

Dear general secretary, dear friends and tenants of the Ecumenical Centre,
dear sisters and brothers,

Today's reading from the Scripture is challenging and intriguing as it invites us to follow God's logic which is so different from our own way of life and of thinking.

I will refer to two aspects and then draw a final, more personal conclusion.

1. In our way of thinking, we are struggling to be always in the centre of all things: to be visible in the media, to have people speak about us and of our deeds which we think are important, to be relevant and have impacting results.

God's logic, according to today's reading, is the opposite. As the animal sacrifices at the Temple were burned outside the camp, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. And the author of the Epistle to Hebrews invites Christ's followers to go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured (Hebrews 11,13).

If we reflect attentively on this aspect, we will see that this is God's logic, manifested throughout the whole Scripture. In the very beginning, according to Genesis, God put the first humans in a garden, not in an office, a house, or a temple. And there, in the garden, in the midst of creation, entrusted to the first humans to till it and take care of it, God is said to have come and walked "at the time of the evening breeze" and spoke with them (Genesis 3,8).

In the entire life of Christ, whom we confess to be the Incarnated Son of God, the same logic is followed. His birth happened outside the city of Bethlehem, in a manger in a cave, because there was no place in the guest room available for them (Luke 2,7). He multiplied the bread and fed the hungry in the wilderness, would go to meet the sick, suffering, and the outcasts at the periphery, the places they were. The Transfiguration happened on a mountain; he carried then the cross through the city to be crucified outside the walls of the city. Outside the city he resurrected from the dead and from a heal outside of Bethany he ascended into heaven.

We complain often that our churches are empty today and that the people of our time are no longer coming to us or show interest in what we have traditionally proclaimed. The reading of today indicates to us a change of direction. It is the very reason and vocation of the Church, of the Christians to go out witnessing and serving the world rather than waiting that the world come by itself to the Church.

2. We like stability and certainty and are afraid of radical changes. That is also true for Church people and for the staff of WCC. Though I remember a saying that we kept repeating "let us listen what the Spirit says to the Churches," any change in structure and direction which came about especially after an assembly made us nervous, stressed, anxious, thinking what will happen to us and to our jobs and positions to our future. It may sound strange for a committed Christian but is human and we have to confess our weakness and failure and try to understand and follow God's logic and will.

In today's reading we hear that the only one which is and remains the same is "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 11, 8). For the rest, we are but pilgrims on the way, we have no lasting city, and are advancing as pilgrims looking for the city that is to come.

Metaphorically, this has been expressed in the life of the World Council of Churches: at the big events a worshiping tent was preferred to a building and here, in the WCC chapel, the waves in the ceiling above us make us think that we are in a moving tent.

Dear friends, you are about to leave temporarily this historic and blessed place which is to be refreshed and renovated but before long you will come back. Both the present staff and the retired ones, we remember in prayer and with gratitude the many years we have met and prayed together in this place which became the house of our togetherness and hope to meet again in three years' time for the prayer of renewed dedication. However, I am also aware that any move and change, however nice and positive it may be said to be, makes people anxious and nostalgic about their dear offices, the meetings and chats in the corridors, the coffees served in the cafeteria. Yet, as pilgrim people, just think that soon you will return.

Concluding personal remark:

In our human way of thinking, I hear today questions and worries which, I assure you, are not new at all: what is the future of WCC and the role of ecumenical movement today, how do we deal with deficits, change in programs, restructuring, etc. In fact, I attended last week two events marking the closing of two prestigious and historical places of ecumenical formation with an experience of more than 50 years. Tears were shed but also encouraging hopes expressed.

For a pilgrim, things can never be expected to be the same. Personally, in my 28 years of work at the WCC and Bossey, I have experienced many changes, I spent many sleepless nights trying to plan, strategize, shape the future, being under the heavy burden of thinking that the future of Bossey and the programs of the WCC I was responsible for were in my responsibility.

Life taught me a different lesson which I wish to share with you. Many times, despite my heavy work, my plans did not come true but even contrary to what I thought and planned; yet, in the end the results proved to be so good and positive which made me understand that it was not me in control of the ecumenical movement but Christ who is the head of the Church. And I thanked God in prayer. The ecumenical movement is not a human enterprise, is not a business as any other business; it needs our human efforts in all we do but its future and success are entirely in the hands of God. Christ has prayed before his death that all may be one and any search for that unity, He is the one who is leading, empowering, and strengthening. Our role is to do our work in faithfulness to his will and promises.

Antoine de St Exupery, the famous French writer, poet and journalist, has an interesting reflection which I quote: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

The author of the letter to Hebrews from which we read today concludes in one of the following verses that the guiding and final point we have to look at in our pilgrimage is "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... who sits at the right hand of the Father" (Hebrews 12,2). He is the captain of our both; he is the Head of His body, the Church.

I would conclude with an encouraging exhortation from Deuteronomy: "Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid: because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6). The ecumenical movement has a future because it is God's will and work. Amen.

Ioan Sauca, Geneva, 14 June 2024