

Moderator's address

Rev. Prof. Dr. Stephanie Dietrich
FaO Meeting 27.11.23

Dear Commissioners,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Dear colleagues

I am glad that we have the opportunity to gather online today. Thanks to each and everyone who invests time and efforts to attend, especially those of you who are attending at very inconvenient hours, late night, or very early morning.

Thanks to the staff for preparing the agenda so well and keeping us all well informed and prepared for our meetings. We all know about the limitations of gathering online. I am therefore very glad that we hopefully will meet in real life in February, in Indonesia.

Our four meetings during these days will hopefully serve as a preparation for our meeting next year. We are standing in the long tradition of Faith and Order meetings over many decades, and the meetings this week are intended to remind us of all the work of our Faith and Order mothers and fathers, on whose shoulders we stand. We do not start from scratch, but we are called to continue and renew the work of the Faith and Order Commission for the coming mandate of work.

I must admit, I was struggling to prepare this address for today. I returned from Madagascar just a couple of days ago, and my mind was very much with the people I was working together with, many of them struggling for everyday survival.

I was asking myself: When you are occupied with the challenges of providing food on the table for your family every day, which role does then our work on questions of Faith and Order play? Does it play a role at all?

When you are living in countries without access to sufficient health services and free elementary school, without a well-functioning democracy, what is then the relevance of discussing questions of ecclesiology, of doctrine and Church unity?

During our last period of work within the commission, we thoroughly reflected about these questions. When the number of responses to our convergence document on ecclesiology, TCTCV, was rather limited, and most of the responses were coming from the global North, we were asking: What is the relevance of our work for those many churches who are not responding? Is it relevant at all? Why are they not responding? Is it just the fact that what we are doing has no obvious relevance for them, is the way we are doing theology alienating, or are people just so occupied with surviving that they do not have the surplus energy to involve in discussions on ecclesiology? Is there may be a lack of structures or financial resources in many churches which could address the discussions on ecclesiology brought to the table by Faith and Order? These remain unanswered questions, and the answers would truly be quite complex.

As we will hear later during this week, the former commission tried to broaden the table by engaging in discussions on ecclesiology with some of the churches that have not been represented around our regular Faith and Order table of discourse.

Meanwhile, while I was travelling and working in Madagascar, I thought a lot about the need to develop further our theology about being church in and for the world.

TCTCV's conclusion chapter refers to the famous homily by John Chrysostomos about the 2 alters:

§67, p.39: "St. John Chrysostom spoke about two alters: one in the Church and the other among the poor, the suffering and those in distress. Strengthened and nourished by the liturgy, the Church must continue the life-giving mission of Christ in prophetic and compassionate ministry to the world and in struggle against every form of injustice and oppression, mistrust and conflict created by human beings."

We cannot blame any churches for not engaging in the theological discourse that takes place within the framework of the Faith and Order Commission, nor should we blame ourselves for pursuing doctrinal discourse in the search for the unity of the Church. This is our duty and task. To search for the unity of the Christian Church through profound theological work. At the same time, maybe we might challenge ourselves to reflect even more on how the two alters that John Chrysostom elaborated on can be a vital part of our theological discernment, so that our life in and for the world and our life as Christians, within the Christian Church, in our doing theology, mutually inform each other.

That leads me to the second part of my address today, the reflection about unity.

Unity a sign and servant of God's reconciling of all humankind and the whole of creation

Our commitment to visible unity is no longer self-evident and obvious for everyone. Perceptions and understanding of unity may differ, and there is a need to explore and to explain why our work for unity is still urgent, and maybe even more urgent than ever before. Even within the Faith and Order Commission, defined by the main task to search for unity, the discourse on why we work for visible unity, and what kind of unity we are looking for, needs to be kept alive constantly.

The polarization and dividedness between nations and groups, between ethnical and religious groups, the ongoing wars so many places in the world are a scandal. And so is the dividedness of the Christian Church.

In a divided world, the work for visible unity is and has always been Faith and Orders primary mission and task, and it is as relevant as ever.

The unity we are searching for is not uniformity. It implies the basic and profound conviction that humankind must stand together, to seek each other's best to uphold the dignity of every human being and the whole creation. That includes also the search for visible unity of the Christian Church.

Faith and Order's first and primary goal is to work for the unity of the Church. The dividedness of the Christian church is a scandal because it shows that we do not fulfill the

commandment of Jesus Christ that we all may be one. It is a scandal because it corrupts the Christian witness to the world, and because it contributes to the conflicts in our world.

The unity of the Church is and will always remain the main goal of our work within Faith and Order. Enjoying the diversities of Christian churches all around the world does never free us from the obligation to seek unity.

We certainly all know that the term “unity” and “visible unity” needs to be unfolded and interpreted. The unity statements of the assemblies show some of the development which has taken place in the understanding of unity. New Dehli in 1961 shaped the understanding of unity as God’s will and his gift to his Church, “made visible as all in each place”. Uppsala in 1968 stressed the understanding of the unity of the Church as being in the service of the unity and common life of all humankind. Canberra, in 1991, urged the churches to move from recognition to reconciliation, and statements at later assemblies put even more emphasis on the unity of the Church as a sign and servant of God’s reconciling of all humankind and the whole of creation.

Maybe it is on time for the Faith and Order Commission to even fuller integrate this understanding of unity of the Church, which becomes visible and tangible through being salt and light in the world, into our ecclesiology, so that visibility is both about structures and joint doctrine, and about shared witness and service as a decisive part of our ecclesiology.

Nicaea 325 was about unity through shared faith, as a counterreaction to disunity. Our ecumenical journey, from Jerusalem via Nicaea 325 to our world conference in 2025, is destined by the search for unity.

I would like to conclude with a quote from the 1952 Faith and Order Conference held at Lund, Sweden. After "earnestly request[ing] our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God", it continued: "Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?"

My hope and prayer is that we during these days can show sufficient eagerness to be in conversation with each other, to manifest the oneness of the people of God.