

LETTER OF CARDINAL WILLEBRANDS

July 4<sup>th</sup> 1983

Dear Dr Potter,

The Fifth Report of the Joint Working Group gives an accurate account of the present situation and marks a further stage in the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. It also serves as a point of reflection on this relationship. As President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity I wish to inform you from the Catholic side that the report has our general approval. At the same time it is desirable to make some remarks to assist the reading and understanding of it. I hope they may be of use also for the discussion of the collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church which will take place in the Sixth Assembly at Vancouver.

1) The Roman Catholic Church acknowledges with gratitude the ecumenical journey which it has made since the Second Vatican Council when it specified the Catholic principles of ecumenism and it believes that the ecumenical commitment which it made then is irreversible. From that time it has undertaken the relationship with the World Council of Churches. For the Council, while making it abundantly clear that it is not and does not claim to be the whole of the ecumenical movement is an important instrument of it. So the Catholic Church has assured its own collaboration with the different activities of the World Council of Churches particularly in the multilateral dialogue of Faith and Order.

At the same time relationships and dialogues with individual Churches and ecclesial communities, and with Families of Churches also came into existence. This was understood when the Joint Working Group, was set up. In the discussion in the Central Committee in 1965 Dr Lukas Vischer said, "The conversation of the individual churches with the Roman Catholic Church is a spiritual necessity". Along with the member churches of the World Council of Churches the Roman Catholic Church is convinced "that the two types of inter-church conversations, the bilateral... and the multilateral... are complementary to one another

within the ecumenical movement" (The Three Reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations. Faith and Order Paper 107, p.20). And the Roman Catholic Church has taken steps on its side to assure that "both bilateral and multilateral relations are fruitful for the ecumenical movement as a whole" (ibid. p.5). Hence for example the Roman Catholic presence in Faith and Order and its increasing contribution to the work of that Commission have gone hand in hand with the increasing number of bilateral dialogues in which it is involved. It is important for the well-being of the Roman Catholic Church/World Council of Churches relationship that this fact be kept clearly in mind.

2) The present relation of the Roman Catholic Church with the World Council of Churches is one of "fraternal solidarity" (Pope Paul VI in letter to the 5th Assembly of the WCC, 1975) in which it collaborates with a number of programmes of the Council according to its possibilities. Ten years ago the Roman Catholic Church decided not to join the World Council of Churches for "there are factors, some theologically based, which at present militate against membership" (4th Report of the Joint Working Group, 1975, II). This is a reality which has to be taken into account in understanding the relationship and in organising the forms given to it.

The decision not to proceed to membership by no means expresses a denial of the special importance of the World Council of Churches for the whole ecumenical movement. It means that at present the relationship is expressed in various forms of collaboration. One appreciates that this is less than the World Council of Churches would desire. At the same time one has to be aware that the relations of the Roman Catholic Church with the World Council of Churches have, in your own words, "been far more intense than with many member churches" (Central Committee 1976 in Ecumenical Review XXVIII n. 4, p.401). In what it suggests this comment confirms my own belief that it does not do justice to describe the relationship as one of mere collaboration. The reality of it was better captured by Pope Paul VI when he spoke of it as one of "fraternal solidarity" with all the positive connotation of these words, including not only collaboration but also common reflection and prayer, inspired by the words of Christ "that all may be one". They express our common calling to full communion in faith and love. Hence our relation should be profound and of a spiritual nature, in the hope that it may lead us to a common

understanding of the Church as “a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race, ...the sacrament of this saving unity” (LG 9).

Because of this close relationship between Christians and their communities, we should set out to make the most of the actual possibilities in order to give full expression to our “fraternal solidarity”. That is why the Roman Catholic Church has repeatedly declared its desire “to find ways of increased cooperation” (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Joint Working Group, Feb. 1979). If such collaboration is to mean something of course it must be taken seriously on both sides. There must be the will to utilise the possibilities. It is also affected by the working priorities given to various programmes within the World Council of Churches and on the Catholic side.

One reflects that the goal of the ecumenical movement is surely to promote collaboration, common actions and steps which will deepen the communion which flows already from our common baptism. Membership in an ecumenical agency can, in the right circumstances, be important but surely is never an end in itself. The commitment of any church or community to the ecumenical movement will not necessarily mean a uniformity of relationship with existing ecumenical instruments and agencies.

The Roman Catholic Church puts strong emphasis on the unity given by Christ through the Holy Spirit and sees it as central to its own existence. It finds its own reality as Church both in the variety of the local Churches and in the communion among them, building up the unity of the Body of Christ in the one Holy Spirit. This reality finds also expression in its constitution “as a universal fellowship with a universal mission and structure”. Likewise it understands the being of the Church, as mystery of Christ and sacramental sign of his salvation, to be inseparably spiritual reality and visible structure. Hence it cannot admit in its ecumenical relations any project or action which may seem to sit lightly to or reject these ecclesiological realities.

Further, for the sake of the collaboration, the Roman Catholic Church shares the concern of many member churches that the World Council be fully a Council of Churches. Speaking to the Central Committee last year you referred to the need for the World Council of Churches to work more closely with its member churches as well as with the groups and networks with which it is accustomed to work. As this concern becomes more effective in life of the Council it will condi-

tion both our relationship and the collaboration in a positive way.

Reference has often been made to a peculiarity of the relation between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches—on the one hand there is a Church with all that implies of a precise doctrinal position and of pastoral responsibility and on the other a Council of Churches of which the Roman Catholic Church is not a member and which as such does not present its own doctrinal position, apart from its Basis and which does not have direct pastoral responsibility. Rather the Council respects the doctrinal convictions of its member churches and serves their pastoral responsibilities on the regional and international levels. Inevitably the very different nature of the two bodies affects the relationship. Yet surely for a true perspective we must be aware that the basic anomaly is the division among Christians and the attitudes of mind and heart which perpetuate it. Provided the reality of the difference in nature between the two partners is respected in practice, experience shows the relationship is one which has a healing effect on that underlying anomaly of division.

3) It was a very considerable encouragement to the Roman Catholic relations with the World Council of Churches when the Fifth Assembly in 1975 gave first place among the Council's aims to the following: “to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ...”. Without doubt that gave a strong impetus to the Roman Catholic participation in the Faith and Order work of the Council.

This significant work of the Faith and Order Commission is a reminder that it is now achieving substantial and important results after fifty years of careful, unflagging work. Our own experience with the bilateral dialogues, shows also that the work for unity is a patient, persevering process which does not yield its results to impatient insistence and does not respond easily to the need of administrative schedules or deadlines. When the Joint Working Group came into existence, we acknowledged with gratitude and joy that we were able to initiate a fraternal collaboration. The undeniable evidence of the last fifteen years is that the process of understanding in the Roman Catholic/World Council of Churches relationship, is one of maturation rather than of rapid negotiation. But even though its pace has been measured, it is a story of growth. It has become the fashion with some to remember the beginning of the Roman

Catholic/World Council of Churches relationship and the Joint Working Group as a time of great achievement which has not been sustained. The reality is quite other. Looking back over the reports and working papers of those early days one is struck by how tentative and limited, even if hopeful, those beginnings were. Real development and consolidation has taken place over recent years which is truly striking even if much remains to be done. May we have the steadiness, faith, and the vision of hope needed to make the ecumenical process fruitful, otherwise we shall not find an agreement on the goal of unity.

On the Roman Catholic side we are aware that the coming of the RCC to the ecumenical movement with its specific theological understandings and traditions can represent a considerable problem for the World Council of Churches and others who have served the ecumenical movement in the past half century. In the baptism, eucharist and ministry study, some certain Catholic insights represent a new factor for the Council and some of its member churches. Of course the way in which this reality and others of a similar kind are dealt with will condition the Roman Catholic Church/World Council of Churches relationship and the role of the Joint Working Group in the coming years.

In my preceding remarks I have touched on questions which are present either explicitly or implicitly in the first sections of the Fifth Report and some of which have surfaced in the discussion which has gone on in various places in recent times about the Roman Catholic Church/World Council of Churches relations. It seemed best to do this in a simple, straightforward manner so that they may be taken fully into account as we look to the way ahead.

4) When one considers the plans for the future work of the Joint Working Group as outlined in the Fifth Report it is evident that; already a substantial amount of work is accounted for by the two titles "The Way Towards Unity" and "Common Witness". The relationships with the Faith and Order Commission and with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism which have made possible the development of these two studies promise a sound development. Hence there is a good basis for moving ahead with the tasks and projects which now need to be carried out in these two fields.

Social Collaboration is a field where we continue to move slowly although much ecumenical collaboration at the local level takes place precisely in

this field. We hope ways may be found to improve the situation. In trying to do so special attention should be paid to the principles and methods involved and the underlying theological presuppositions be examined. For new problems tend to emerge in some of these presuppositions which affect the principles and methods. Already the joint consultative group has begun to look at some of the problems which must be faced if the collaboration in social thought and action is to improve.

One can only be pleased that the first priority for the coming period is given to "Ecumenical Formation". This is a challenge for all who have specific ecumenical responsibility. We have tended to take too much for granted that there is a sound knowledge of the ecumenical movement, of its history, and of the principles which are at stake. It is necessary that the topic of ecumenical formation be approached in terms of theological content as well as of pedagogical process and method. At issue also is the question of communication. We see that the studies commissioned by the Joint Working Group are too little known and used. In the next period then we have the task of making the Joint Working Group and its work better known and of interpreting its significance at various levels so that its contribution to the ecumenical movement may be more effective.

I believe that the Fifth Report provides an adequate outline for carrying on and developing the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches in the coming period. It seems to me a realistic but determined effort to move ahead in a way that will promote the goal of the ecumenical movement.

May the Father of all good through the mission of His Son, the life of the world, and the Holy Spirit, the Lifegiver, bless the work of the Assembly and be always with you.

I remain  
Sincerely  
yours

+ Johannes Cardinal Willebrands