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy . . . he even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure – after the likeness of God – in his heart.¹⁶

Such apophthegms abound in the spiritual literature of the desert fathers and mothers.

Closer to our time, St Silouan the Athonite and his disciple Father Sophrony adopted the same language: God's love is for all creation; it is present even in hell because God's presence is everywhere.¹⁷ God is the same, absolute love, even in hell. The "punishment" and sufferings that people endure in hell are sufferings caused by the presence of love and the impossibility of sharing in it. Justice is done through love, and evil is "rewarded" by the presence of good. In fact, they followed the Eastern Christian spiritual tradition that St Isaac the Syrian, whom we have already quoted, summarized so clearly:

¹⁵ Fr Dumitru Staniloae, "The Cross Is the Proof of God's Love for Us," audio recording, 1990, <http://otelders.org/theology-and-spirituality/cross-proof-gods-love-us-fr-dumitru-staniloae>.

¹⁶ *Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria*, ed. A. M. Allchin, trans. Sebastian Brock (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 29.

¹⁷ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, "We Must Pray for All: The Salvation of the World According to St Silouan," *Sobornost* 19:1 (1997), 51–55.

I say that even those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. Scourgings for love's sake, namely of those who perceive that they have sinned against love, are more hard and bitter than tortures through fear . . . Love works with its force in a double way. It tortures those who have sinned, as happens also in the world between friends. And it gives delight to those who have kept its decrees. Thus it is also in Hell. I say that the hard tortures are grief for love. The inhabitants of heaven, however, make drunk their soul with the delight of love.¹⁸

Rather than the metaphysical theology of dogmatic textbooks, it is the spiritual perspective of a compassionate and merciful God and a God who applies his justice through love that has shaped the spirituality of the Orthodox people, their literature, and their way of life.

Dostoevsky said that “hell is the suffering of those who could not love,” and Eugene Ionesco argued that “hell is the crime against love.” In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (Book 6), Dostoevsky puts the above discourse and spiritual approach into the mouth of the Starets Zosima:

Brothers, do not be afraid of men's sin, love man also in his sin, for this likeness of God's love is the height of love on earth. Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love. Love the animals: God gave them the rudiments of thought and an untroubled joy. Do not trouble it, do not torment them, do not take their joy from them, do not go against God's purpose. Man, do not exalt yourself above the animals: they are sinless, and you, you with your grandeur, fester the earth by your appearance on it, and leave your festering trace behind you – alas, almost every one of us does! Love children especially, for they, too, are sinless, like angels.¹⁹

The Orthodox Icon of the Last Judgment shows the lamb of God on the throne, from which a ray of light is streaming down. This light is divided into two halves: one half reaches to heaven and the other half to hell. God remains the same even at the last judgment, a loving, just, and merciful God. God always exercises justice, but through love and mercy.

Some of the reactions to the theme of the Karlsruhe assembly have shown that talking about compassion, mercy, and love has become problematic today. The powerful and those who are successful and wealthy are well regarded in this world. Competition is on

¹⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises*, trans. A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), 136.

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 318–19.

the rise. The weak, the sick, and those who have not achieved what they set out to do are thrown on the trash heap of history. Only if we take this context into account can we understand why in our time there is more depression and suicide among younger people than among older people, as was the case a few years ago. We need to find a new discourse to be understood and heard by the people of today: not a God who is judge and gendarme, distant and apathetic, who controls in order to punish with the punishments of hell, keeps people away from the church, and ensures that the message of the gospel of joy is no longer heard and accepted.

On the other hand, one must not go to the other extreme. Love does not avoid or eliminate justice but embraces it. Compassion is not a simple and cheap sentimentalism that erases the application of justice. Compassion means suffering together and with the sufferer; it is a cry for justice and against injustice. St John the Baptist and the prophets show us what prophetic mercy is.

Mercy is not a contemptuous pity, but a love that takes on the condition of the other, that identifies with the other person. It is the effort to put oneself in the other's place out of love, to stay with the other, not to judge the other lightly, but to accompany and advise her or him in their need, without showing any sign of superiority or dominance. It is this love that changes and transforms and, in the end, creates justice. Justice is not the elimination of evil, but the transformation of evil into good through good.

The apostle Paul offers us this prescription, which is more relevant today than ever: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap coals of fire on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:20-21).

With the choice of the assembly theme, the exchange of such theological reflections and conversations about them need to inform the preparations for the WCC's 11th Assembly. The message of the assembly must address the signs of the times and transform their intrinsic logic. Daring to speak of Christ's love in the present context, and thus of the love of the triune God, of God's mercy and God's justice, the assembly will find its purpose and goal.

Toward a Doxological Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the prayer of St Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow (+1867), which summarizes and affirms the main ideas of this contribution in the form of a doxology:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Lord, may I calmly accept whatever this day may bring me and consecrate myself entirely to Your holy will. Guide me and help me in every hour of this day. Control my thoughts and feelings in all my actions and words. When unforeseen circumstances arise, do not let me forget that everything comes from You.

Teach me to be fair to my brothers and sisters, never to provoke trouble or cause pain. Control my will and teach me to pray, believe, hope, suffer, forgive and love.

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace; where there is hatred, let me spread love; where there is offense, forgiveness; where there is discord, unity; hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, joy where there is sadness.

O divine Master, let me give comfort instead of receiving it; let me understand others instead of being understood; let me love others instead of being loved. For when we forgive, we are forgiven. When we give, we receive, and when we die, we are born to Eternal Life.

Holy Spirit, help me to consecrate this whole life to my Savior and to my God.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, it is better not to live than to live without You. I thank You, O God, for the gift of this day and for all the good deeds You will help me to accomplish today.

Merciful God, free me from the desire for comfort and make me worthy at all times to forget myself for love of You and of my brothers and sisters, for this You have given me life. Help me to reject everything that does not come from You and to accept everything that comes from You with pious faith, hope and love.

Give me the courage to serve You with dignity, to place justice above profit, to place noble deeds above fleeting pleasures, to place others above myself, and to fulfill Your commandment of love. May the light of Your beauty, goodness and love shine in my soul.