

#### IV. RELATIONS WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

This is the third time that a WCC Assembly officially discusses the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches and its member churches. The Assembly *approves* the Fifth Report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. The Report offers a frank, realistic description of the present ecumenical situation, an accurate summary of the activities of the JWG since the Nairobi Assembly, and clear proposals for future work. For its response, the Assembly also gratefully acknowledges the response of “general approval” from the Roman Catholic Church, in the official letter to the WCC General Secretary Dr. P. Potter by Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, the President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (4 July, 1983; the letter to be included in the official minutes).

##### A. General Considerations

Two affirmations deserve to be underlined:

1. Overarching all considerations of continual relationships between the RCC and the member churches, whether on the world, regional or local levels, should always be the awareness of the common ground and the vision of the common goal of the ecumenical movement: “a oneness based on the real, though imperfect communion existing between all who believe in Christ and are baptized in his name” (Report, 1.3); and the goal of “visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ” (Constitution of the WCC, Article III). Only by a firm commitment in faith to this goal can the churches accept “their mutual responsibility and accountability before the world” as agents of reconciliation, humbly see their need already to express visibly in common witness that growing communion which already exists among the churches (cf Report, IV.2), and to overcome the obstacles which impede the manifestation of full ecclesial communion (cf. 1.3).

2. With this shared commitment and vision, the RCC and the WCC and its member churches have general criteria to evaluate various forms of collaboration in ecumenical solidarity. Since the 1972 answer to the membership question—“not in the immediate future”—still stands and the question is not yet ready to be taken up again (cf. 1.7), the realistic question already posed in the Fourth Report 1975 remains valid and should ever be kept in mind:

“How can the RCC and the WCC, without forming one structured fellowship, intensify their joint activities and thereby strengthen the unity, the common witness, and the renewal of the churches?” Or in the words of Cardinal Willebrands, if such increased collaboration “is to mean something it must be taken seriously on both sides. There must be the will to utilize the possibilities”.

##### B. Ongoing and Future Collaboration

The Fifth Report provides a helpful summary of the activities of the JWG since Nairobi, its achievements, encountered problems, and attempts to learn from failures. Five aspects in the Report deserve to be underlined, but they should not detract from the other main points and their details:

1. As in its Nairobi periods, the JWG has had its most visible success in initiating a number of joint studies. The study “Toward a Confession of the Common Faith,” already identifies that such a common expression of the apostolic faith today is one of the requirements for visible unity, and now this long-term study project of the Faith and Order Commission will complement the convergence texts on baptism, eucharist and ministry. This coordinated effort is strengthened by the full RC membership in the F&O Commission. The other joint study, “Common Witness,” evaluates the “new tradition” of experiences which draw the churches closer to one another and to the ground and source of their unity in Christ. Diversity in witness which responds to different pastoral situations and contemporary challenges is no longer seen as a sign of dividedness in faith; rather, it can be considered as enriching the understanding of the common faith of the church. The churches assign different degrees of significance to formulated doctrine and authoritative teaching as criteria for the unity within and among the churches. The experiences of common witness can help them to discover afresh the source of their faith beyond the differences of inherited doctrinal formulations.

These two studies have opened fresh perspectives which need to be pursued. How much unity of doctrinal expression of the faith is required in order to enable the churches to witness together? How do we evaluate the claim of some that there are moral issues that are “confessional” and therefore potentially divisive? How much diversity in doctrine, moral teaching, and witness is compatible with the confession of the one faith in the One Church? Behind these questions is the unavoidable issue: the teaching authority of and in the church.

2. While these observations and questions indicate the fruitfulness of the studies initiated by the JWG, the Fifth Report also reveals the unevenness of collaboration between the WCC programme units and sub-units and the corresponding offices of the Holy See.

One notices, for example, the visible relationship and active, ongoing RC involvement in the Faith and Order Commission, the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism, Dialogue with People of Living Faith and Ideologies.

But in the area of social collaboration, new difficulties have occurred. The Report outlines the emerging ecumenical convergence on affirmations about Christian social responsibility, particularly in the areas of human development, peace and human rights (IV.3). But the strong, visible symbol of common effort which was given by SODEPAX (Committee on Society, Development and Peace) was diminished by the 1979 decision to terminate SODEPAX. Many on both sides interpreted this decision as a weakening, or, even a withdrawal from a shared commitment to active collaboration.

The JWG acknowledges the influences of different structures and ways of operation (III.3.b) and emphasizes that what "ultimately matters...is the will to work together effectively" (ibid.). The Assembly thus welcomes every effort of the new Joint Consultative Group for social thought and action to find realistic visible, "flexible forms of collaboration on the international, as well as on the national and local levels" (IV.3), for example, in common witness for peace, for the defense of human rights, including the right to religious freedom.

3. The Fifth Report focuses on relationships between the RCC and the WCC at the world level. But the JWG also acknowledges that the initiative for common witness has moved more and more to the local and national levels, and involves a wide variety of agents from both the member churches and the RCC; i.e., regional, national and local councils of churches, ecumenical groups, centres and organizations, religious orders, etc. The JWG has tried through surveys and analyses of case studies to assess the new experiences of local ecumenism and their implications for the relationship between the RCC and the WCC at world level (Highly recommended for wide circulation and joint use is the JWG *Common Witness* study). It would seem that a continuing, more comprehensive analysis and understanding of the various levels is needed if future creative opportunities are

to emerge. Included in such studies should also be analyses of those situations in which there is little, if any, common witness or its noticeable decrease.

4. Many of the member churches of the WCC have entered into bilateral dialogues with the RCC at national or world levels. At the same time, these dialogues complement the multilateral dialogue which takes place within the Faith & Order Commission or within other WCC theological and pastoral studies. Some of the bilateral dialogues "have reached a stage that is of considerable significance for the partners and the ecumenical movement as a whole" (1.6). What are the ways in which all of the churches can be mutually edified and enriched by the results of both the bilateral and multilateral dialogues? How can the RCC help the WCC to benefit from the insights which are gathered from its varied experiences in these bilateral conversations? Are there some emerging common concerns which now can be discussed within the fellowship of the WCC?

5. The Assembly strongly supports the Report's insistence on "the present urgency of the task of ecumenical formation" (IV.4) and the recommendation that this be the first priority for the coming period. As Cardinal Willebrands remarks, "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". Indeed, "the ecumenical dimension is an indispensable part of all processes of Christian formation and nurture, be it the formation of laity, youth work, programmes of catechesis and religious training, or theological training" (IV.4).

### C. *The Joint Working Group*

The Assembly accepts the JWG's self-description of its ongoing role and future tasks (V). The JWG in itself is important for the visibility which it gives to the RCC/WCC relationship — a symbol of a shared commitment to the one ecumenical movement. The new emphasis on ecumenical formation has implications for the organization, composition and style of the JWG. For example, besides being a necessary liaison body between two administrative and programme structures on the world level, the JWG should also be the direct listener and responder of local insights and should provide a framework for the sharing of experiences between different contexts, whether local, national or regional.

In approving the Fifth Report of the JWG, the Assembly recommends that:

- a) The Central Committee nominate to the JWG persons with experiences in local and regional ecumenical collaboration with the RCC. Such persons should be greater in number than representatives of the administrative structures of the parent bodies, in order to explore more adequately both problems and opportunities for significant ecumenical dialogue.
- b) The JWG be enabled to hold at least some of its meetings outside its previous site, i.e., Western Europe. On the occasion of its meeting, the JWG would participate in local ecumenical activities.
- c) The JWG should consider for implementation not only the specific recommendations above (part B) but also all of those recommendations which are offered in the Fifth Report under "Proposals for Future Work" (cf. V).
- d) The parent bodies be even more concerned with the higher visibility of the JWG and with the communication of its findings to interested member churches and to the wider RC constituency.