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Mutual Acceptance and Common Pilgrimage

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"Receive one another as Christ has received you for the glory of God", from Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 15, verse 7, has been chosen as the general theme for this Plenary Meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2004. When we look this verse up in different contemporary Bible translations, we are immediately confronted with a certain variety in the translation of the Greek verb, *proslambanesthai*, rendered here by "receive". Both the *Revised Standard Version* and the *New Revised Standard Version* translate it by "welcome one another..." Others, like the *New American Bible* and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, do the same¹. The *Good News Edition*, *Today's English Version*, chooses: "Accept one another..." Why these differences? Do they imply different understandings?

A Welcoming Acceptance

In her scriptural presentation, Rev. Dr Judith McKinlay points out the possible meanings and connotations of the Greek verb *proslambanesthai*: "to take alongside oneself", "to receive or accept someone into one's society, home, circle of acquaintance", with a connotation of a "wholehearted acceptance" that is long-term². J. Fitzmyer uses almost the same expressions: "take to oneself, take into one's household", hence "welcome", "accept with open heart"³.

It is not difficult to see how this text can illustrate and inspire our gathering here as a Plenary Commission. We have been welcomed with open heart and we are ready to welcome each other with open heart. We come from so many different cultures, nations, languages, churches and denominations and gather here in order to know each other better and to embark together on a common search for unity, a common pilgrimage⁴. The quality and also the success of our meeting will depend to a great extent on the sincerity and quality of our mutually accepting each other. Therefore it is important to keep in mind that, in every thing, the source of our inspiration and our strength is no other than Christ himself: "Receive one another as Christ has received you".

The Christological Dimension

Indeed, the Christological dimension of our mutual acceptance is of primary importance. Our mutual welcoming should be Christ-like not only in our way of acting but also in our deepest inner attitudes and motivations.

¹ Joseph A. FITZMYER, *Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 33, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, Doubleday, 1993, p. 704.

² Cf. references given in her presentation.

³ J. FITZMYER, *Romans*, p. 689. In French: "Accueillir chez soi", "recevoir dans sa société, traiter avec l'affection qu'on doit à un proche" (J. DUPONT, "Accueillants à tous", in *Assemblées du Seigneur*, n.s. 6, 1969, p.17).

⁴ The image of pilgrimage for the search of *koinonia* was very much present at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993: "Many have spoken of the significance of locating this conference at Santiago de Compostela, the place for penitent pilgrims. As we strip ourselves of false securities, finding in God our true and only identity, daring to be open and vulnerable to each other, we will begin to live as pilgrims on a journey, discovering the God of surprises who leads us into roads which we have not travelled, and we will find in each other true companions on the way" (cf. Report of Section I, n. 27, in Thomas F. BEST and Günther GASSMANN [eds.], *On the way to Fuller Koinonia. Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994, p. 234.

Rev. Dr Judith McKinlay rightly underlines that, in the ministry of Jesus, “we see acceptance and hospitality in action”. In fact, “in Jesus we are seeing and hearing God the host, who offers hospitality to all who are open to receiving it”. We see Jesus reaching out to the little ones, sitting at table with tax collectors and “sinners”, preferring the repentant publican to the self-righteous Pharisee, and allowing to be touched and anointed by a woman considered to be a public sinner by the Pharisee who was hosting him. He also reaches out beyond the borders of the People of Israel to heal the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the son of the Roman centurion, praising their faith. He chose “uneducated and ordinary men” as his companions (Ac 4:13).

However, it is not enough for us to see how Jesus acted and to try to act likewise. We have also to be inspired and guided by his deepest spiritual attitudes and motivations. He came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Luke underscores this requirement in a dramatic way by showing the disciples quarrelling as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest, up to the last moment, while sharing the last supper. Jesus’ answer is right to the point, not only for the disciples, but also for us: “For who is the greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Lk 22:27). It is a lesson not only on hospitality, but also and even more on authority: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them: and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you: rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Lk 22:25-26). This teaching remains true for all his disciples, wherever they gather, for every Christian community, and also for us here as well as for all who truly want to work for authentic unity, around the one who is in the midst of us as the one who serves.

Philippians, chapter 2, puts this service in the perspective of God’s plan of salvation: the one who was in the form of God emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross (cf. Phil 2:6-8). This is the path followed by the one who died “to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (John 11:52). The conclusion of the Letter to the Philippians is clear: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5).

In the theological texts produced by our Commission, this *kenosis* is very often referred to. Do we truly realise what that means for the way in which we meet, welcome and accept one another, as persons and as communities? What does this *kenosis* has to say about theology, not only as far as its content is concerned, but also about the way we practice theology and are able to discuss theology with others?⁵

For the Glory of God

In all this, it is important to keep in mind that hospitality, welcoming and mutual acceptance, based on the model of Christ, do not constitute aims in themselves, but are “for the glory of God”. If we enter into the dynamics of the life and ministry of Christ, we have to accept that we are always on the way to something greater, to Someone infinitely greater. That is why we can say that our mutual acceptance in Christ is also a common journeying, a common pilgrimage. When we meet to deepen our mutual knowledge and trust, seeking “to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2), we are called to look beyond ourselves and our communities. In John’s gospel, unity and the glory of God are inseparably linked, especially in Jesus’ last prayer: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:22-23). And this perspective of God’s glory should penetrate and permeate all our thinking and acting, as a spiritual attitude and an ultimate criterion of faith and truth, keeping in mind what Jesus said to his opponents: “How can you believe when you accept glory from

⁵ Cf., for instance, the Report of Section I of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostella 1993, n. 20: “The encounter with the other in the search to establish the *koinonia*, grounded in God’s gift, calls for a *kenosis* – a self-giving and a self-emptying of oneself. Such a *kenosis* arouses fear of loss of identity, and invites us to be vulnerable, yet such is no more than faithfulness to the ministry of vulnerability and death of Jesus as he sought to draw human beings into communion with God and each other. He is the pattern and patron of reconciliation which leads to *koinonia*. As individuals and as communities, we are called to establish *koinonia* through a ministry of *kenosis*” (*On the way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 233).

one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?" (John 5:44). We are not gathered here and our debates do not have as their purpose to prove who is right and who is wrong, but in order that by our common search for truth and our common call for unity we may be together for the glory of God.

Acceptance and Difference

However, even in this selfless search for truth and harmony, a basic question remains: is it allowed to submit mutual acceptance in community to certain conditions? This is of particular importance in our work for Christian unity. The mere fact that Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to welcome each other: weak and strong (Rom 14:1), Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom 15:7), shows that there were at that time tensions and struggles as to who should be admitted into the community. Paul's answer seems to consist not in ignoring the differences, but in recognizing and overcoming them, once some basic requirements are met.

Jesus reached out to all those in need, on the sole condition that they had faith in him, meaning that they recognized in him the one who came to bring the Good News of the Kingdom. Where there was no faith, he could not heal or save. Those who locked themselves up in self-righteousness or self-sufficiency excluded themselves: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:24). For Paul, belief in the Gospel he has received and handed on, in particular belief in the resurrection of Christ is an absolutely necessary condition – unless you have come to believe in vain" (1 Cor 15:1-3) –, but when these basic conditions are fulfilled then there is room for rich diversities among the different members of the one Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-30). In the Pastoral Letters certain doctrinal requirements emerge very clearly, when the "sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim 1:10; cf. 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 4:3) is opposed to "myths" (1 Tim 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim 4:4) and teachings of "liars" (1 Tim 4:1-2). The first Letter of John feels the need to indicate the criteria of an authentic Christian life; moral criteria in the first place: to avoid sin (3:6), to walk in the light (1:9), to practice justice (2:29; 3:10), to observe the commandments (2:3-5; 3:24; 5:2) and especially the commandment of fraternal love (2:9-11; 3:10.18-20); but doctrinal criteria also: to abide in the teachings received from the beginning (2:24), to listen to those who, in the Church, teach the truth (4:6), to believe and to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (2:23; 4:2; 5:1.10).

We should be guided by the same spirit of truth and openness when we meet and work together for mutual acceptance and unity. When we can recognize in each other the basic truth of the Gospel of Christ, "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6), a large possibility of diversity in interpretations, expressions and practices should be admitted: unity is not uniformity; harmony supposes the mingling of different tunes and rhythms. However, the main and most critical question will likely remain: do we have the same understanding of what is absolutely basic in Christian faith and communion? Are we able to accept or at least to continue dialogue with those who do not agree on these basic requirements? At this point we should always be reminded of Paul's words: "Receive one another as Christ has received you", inviting us to continue our mutual listening and our common pilgrimage.

The Work of Faith and Order

How can we relate these fundamental attitudes to the work of Faith and Order, in accordance with its aim "to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe"⁶? And more concretely, how can we work in this spirit during our present Plenary Commission meeting? Let us therefore have a first look at the main points on the agenda for the coming days.

Baptism

The study on baptism rightly occupies the first place on our agenda. In one of the most widely distributed and most important ecumenical documents of the last decades: *Baptism*,

⁶ By-laws of the Faith and Order Commission 3.1.

Eucharist, Ministry (BEM – Lima texts 1982)⁷ – work of our Faith and Order Commission –, the section on baptism was undoubtedly the one on which the churches were able to affirm the largest convergence. In fact, baptism, as the symbolic or sacramental expression and seal of the personal belief in Christ, can be considered as the real basis of ecumenism. Therefore BEM already made a strong appeal in favour of mutual recognition of baptism “as an important sign and means of expressing the baptismal unity given in Christ” and offered some suggestions to that purpose (n. 15-16). The Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order in Compostela also emphasised the importance and meaning of a mutual recognition of baptism, pointing to some possible implications for ecclesiology⁸ and witness or mission⁹. And the present study of baptism was precisely mandated by the Standing Commission as a contribution to the churches’ mutual recognition as churches¹⁰.

However a mutual recognition of baptism, or a common recognition of the “one” baptism, still encounters very serious obstacles, some of them being rather underlying or hidden, others explicitly stated. Some concern the nature or meaning of baptism, others the relation between personal faith and baptism, others still the relation between baptism and church. In view of surmounting these obstacles the present study on baptism envisages including two additional projects: a collection of baptismal liturgies with commentary provided by the churches, and a survey of the churches pre-baptismal and post-baptismal education and nurture practices. The purpose is clear: through a better knowledge of each other’s understandings, intentions and practices –, by putting them in a larger context –, we can hope to discover common basic elements and open a way to mutual acceptance beyond the present differences. The churches should learn to build more systematically on this basis of the one baptism; the positive implications of mutual recognition are often not sufficiently realised. Indeed, through the rite of baptism personal faith in Christ and personal adhesion to Christ go beyond the private sphere and enter the visible level of relationship to the Body of Christ. A common reflection along these lines could open various new possibilities to “receive one another...”, in view of a more harmonious Christian presence and common witness, in particular on the local level and in places where Christians constitute a small minority.

Ecclesiology

The study project on ecclesiology follows logically the one on baptism, because it builds entirely on the concept of the one baptism, in which “Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and every place”, as it is said in the Faith and Order text “The Nature and Purpose of the Church”, published in 1998¹¹. If baptism is the basis of ecumenism, ecclesiology goes straight to the heart of it.

The present Ecclesiology project was decided by the Standing Commission at its Toronto meeting in 1999, with the aim to revise the 1998 text in the light of the responses received from the member churches¹². At Toronto the hope was also expressed that this study may one day develop into a convergence statement on the Church analogous to the BEM document¹³.

⁷ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111, Geneva, WCC, 1982.

⁸ “If the baptism celebrated by a community is recognized, then what else in the life of that community may already be recognized as ecclesial? Insofar as they recognize each other’s baptisms, the churches may be at the start of developing a baptismal ecclesiology in which to locate other elements of shared belief and life” (Report of Section III, n. 12: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 247).

⁹ “A common baptism also expresses the paradigmatic nature of the Church in the world as an inclusive community, where men, women and children of different cultures and races can participate freely on an equal basis, where social and economic inequality can be surmounted, and where there is respect for different traditions and capacities, confirmed by the bonds of love for brothers and sisters and in fidelity to the Triune God” (*ibid.*, p. 248).

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 7-14 January 1996, Bangkok, Thailand*, Faith and Order Paper No. 172, Geneva, WCC, 1996, pp. 48-49, 56; *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 18-19.

¹¹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church. A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181, Geneva, WCC, November 1998, n. 75, p. 36.

¹² *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 15-24 June 1999, Toronto, Canada*, Faith and Order Paper No. 183, Geneva, WCC, 1999, pp. 41-46, 88.

¹³ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 5-9.

The Ecclesiology project can clearly draw inspiration from the general theme of our Plenary Meeting: "Receive one another...", in particular since the notion of *koinonia* (communion) occupies a central place in it. An ecclesiology of communion is essentially mutual acceptance and recognition, in the gift of life received from the Triune God. And the goal of full communion is described as being realized "when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness". On this point "The Nature and Purpose of the Church" quotes The Canberra Statement on "The Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling"¹⁴. The ecclesiology of communion not only leaves room for diversities, but welcomes them as a richness of life and witness: "Diversity in unity and unity in diversity are gifts of God to the Church". However, "there are limits to diversity"¹⁵. "There are limits within which diversity is an enrichment and outside which it is not only unacceptable but destructive of the gift of unity"¹⁶. In order for the churches to be able to recognize each other, they are called first of all to become fully aware of the fact that "they already share a profound degree of communion grounded in their participation together in the life and love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit"¹⁷. Only then they will be able to evaluate the real importance or non-importance of the still remaining differences. Only on that condition can they set out on a common pilgrimage with the aim of making this communion ever more complete and more visible.

In this perspective, we can rejoice that the Ecclesiology project tries at present to clarify certain difficult issues that are still considered church-dividing. Consultations are planned, for instance, 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. These are indeed crucial issues, but careful attention should be paid to the fact that these remaining questions could compromise all future progress if they are not constantly seen in the light of the already existing, although still imperfect communion. The dynamics of Paul's exhortation in Romans 15:7 should be fully a work in this process. For Faith and Order it is of primary importance to continue this study project, even though it has already a long history and it is still impossible to foresee the end of it¹⁸.

Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for the Unity of the Church

The study on "Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for the Unity of the Church" can offer at the same time a test for the authenticity of our search for the unity of the Church and a privileged field to work for this unity. It can be a test in the sense that it challenges our theological work: Do our theological concepts and approach correspond to what is in fact happening on the ground, or are we building castles in the air? Do they have any impact on reality? It can also offer a privileged field for action: It will help us to experience that working for the unity of the Church is something very concrete, inseparable from the human context, and implies more than just theological studies. It may also help us to better understand why certain divisions happened in the past and what is needed to overcome them today.

And this is true both on the personal and on the community level. A closer observation and deeper awareness of the deep roots and the omnipresent implications of identity will almost certainly challenge us on both levels: What does this mean for a baptised Christian? What does this mean for the Church? As a consequence, it is intimately linked with the two previous study projects: Baptism and Ecclesiology, as well as with the study on Theological Anthropology.

On the personal level, there is the fundamental truth that those who are baptised into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer

¹⁴ *The Nature and the Purpose of the Church*, n. 121; cf. n. 67; Michael KINNAMON (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991*, WCC Publications, Geneva – Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 172-174

¹⁵ The Canberra Statement, n. 2.1 (*Signs of the Spirit*, p. 173).

¹⁶ *The Nature and the Purpose of the Church*, n. 63, p. 29.

¹⁷ *The Nature and the Purpose of the Church*, box on *koinonia*, after n. 60, p. 28.

¹⁸ The Ecclesiology study was strongly recommended in Santiago de Compostela, in 1993, but it draws considerable inspiration from the previous study that resulted in the Faith and Order document *Church and World* (Faith and Order Paper No. 151, 1990) and was initiated at the Faith and Order Plenary in Lima (1982) under the name "The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community".

slave or free, there is no longer male of female, for all of you are one in Christ" (Gal 3:27-28). "For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). How does this new identity relate to the other ones: by harmonisation, opposition or identification? Which element prevails over the other? Does this new identity allow reaching out to those who are different? Or does it exacerbate differences and result in withdrawing into oneself and cutting oneself off from others? In a context where politics, nationality and religion are intrinsically linked, like it is the case in Israel/Palestine where I have spent most of my life, it is almost impossible for the Christian minority to come to a clear self-understanding: am I a Christian Palestinian or a Palestinian Christian? What do these various expressions imply? And what impact do they have on my relationships with Israelis and other Palestinians? With other Christians, Jews and Muslims?

On the level of communities we should always go back to Ephesians, chapter 2, where it is said that Christ, who is our peace, has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, "that he might create in himself one new humanity" (Eph 3:14-15). This is true in the first place for the wall dividing the Jewish People and the Gentiles, but it stands as a symbol and prototype for all walls that divide and threaten peace. Do we accept this new reality and live accordingly? Or do we maintain ancient dividing walls in spite of this new common identity? Or do we perhaps build new walls trying to protect this new identity? This is a real challenge to the Church, which, according to the study document "The Nature and the Purpose of the Church", is called to be "the sign and instrument of God's design for the whole world": i.e. "the salvation of the whole world, the renewal of the human community by the divine Word and the Holy Spirit, the community of humanity with God and within itself"¹⁹. How can the Church be such a sign and instrument, when it is itself divided along ethnic or national lines?

Such divisions can take very different forms. Sometimes ethnic or national strife or confrontation may happen between groups that belong to the same Church or denomination. Elsewhere, the differences between churches or denominations become part and parcel of opposed personal and national identities, rendering reconciliation even more difficult, every concession tending to be seen as an infidelity. At times the Christian identity is formed in opposition with other surrounding religions, putting the Christian community in opposition with or cutting it off from other believers or non-believers, instead of reaching out, recognizing and welcoming, as Christ did. These dividing or conflicting identities can become even more complex and irreconcilable when, in one way or another, the concept of "chosen people" is introduced, when the identification between the religious and ethnic or national identities are believed to be part of God's design, in virtue of a unilateral reading of the Bible²⁰; then the narrow identity tends to be regarded as sacred over and against the others and concessions threaten to be seen as betrayal and apostasy. How can such attitudes be reconciled with the nature and the mission of the Church? How is it possible to live in these situations the attitude of mutual acceptance Christ has towards us?

Anthropology Study

The Anthropology Study also traces its origin back to the Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order in Compostela in 1993 and in the course of the following years it was repeatedly recommended by the Standing Commission. From the beginning it was presented as trying to respond to different requests coming from different sectors within the WCC: human sexuality, ethnic and national identity, building inclusive community, overcoming violence, authority and authoritative teaching, etc.²¹ Some critics could be tempted to say that it appears to be a typical project that is supposed to tackle all problems that nobody else can handle. In fact, a more positive way of looking at it would be to consider it as an attempt to go to the very roots of these problems, in order to find a firm common basis that would make it possible to approach in a new way a number of problems that keep propping up in very different

¹⁹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, n. 42-47, p. 21-22.

²⁰ Alois MOSSER (Hg.), "Gottes auserwählte Völker". *Erwählungsvorstellungen und kollektive Selbstfindung in der Geschichte*. Pro Oriente, Schriftenreihe der Kommission für südosteuropäische Geschichte 1, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2001.

²¹ See e.g. *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission*, 9-16 January 2002, Gazzada, Italy, Faith and Order Paper No. 191, Geneva, WCC, 2002, p. 69; *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission*, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 69-70.

contexts. If the churches can come towards a common fundamental understanding of the human person, they might be able to face together common critical challenges and start moving step by step to a common response, instead of clashing frontally right from the beginning, as it now happens far too often.

As working method, the group in charge has opted for a process of multidisciplinary interaction and has decided to start from a number of present urgent questions or situations, instead of engaging in the elaboration of a systematic Christian theological anthropology. How do contemporary burning issues challenge and threaten our understanding of the human person? And what would be the most appropriate way to respond to them? Among the issues considered, one could mention: death (and more widely the beginnings and ends of life), suffering (in particular HIV/AIDS), poverty, sexual exploitation, disabilities, oppression and conflict (especially where religion is involved), biomedical sciences, ecology.

The basic intuition of the study is that the unique worth and dignity of every human person, that has to be preserved at any cost, is best conceived and expressed in the concept of the image of God. Every human person is created in the image of God and as such has an eternal and infinite dimension and value. This image acquires its fullness in Christ, the perfect “image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation” (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 3:18). However, from the beginning, the relational character of the human person and of the image of God must equally be stressed: the human person is created in the image of the communion of the Triune God, and through baptism in the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples have clothed themselves with Christ (Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:27) and are baptized into the one Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Person and community can never be separated; both are in the image of God and receive their value from God.

How can we recognize and uphold this value in front of the forces of death that are at work in our world, or in the midst of oppression, discrimination, conflict, poverty, illness, disability, discrimination? How to reconcile this spiritual dimension with modern biomedical research concerning the beginning and end of human life, genetic manipulation, etc.?

Under the title “Ecumenical Perspectives on the Human Person”, the study, at its present state, reaches an impressive list of “common affirmations”. If our churches really do agree on these fundamental truths, then far-reaching common studies and actions should be possible. The study also affirms that our churches, “while they are united in owning a basic common understanding of the human person”, “they do not always agree on the concrete choices to be made or the specific strategies to be followed”. The question then arises: How far can we walk together before separating? Is it possible, by walking together patiently, caring for one another and for the whole of humankind, to deepen our mutual acceptance and to prolong step by step our common pilgrimage? And when we reach the point where we start to disagree, it may then perhaps become easier to look together at the roots and the reasons of our divergences, without losing confidence, without condemning one another. We will then perhaps be able to “confess our temptation to judge others according to our own image rather than to receive one another as human beings created in God’s image”. In the line of the general theme of this Plenary Commission, we will have to learn “to listen to each other respectfully, to work together trustfully and to affirm hope courageously”²².

Hermeneutics Study

It is obvious that in this process of ongoing listening to each other, hermeneutics have an essential role to play. In some way, hermeneutics should become an art of living together, in order to overcome the differences of time, space and culture, as well as the many frontiers existing between our communities. In this sense, the study on hermeneutics is a fundamental requirement if our churches want to live up to the theme of our Plenary: “Receive one another as Christ has received you for the glory of God”. In turn, the study itself will be enriched to the extent that we will be capable to listen careful and respectful to each other.

²² Brief quotations from the study report “Ecumenical Perspectives on the Human Person”.

The aims of the study are briefly explained in the introduction to the 1998 text entitled: "A Treasure in Earthen Vessels"²³: "(1) aim at a greater coherence in the interpretation of the faith and in the community of all believers as their voices unite in common praise of God; (2) make possible a mutually recognizable (re)appropriation of the sources of the Christian faith; and (3) prepare the ways of common confession and prayer in spirit and truth." Different names have been tested out for this kind of hermeneutics: "ecumenical hermeneutics" or, more recently, "hermeneutics of *koinonia*", and the church has sometimes be called a "hermeneutical community". The latest consultation, in Strasbourg 2002, addressed the "interpretation of Scripture, 'Tradition and traditions', and the hermeneutics of confessionality"²⁴.

The need for a study on hermeneutics emerged clearly in the course of the reception process of the BEM document, in particular in relation with the first question addressed to the churches in the preface: "the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages"²⁵. This question had been very carefully phrased, so that the churches would not limit their responses to a comparison with their present faith formulations or liturgical practices, but go into the depth of their origin and tradition. Nevertheless, many of the objections made to BEM resulted precisely from the fact that the responses were based in the first place on contemporary formulas, without making a real attempt or without being able to take seriously into account historical developments. This is unfortunately what happens relatively often with ecumenical documents or consultations.

That is why "A Treasury in Earthen Vessels", in its last paragraph, explains how "a practical application of ecumenical hermeneutics occurs both in the production and the reception of ecumenical documents"²⁶. However, this process seems much larger than only written documents. Hermeneutics should become part of the churches' life. The endeavour to replace sensitivities, attitudes and concepts in the context of time, space and culture of their origin in order to "translate" them into the new context where they are supposed to be understood and received supposes a constant attention to these different contexts, but also to the persons and communities involved. It is a process of ongoing mutual welcoming and understanding.

In this light, the idea of a "hermeneutics of *koinonia*" could acquire a profound and dynamic significance. Fully aware of and solidly rooted in the real although still imperfect *koinonia* that already unites them, our churches are called to listen patiently and truthfully to one another, to look at their diversities and disagreements in the light of what they already believe and live in common, in order to overcome present misunderstandings and to take their common pilgrimage one step further. How often are they trying to say the same thing or to bear the same witness, but they do it out from such different experiences and situations that they tend to contradict and to counteract each other.

Inter-religious Dialogue

This apparent contradiction strikes us of course even more when we enter the realm of inter-religious dialogue. Strictly speaking, Paul's exhortation in Romans 15:7 is addressed only to the Christian community. However we should not forget that Jesus, at several occasions, reached out beyond the boundaries of the People and of the Land of Israel. Are we not called to do the same? To look beyond the boundaries of the visible Christian community? In that case the mutual recognition and acceptance may be of a different level, as much as ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious dialogue are different. But we can also be questioned by "others", Non-Christians, and we can learn from them. And why should we not be able to walk part of the way, of our pilgrimage, with them?

²³ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels. An instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper No. 182, Geneva, WCC, 1998, n. 6, p. 9.

²⁴ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 35-38; 93-98.

²⁵ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, n. 11, pp. 11-12, and n. 65, pp. 39-40; cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149, Geneva, WCC, 1990, pp. 32-35.

²⁶ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, n. 66, p. 40.

At its last meeting, the Standing Commission discussed at length the role of Faith and Order in inter-religious dialogue and tended to conclude that there is need for a reflection on the significance of the plurality of religions²⁷. What does this plurality mean for the universality of Christ and the self-understanding of the Church? The whole creation comes from God, is kept in existence by God and returns to God. The Holy Spirit is at work in the whole of creation²⁸. On the one hand the infinite mystery of God is far beyond all finite human beings can conceive and affirm about it, and some human affirmations about this mystery that at first sight may seem contradictory could in fact be mutually corrective and complementary. On the other hand, our Christian theology is one of Incarnation, expressed and practised in a concrete context of space and time. To be handed on and witnessed to, it must be in an ongoing hermeneutical dialogue with other contexts of time, culture and religious environment. Even what other religions seem to deny in Christianity can in fact be a call for purification and deepening. Christianity is by nature dialogue²⁹.

In a recent consultation, jointly sponsored by Faith and Order, the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism and the Inter-religious Relations Team, the theme of hospitality was suggested as being able to provide a basic framework for a renewed Christian theology of religious plurality. The rich biblical tradition of hospitality shows how through openness to the "other", including the religious "other", we may encounter God in new ways (cf. Gen 18; Heb 13). Through the practice of true hospitality, which transcends somehow the distinction between "host" and "guest", a mutual transformation takes place. Christians can discover unknown dimensions of God's presence and action in the world. Persons and communities of other religions, partners in such hospitality, also experience change, both in their perception of Christianity and in their understanding of their own traditions. Such reciprocity is exemplified in Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen 14); it includes bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the "other" as well as making space for the "other" as a gift from God. This mutual acceptance respects God's loving care for the whole of creation, is guided by the Spirit who comes from and blows where the Spirit wills, and is called to be Christ-like, self-giving and kenotic, "as Christ has received" us.

Participation in inter-religious dialogue can also be an important factor of growth in ecumenical relations. In inter-religious dialogue, theologians belonging to different denominations endeavour together to express their faith in a new language accessible to the "other" partners. In this effort they will, necessarily and spontaneously, rise above the traditional categories and terminologies linked to the historical divisions among their communities. As a consequence, convergences and differences will be seen in a quite different light. If inter-religious dialogue can contribute to our mutual acceptance, why should believers of other faiths be excluded from our welcoming? In their "otherness" they are no strangers to our ecumenical pilgrimage.

Prayer for Unity

This ecumenical pilgrimage has always to be renewed and expressed in prayer. Almost since its beginning, Faith and Order has been closely linked with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and we will hear a report on this task during our Plenary here. Continuous attention has also been given to the relationship between worship and the unity of the Church. This dimension has received a particular emphasis at the Fifth World Conference in Compostela (1993) and, consequently, at the previous Plenary Commission in Moshi (1996). The report *So We Believe... So We Pray* is a concrete and rich expression of this concern³⁰.

²⁷ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 8-12.

²⁸ This perception was very much present at the WCC Assembly in Canberra, 1991; cf., for instance, the Report of the Seventh Assembly: "We confessed the Holy Spirit as one with the Father and with Christ, undivided, indivisible, embracing the whole created order within its life-giving, reconciling and redemptive love. Yet we recognised, too, the need for discernment and the danger to speak too easily and quickly about the presence of the spirit, of identifying the Spirit with our own priorities and programmes" (*Signs of the Spirit*, p. 236).

²⁹ Claude GEFFRE, "Pour une théologie de la différence. Identité, altérité, dialogue", in *Sedos Bulletin* 33, 2001, pp. 286-296; Id., "Mission Issues in the Contemporary Context of Multifaith Situations", in *International Review of Mission* 86, 1997, 407-409.

³⁰ Thomas F. BEST and Dagmar HELLER (eds.), *So We Believe... So We Pray. Towards Koinonia in Worship*, Faith and Order Paper No. 171, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1995.

The prayer for unity has a double dimension. In the first place, unity is essentially a gift of God that we have to implore and receive in the Spirit. However, prayer for unity, and especially common prayer for unity, is part and parcel of our common and patient pilgrimage towards unity: expression of the degree of *koinonia* already reached and strengthening of this *koinonia*. The report of the consultation on the theme "Towards *Koinonia* in Worship", held at Ditchingham, England, in August 1994, expresses it as follows: "In worship Christians are able to express the *koinonia* that unites them and at the same time to find that *koinonia* nourished and strengthened. For it is only as the Christian community draws together nearer to God the Father in common allegiance to Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit that its own *koinonia* is renewed and enlivened"³¹. Pope John Paul II points out the same reality in his encyclical letter *Ut unum sint*, published in 1995: "When brothers and sisters who are not in imperfect communion with one another come together to pray, the Second Vatican Council defines their prayer as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. This prayer is 'a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity' [...]. Even when prayer is not specifically offered for Christian unity, but for other intentions such as peace, it actually becomes an expression and confirmation of unity." "If Christians, despite their divisions can grow ever more united in common prayer around Christ, they will grow in the awareness of how little divides them in comparison to what unites them"³².

It is in prayer that all our ecumenical efforts converge and receive their full meaning and fruitfulness. This is equally true of our many studies, debates and projects during our Plenary Commission Meeting here. Unfortunately, many of our churches are not yet able to "receive one another" in the full sense of the word in all aspects of prayer and worship, in particular not in its summit, the Eucharist. It is one of the most painful manifestations of the fact that we still disagree on some fundamental conditions. To acknowledge this disagreement with suffering is part of our mutual acceptance. However we must never lose sight of the final vision, the goal of our common pilgrimage.

In this perspective I would like to conclude this presentation with the invitation that the presiding priest, during the Byzantine Eucharistic Liturgy, addresses to the assembly as an invitation to the kiss of peace, which in turn prepares for the recitation of the Creed: "*Agapísōmen allilous, ina en omonía omologísōmen...* Let us love one another, that we may with one mind confess (our faith)".

FOOTNOTES

¹ Joseph A. FITZMYER, *Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 33, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, Doubleday, 1993, p. 704.

² Cf. references given in her presentation.

³ J. FITZMYER, *Romans*, p. 689. In French: "Accueillir chez soi", "recevoir dans sa société, traiter avec l'affection qu'on doit à un proche" (J. DUPONT, "Accueillants à tous", in *Assemblées du Seigneur*, n.s. 6, 1969, p. 17).

⁴ The image of pilgrimage for the search of *koinonia* was very much present at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993: "Many have spoken of the significance of locating this conference at Santiago de Compostela, the place for penitent pilgrims. As we strip ourselves of false securities, finding in God our true and only identity, daring to be open and vulnerable to each other, we will begin to live as pilgrims on a journey, discovering the God of surprises who leads us into roads which we have not travelled, and we will find in each other true companions on the way" (cf. Report of Section I, n. 27, in Thomas F. BEST and Günther GASSMANN [eds.], *On the way to Fuller Koinonia. Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994, p. 234).

⁵ Cf., for instance, the Report of Section I of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostella 1993, n. 20: "The encounter with the other in the search to establish the *koinonia*, grounded in God's gift, calls for a *kenosis* – a self-giving and a self-emptying of oneself. Such a *kenosis* arouses fear of loss of identity, and invites us to be vulnerable, yet such is no more than faithfulness to the ministry of vulnerability and death of Jesus as he sought to draw human beings into communion with God and each other. He is the pattern and patron of reconciliation which leads to *koinonia*. As individuals and as communities, we are called to establish *koinonia* through a ministry of *kenosis*" (*On the way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 233).

⁶ By-laws of the Faith and Order Commission 3.1.

⁷ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111, Geneva, WCC, 1982.

⁸ "If the baptism celebrated by a community is recognized, then what else in the life of that community may already be recognized as ecclesial? Insofar as they recognize each other's baptisms, the churches may be at the start of developing a baptismal ecclesiology in which to locate other elements of shared belief and life" (Report of Section III, n. 12: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia*, p. 247).

³¹ *So We Believe... So We Pray*, p. 10.

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Ut Unum Sint*, nn. 21-22.

- ⁹ "A common baptism also expresses the paradigmatic nature of the Church in the world as an inclusive community, where men, women and children of different cultures and races can participate freely on an equal basis, where social and economic inequality can be surmounted, and where there is respect for different traditions and capacities, confirmed by the bonds of love for brothers and sisters and in fidelity to the Triune God" (*ibid.*, p. 248).
- ¹⁰ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 7-14 January 1996, Bangkok, Thailand*, Faith and Order Paper No. 172, Geneva, WCC, 1996, pp. 48-49, 56; *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 18-19.
- ¹¹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church. A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181, Geneva, WCC, November 1998, n. 75, p. 36.
- ¹² *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 15-24 June 1999, Toronto, Canada*, Faith and Order Paper No. 183, Geneva, WCC, 1999, pp. 41-46, 88.
- ¹³ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 5-9.
- ¹⁴ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, n. 121; cf. n. 67; Michael KINNAMON (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991*, WCC Publications, Geneva – Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 172-174.
- ¹⁵ The Canberra Statement, n. 2.1 (*Signs of the Spirit*, p. 173).
- ¹⁶ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, n. 63, p. 29.
- ¹⁷ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, box on *koinonia*, after n. 60, p. 28.
- ¹⁸ The Ecclesiology study was strongly recommended in Santiago de Compostela, in 1993, but it draws considerable inspiration from the previous study that resulted in the Faith and Order document *Church and World* (Faith and Order Paper No. 151, 1990) and was initiated at the Faith and Order Plenary in Lima (1982) under the name "The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community".
- ¹⁹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, n. 42-47, p. 21-22.
- ²⁰ Alois MOSSER (Hg.), *"Gottes auserwählte Völker". Erwählungsvorstellungen und kollektive Selbstfindung in der Geschichte*. Pro Oriente, Schriftenreihe der Kommission für südosteuropäische Geschichte 1, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2001.
- ²¹ See e.g. *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 9-16 January 2002, Gazzada, Italy*, Faith and Order Paper No. 191, Geneva, WCC, 2002, p. 69; *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 69-70.
- ²² Brief quotations from the study report "Ecumenical Perspectives on the Human Person".
- ²³ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels. An instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper No. 182, Geneva, WCC, 1998, n. 6, p. 9.
- ²⁴ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 35-38; 93-98.
- ²⁵ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, n. 11, pp. 11-12, and n. 65, pp. 39-40; cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149, Geneva, WCC, 1990, pp. 32-35.
- ²⁶ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, n. 66, p. 40.
- ²⁷ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 3-10 July 2003, Strasbourg, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 193, Geneva, WCC, 2004, pp. 8-12.
- ²⁸ This perception was very much present at the WCC Assembly in Canberra, 1991; cf., for instance, the Report of the Seventh Assembly: "We confessed the Holy Spirit as one with the Father and with Christ, undivided, indivisible, embracing the whole created order within its life-giving, reconciling and redemptive love. Yet we recognised, too, the need for discernment and the danger to speak too easily and quickly about the presence of the spirit, of identifying the Spirit with our own priorities and programmes" (*Signs of the Spirit*, p. 236).
- ²⁹ Claude GEFFRE, "Pour une théologie de la différence. Identité, altérité, dialogue", in *Sedos Bulletin* 33, 2001, pp. 286-296; ID., "Mission Issues in the Contemporary Context of Multifaith Situations", in *International Review of Mission* 86, 1997, 407-409.
- ³⁰ Thomas F. BEST and Dagmar HELLER (eds.), *So We Believe... So We Pray. Towards Koinonia in Worship*, Faith and Order Paper No. 171, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1995.
- ³¹ *So We Believe... So We Pray*, p. 10.
- ³² JOHN PAUL II, *Ut Unum Sint*, nn. 21-22.