

## A COMMENT AND REFLECTIONS ON "TOWARDS A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH"

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The international dialogue between the Roman-Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches is less known than the Anglican — Roman Catholic (ARCIC) and the Lutheran — Roman Catholic commission. The documents they produced moved indeed the ecumenical waters. This lack of interest is due in part to the fact that the Roman Catholic/Reformed dialogue has published until now only one major report, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*,<sup>1</sup> in which the results of the first stage of the dialogue, 1970-1977 are presented. The document, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, published in this bulletin, makes available the findings of the second round of talks. Looking at the partners of the conversations, it is clear that the results deserve close attention. They are indeed of great importance for the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Protestant tradition as a whole.

The dialogue is sponsored and organized, on one hand, by the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, involving thus the Roman Catholic Church officially at its most universal level, and on the other hand, by the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC). This alliance was instituted in 1970 through the merger of the *Alliance of Reformed Churches* (1875) and the *International Congregational Council* (1891). It constitutes thus a world-wide fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational churches, that retrace their origins to the Protestant Reformation of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, as it was developed in Switzerland and Southern Germany by Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), and in particular by John Calvin (1509-1564) and spread world-wide through mission and emigration from the Netherlands, England and Scotland. "Reformed" and "Reformation" refer thus to a particular brand within the Protestant movement that considered itself more consistent with the original ideals of the Lutheran movement. It is not immaterial for the assessment of the present document, that ecclesiological issues with regard to the organization of the Church according to the Word of God played an

important role in the controversies within the Protestant world. It lead these churches to call themselves, not after their initiator as the Lutherans did, neither after a nation, but after their *church order*, whether *Congregational* or *Presbyterian*. A specific church order becomes thus a constitutive part of the confessional identity of these churches. They stress either the local aspect of the community or congregation gathered actually for worship and service, or the synodal upbuilding, by which the church is constituted at all levels by synods, representing the various categories of ministers and laity.

"The WARC counts today, the report recalls, about 170 member churches. The majority of the member churches of the alliance are to be found in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific" (26).<sup>2</sup> This universality explains the variety of concerns alive within the world-wide Reformed family. The strong presence of Reformed Christians in South-Africa e.g. explains the sensitivity of the WARC, and accordingly of the document, with regard to the injustice caused by racism, in particular by *Apartheid* (158). To the majority of member-churches does not correspond an equal proportion of churchmembers: the majority of Reformed Christians are still to be found in those areas where the Reformation started in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and in the United States of America.

### 1. THE DIALOGUE: ITS HISTORY

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council various bilateral dialogues were set up between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches. Due to the discrete role the WARC plays with regard to its member churches, wanting to favour more the local initiatives, the international dialogue was taken up rather late, in 1970.<sup>3</sup> The results of the first series of talks were published in the progress report of the discussions and findings, entitled *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, which we mentioned already. The report deals mainly with ecclesiological issues. The leading concern of the talks was to "discern together what they [the two

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<sup>1</sup> See, SPCU, *Information Service* 35, 1977, pp. 18-34. Also: *Growth in Agreement*, ed. by H. MEYER and L. VISCHER (Faith and Order Papers 108). New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press/Geneva: WCC 1984, 433-463.

<sup>2</sup> Without further indication the number between brackets refers to the paragraph number of *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, § 2-3.



communities] must do in order to become more credible in the eyes of the world"<sup>4</sup>. The talks dealt with Christ's relationship to the Church, the teaching authority of the Church, the presence of Christ in the world, the Eucharist, and finally, ministry. Though not all the questions mentioned in the first report were taken up, the following round kept and even emphasized this ecclesiological orientation by taking as a topic, *the Church as People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit*. Starting in Rome in 1984 the group met five times under the presidency of Dean Lewis Mudge, Reformed, and Fr. Bernard Sesboué s.j., Roman-Catholic. *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* is the progress report of this second round. More than the previous text it constitutes a thematic unity, leading into suggestions for further work and rapprochement in view of the reestablishment of full communion.

Before we return in detail to each chapter, we first give an overview of the document.

1. *Towards a reconciliation of memories*: both partners in dialogue try to read the history of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, and their separation since, with "greater objectivity and more balanced judgement" (14).

2. As a common basis for further reflection a *common confession of faith* is produced.

3. The calling of the Church is, of course, a part of such a confession of faith. But here, properly, the two confessions discover, along with agreements, divergent positions with regard to the relation of the Gospel and the Church, that may "appear incompatible or incommensurable" (92).

4. The last chapter indicates some practical steps, to be taken upon the *Way forward* towards greater communion.

The opportuneness of a document on ecclesiology must not be underestimated. The issue is on the agenda of several other conversations, such as those with the Orthodox, the Anglicans and the Lutherans. Several responses to the Faith and Order document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* stressed the urgent need for such a study. It is seen as a condition for the identification and the clearing away of other difficulties upon the road toward unity. In the conversations between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant traditions the difference in the comprehension of the Church is considered by many as the decisive point of division, including not only theoretical views, but concrete attitudes as well. Focusing on two words, that constitute the shibboleths of the confessional controversies, "Word" and "Sacrament", some readily oppose the Catholic Church as the "Church of the Sacrament" to the Protestant view of the "Church of the Word". The document that "brings — indeed

— important aspects of ecclesiology into bilateral conversations for the first time" (3), can help to open the deadlock.

## 2. RECONCILIATION OF MEMORIES

Under this title the first chapter gives a survey of how the Reformed and the Catholic participants interpret the events of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, the evolution afterwards, and the contemporary attitudes towards the other interlocutor in the light of the ecumenical rapprochement. As the report states, the chapter "consists of accounts, written with consultation by each delegation, of our respective histories in relation to one another, as we see them now after five years of annual dialogues" (12). Such an historical reconsideration is of course quite schematic, relying on the conclusions of previous detailed research and asking for further confirmation.

This revisiting is done under the motto of *reconciliation of memories*. It is seen as an important step on the way forward: "Coming to terms with these memories is one of the main elements of ecumenical progress" (154). This concern gives a certain inner cohesion and dynamism to the whole text. I see in this englobing perspective one of the main contributions of *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*. It is in fact the first time that such a concern is so expressly articulated in an ecumenical text.

The approach refers in particular to the historic interpretation the churches give of each other. They see one another through the "memories" they have accumulated during centuries of separation, opposition, antagonism and even bloody wars. "In the past, we tended to read our histories both selectively and polemically" (13). One could have added that "polemics" was powerfully assisted by its twin-brother, "apologetics", trying to prove first of all to one's own supporters the rightness of one's cause against dissidents. Denigration and even bedeviling by bitter polemics was twined to self-exaltation by one-sided and partisan apologetics, not only in history and theology, but also in popular writings and iconography. They clouded the eye with which we looked at fellow-Christians and heavily conditioned the social and cultural patterns of judgement. Getting aware of the socio-psychological mechanisms at work is a condition for a purification and a reconciliation of personal and collective memories. Indeed, a reconsideration of history will help. And modern scholarship has already done this. "A new measure of objectivity has become possible. If we still inevitably interpret and select, at least we are aware that we do, and what that fact means as we strive for greater objectivity and more balanced judgement" (14). However, is it possible to come eventually "to a reconciliation of memories, in which we will begin to share one

<sup>4</sup> *Presence* § 5.



sense of the past rather than two" (16)? No doubt, the ecumenical involvement itself creates its own "memory" of togetherness and reconciliation. It brings about a growing sense of shared identity (153). But speaking of unity in reconciled diversity, we must admit that different "memories" are part and parcel of such a diversity. They will remain even tainted by tension. They are a constitutive part of one's historic identity and of the different self-interpretations, that have "fostered the establishment of whole sets of different values, symbols, assumptions and institutions — in a word, different religious and ecclesial cultures" (62). "Reconciliation" accomplishes that the differences are drawn away from their "isolation" into "relatedness" and into a wider horizon of reconciliation (32). Ready to listen, the partners accept being questioned and challenged, to discover complementary aspects in their different traditions, to combine appreciation for the questions and insights of the Reformers, with recognition that the Reformed can also learn from the Roman Catholic Church, and to realize that Reformed and Roman Catholics need each other in their attempt to be more faithful to the Gospel (32). The reconciliation of memories includes, but also surpasses the hermeneutical and historiographical effort: it is part of the general effort of conversion, repentance and forgiveness (63).

### 3. OUR COMMON CONFESSION OF FAITH

Efforts towards reconciliation presuppose a "common ground" as their primordial context. Therefore the second chapter presents a *common confession of faith*. Such a high and pretentious title may need a warning and a justification and the content needs careful examination: "We give this affirmation of faith the title of 'confession' even though it is neither a confession in the ecclesial sense nor a complete statement of faith. We do so because we are convinced that the importance of what we are able to say together merits such a title" (64). By doing so the commission makes clear its starting point and affirms its standing on common ground:

"We wish to voice our conviction that what unites us as Christians is more important, more essential, than that which separates us as Roman Catholics and Reformed. Even if full communion is not yet granted us, we cannot define our relations to each other simply in terms of separation and division" (65).

The re-examination of the priorities raises necessarily the question, "whether or not [the reasons which brought about our separation] are still of such a nature as to justify our division" (65).

It is striking how much the orientation of this common confession of faith is conditioned by the concerns that stood at the heart of the controversy between Catholics and Reformed. The orientation is in fact strongly soteriological. The first article confesses the faith in *Christ, Mediator and Reconciler*: "Mediation and reconciliation [between God and humankind] have been embodied and located, named and personified in Jesus of Nazareth" (70). The New Testament faith that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19) and that Christ is the one and unique Mediator between God and humankind, is the center of Calvin's Christology as it is exposed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Thus the work of Christ reveals that he is the Son within the Trinity. We confess accordingly "Jesus Christ as at once true God and true human being, at once one with God and joined in solidarity with humankind, not an intermediary between God and humanity but a genuine Mediator, able to bring together God and humanity in immediate communion" (73). The Son reveals also the role of the Holy Spirit, present and active throughout the history of salvation (74-75).

Faith in Christ includes — as a second article — faith in our justification by grace and faith alone, accomplished and offered in Jesus Christ. Faith is above all reception of pardon, liberation and life with God. It contains also a call to bear fruits worthy of that grace: "justification by faith brings with it the gift of sanctification which can grow continuously as it creates life, justice and liberty" (79).

However there is no justification in isolation. It occurs in the community of believers or is ordered towards the gathering of such a community (80). This conviction leads into the extensive third article of the confession of faith, which constitutes also the main issue of the document, and particularly of the third chapter, *The Calling of the Church* within God's eternal plan of salvation for humankind. The text wants to show the novelty and radical change within a continuity brought by the Incarnation of the Word and by the foundation of the Church. The Church is a community of men and women called to share in the salvific activity of Christ Jesus (85). Describing the specific role of the Church in this activity is a crucial issue in a dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. The Church does not exercise a mediation complementary to that of Christ. It is not clothed with a power independent of the gift of grace.

"The Church is at once the place, the instrument, and the minister chosen by God to make heard Christ's Word and to celebrate the sacraments in God's name throughout the centuries. When the Church faithfully preaches the Word of Salvation and celebrates the sacraments,



obeying the command of the Lord and invoking the power of the Spirit, it is sure of being heard, for it carries out in its ministry the action of Christ himself" (86).

This common confession of faith did not intend to be a complete confession in the traditional sense. It remains a fragment, but it shows already an impressive commonality on articles that were long considered divisive. We think however, that for the aim pursued, the first article on God the Creator would have deserved particular attention. It would have broadened notably the cosmological context in which Christ and the Church appear. Speaking of the Church from Abel and of the covenant in paragraph 81 widens surely the horizon. But this view is not kept through consequently. The creation sets the universal space and history, that is already God's Kingdom, but is called to become it in fullness. The whole creation is groaning... (*Rm* 8.22). As Creator God is working sovereignly. Jesus Christ and his Church are set in this time and space to be ministers of a salvation that is destined for *all* in a Kingdom that transcends all historical expressions of catholicity and universality, which are at best the signs of it and make our hearts restless until they come at rest in God's Kingdom. Looking at the creation as a whole, and at the human being as an image of God sheds light upon the understanding of the deepest foundation of unity and communion. The creatures confessing their faith in the incommensurable Creator will discover also another and more fundamental aspect of God's *hiddenness*, than the one mentioned in § 69 (b). In creation the Creator, in a hidden way, is near and present.

#### 4. THE CHURCH WE CONFESS AND OUR DIVISIONS IN HISTORY

According to the hermeneutical progression of the document leading from commonalities to differences, the latter have to be tackled at some moment, but in a new context. The divergences are located in a different comprehension of the connection between that which we together confess concerning the origin and the calling of the Church, on the one hand, and the *forms of its historical existence*. In fact, we do not agree fully in admitting that some historical forms and embodiments correspond really to this calling. The churches agree upon the ministerial and instrumental role of the Church. They do not agree on the forms in which it is exercised.

The report discusses two areas: first, the views on continuity and discontinuity in the Church's history, and then the interpretation of the Church's visibility and ministerial order. It is fair to refer from the outset to a delicate and underlying question, that is treated only towards the end of the section, in paragraph 129, and raises the question of the closer identification of

the Church with its visible and historical aspects and structures. How to assess the ecclesiality of the various communities? What does the claim of Vatican II that the Church of Christ *subsists* in the Roman Catholic Church mean for the ecclesial dimension of other churches? Is the claim exclusive? From the answer to these preliminary questions depends to a large extent the attitude with which we meet the other churches. The question is in no way a mere theoretical corollary. The answer shapes in a fundamental way a Church's involvement in the quest for unity. An elucidation of this will not spring only from a study of the Vatican Council. It will also have to take into account the ecumenical experience since the Council: what does it mean *ecclesiologically* to stand on common ground?

The chapter opens with a description of two different ecclesiological approaches, viz. the *Church as creatura verbi*, and the *Church as Sacrament*. The Protestant tradition speaks after Luther of the *Church as a creature of the Word*: "The Church is the creation of the Word because the Word itself is God's creative Word of grace by which we are justified and renewed" (101). The Word creates the Church out of our being nothing: "God said and so it was". In analogy to the first creation we can understand all other divine interventions working by his word in a threefold form: the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, the Word spoken in God's history with his people and recorded in the Scripture, and lastly the Word heard and proclaimed in the preaching, witness and action of the Church (96). The result of the emphasis upon hearing and obedience was that "against the appeal to continuity, custom and institution, the Reformed appealed to the living voice of the living God as the essential and decisive factor by which the Church must live, if it will live at all" (99). The reception of the Word in faith stands at the center. Institutions, necessary as they may be, are always under the judgement of the Word.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic ecclesiology has described the Church rather in terms of *sacrament*. The Council speaks in *Lumen Gentium* (§ 1) of the Church as "a kind of sacrament, or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind". The view was developed further after the Council. The intention in doing so was not to belittle the absolute Lordship of Christ over the Church and its total dependence upon him. It wanted rather to draw attention to the other pole, the *human and visible aspect* of God's presence in the Church. "The terms *sacrament* and *sign*.. designate the Church at once as the place of presence and the place of distance; and they depict the Church as instrument and minister of the unique mediation of Christ. Of this unique mediation the Church is the servant, but never either its source or its mistress" (107). Accordingly the



visible, institutional and historical aspect acquires theological relevance and is seen as an effective sign and manifestation of God's presence and faithfulness.

After having warned against the onesidedness they can engender (112), the paper rightly states that the two conceptions can be envisaged as complementary and as the poles of a creative tension between both traditions (113). Why not even a challenge and a necessary correction of possible imbalance? On the one hand the Church must confess that it is a creation of the Word, and thus recognize God's absolute Lordship over the Church. But by hearing and obeying the Church is more than a dead *tool* in the hand of a craftsman. It is really a community of persons, fellow-workers, servants, stewards, ambassadors, living and resourceful witnesses (117), called with their own historicity, creativity and responsibility to obey freely in total dependence on God, their Creator. Threatened however with becoming unfaithful, they confess their sins, together with their trust in the mercy of God, who promised to remain eternally faithful to his people. Both, *Word* and *sacrament*, carry along with the story of their signification, tainted by centuries of confessional polemics, the two dimensions of being *human signs and words of God's presence*.

This tension and the difference of emphasis work themselves out in two specific areas. They are examined in the rest of the chapter: first, the continuity of the Church throughout the ages, and, secondly, the visibility and the ministerial order of the Church.

Dealing with *the continuity of the Church* raises the question of God's fidelity and our sinfulness. It gives the opportunity to discuss not only the need, but also the meaning of reform in the Church, and in the concrete the meaning of the events of the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century. How deep in fact did they affect the unity of the Church? Did the rupture really strike at the continuity in the Church, as Catholics assert? (123) However, the need for reform is not due uniquely to sinfulness. It is linked also to the historicity and provisionality of all human achievements. And so the churches will always have to match the challenges of the various times and cultures. The text calls for a discernment of the spirit, "i.e. to distinguish in the process the work of human sinfulness from the work of the Spirit... We should not seek to justify ourselves here. We must each assume responsibility for our own past and for that part of the sin which was our own" (188). Of course and indeed! Nevertheless, we should not reduce the efforts to a discernment within the binomium *work of the Spirit versus human sinfulness*. As a matter of fact we will soon experience that we are entering a thick and inextricable scrub of historical contingent events in which various mechanisms, interests and decisions were at work and as a result of which our judgments are marked by unavoidable ambiguity.

Even recognizing our responsibility we will never get out of the entanglement, without trusting that "in everything God works for good with those who love him" (*Rm* 8:28). So we are called to *forgive*. The effort to recognize the positive meaning of the Reformation challenge does not remove all of the existing divergences, but it puts them in a new light and creates a new relatedness. The paper sums up some of the divergences. They are linked with the theological momentum of the visible signs and realities through which the Spirit works. What is at stake is not so much the *existence*, but rather the *authority* of the living tradition and of the visible institutions of the Church. It is not so much the ingredients of the process, as it is their mutual relation and their weight and authority within the process that create the difference (121).

The effort to assess the theological meaning of the Protestant Reformation within the general call for reform within Western Christianity is worthwhile being pursued, as is asked in § 124 (1) in view of the reconciliation of memories. What is indicated too succinctly in this and the previous paragraph would have to be deepened. The history of the interpretations of the Reformation is heavily conditioned by the growing ideological estrangement between the denominations. The impact of the mutual and formal *excommunications* should also be explored. How can they be understood in an ecumenical context? The past anathemas as a matter of fact are not merely past events. They continue to be often a heavy burden upon our collective memories and real blockages in our mutual relations.

The difference of comprehension with regard to the relation between the Gospel and the Church is noticeable also in the explanation of the *visibility of the Church and the relevance of its ministerial order*. It is not so that the Reformed churches separate the visible from the invisible Church, whereas the Catholic Church keeps both together, and even tends to identify them. Both accept that the "invisible Church is the hidden side of the visible earthly Church" (127) and that it "lives in the world as a structured community", enabled to serve as an instrument of Christ for the salvation of the world (128). But we disagree on the closer identification of the Church with its visible aspects and structures. Where does the Church *subsist*? What is the ecclesiological density and identity of the visible side in relation to the hidden reality? The paper rightly links this more fundamental question with the concrete mission of the Church and in particular with its ministerial order. After a short description of the three dimensions of ministry, the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of oversight, (*episkope*), the document shows in close connection with the previous report, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, some areas of divergence that deserve further exploration and offer new challenges.



With regard to the question of doctrinal authority in the Church one could ask first of all whether there is not a fundamental dissimilarity between the terms of the comparison, viz. the supreme authority of the Word of God in Scripture, accepted by all, and a God-given authority vested in the Church, that is differently weighed by the churches. Both can be decisive authorities on a *different* level. For all Christians the Word of God in Scripture is a *norma normans* (121). But this conviction does not cancel the problem of the *proper* authority — which is of another kind — of the preacher and the interpreter, and even of every believer in his own position. Linked to more fundamental questions on the nature of the Church, and even on the ontological status of earthly reality as expressed, either in scholastic and metaphysical categories, or in more existential and relational ones, there remains a difference in weighing the personal teaching authority of the interpreters.

Next, divergences are listed regarding the sacraments, viz. their number, understanding and ministering, and also regarding ordination. More space is given to the role of the *episkope*. In the ecumenical discussion today that term does not indicate the specific ministry of a *bishop*, but more generally, the *function of oversight* in the various forms it has in the different traditions. So it is possible to find "episcopal" features in churches that have no *bishops*, such as in the Reformed Churches. Although there is agreement that such an episkope must be exercised in a collegial way, there is a disagreement about "who is regarded as *episkopos* at these different levels and what is the function or role of the *episkopos*" (142). A short description of such a ministry shows again a difference of accentuation because of a more ontological and institutional approach in the Catholic view and a kerygmatic-functional one in the Reformed tradition.

Finally reference is made to the "particularly difficult issue of the structure of ministry required for communion in the universal Church" (143), viz. to the role of the bishop of Rome and his "service on behalf of the unity of the whole Church in apostolic faith and life" (142b). As a first approach the commission suggests study of "the significance there is for the Church today of the New Testament findings on the role of Peter and its interpretation in the ancient Church" (144).

## 5. THE WAY FORWARD

The first of the five directions indicated, asks to take into account the *diversity of situations* in which interconfessional relations evolve at the local level: "initiatives should be taken to deepen Christian fellowship in each country". The results of the international dialogue can serve thereby as a stimulus and an encouragement (150-151).

Secondly some indications are given with regard to sacramental life: A formal agreement on *mutual recognition of baptism* is an urgent and concrete step that must be taken without delay (152c). Despite the inherent difficulties, confessionally *mixed marriages* can be seen as an opportunity of encounter between the two traditions. They call for shared pastoral responsibility "in a manner which supports the integrity of each person and respects their rights" (152c). Notwithstanding the progress made in a common understanding of the *Eucharist*, as it has been already expressed in *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (§§ 67-92) and reaffirmed in the present document, the statement recalls that because of the difference in the understanding of the intimate relation between the Church, the confession of faith and the Eucharist, the Roman Catholic Church is not yet in a position to celebrate the Eucharist together with the Reformed churches.

We have already dwelled upon the third point, the importance of the *reconciliation of memories*.

Fourthly, living for each other as Church means also bearing *common witness in the world today* (157). Such an appeal has been heard often in the ecumenical movement. Unfortunately, it risks remaining rhetoric as long as mutual trust and commitment are not strengthened and the instruments for such witness are not set up.

The document finally calls for further studies on *what kind of unity we seek*, and what the agreed vision and the ultimate goal are (161). The paragraph refers hereby to the studies on *conciliar fellowship* presented by the World Council of Churches.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The report, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, is one of the first to deal with a central issue of the present ecumenical conversations. It does it at a moment that the ecumenical movement at large has become aware that a dialogue on ecclesiology is urgent. Such a reflection is not only an item on the agenda of the ecumenical dialogues. Every church has to take up the issue and must consider the ecclesiological implications of its ecumenical commitment. According to the challenges of the most recent ecumenical dialogues, Catholic ecclesiology too must confront the conciliar documents on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, written at the moment that the Catholic Church stood on the threshold of its ecumenical involvement, with its experience since that time and with the results of the dialogues the Council asked for. What is the ecclesiological starting point of such a reflection? What are its framework and ecclesial coordinates? Do we start from a *hermeneutic of separation*, in which the churches consider first their



divisions and try to recompose the communion from outside by putting together the fragments? Or do we rather develop a *hermeneutic of unity*, by situating the divisions within the horizon of a more fundamental unity that can never be severed because it is God's gift to his Church? In such a prospective we have to overcome the disunity endogenously and from within, by increasing our efforts of reconciliation, forgiveness and communion in prayer and service. Both approaches can be found in the ecumenical endeavors. The first is perhaps prevailing. The second is probably the most promising.

Though the report speaks of a "still fragile fellowship" (160) and states that "we are still far from being able to proclaim full communion" (161), referring thus to the "imperfection" of what is currently called "imperfect communion", it builds upon the already existing commonality and stresses thus the communion underneath "imperfection". Several times the paper uses the term *common ground*, that was described some years ago in the *Fourth Official Report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*.<sup>5</sup> The existing ties are summarized in § 4:

"Both communions confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, affirm the Trinitarian faith of the apostolic Church through the ages, and observe the one Baptism into the threefold Name. In recent years Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians have begun, in many places and at many different levels, to share the experience of fellowship and to seek fuller communion in truth and love for the sake of our common service of Jesus Christ in the World. *Our churches share more common ground than previously we were able to see*".

It includes also a calling "to live and witness together to the fullest extent possible now, and to work together toward future reconciliation. The common ground we share compels us to be open toward one another, and to aspire to that communion into which the Spirit seeks to lead us" (6). The way forward leads over common ground:

"The common ground that unites our churches is far greater than has usually been assumed. We start from the premise that God has already granted us unity in Christ. It is not for us to create unity, for in Christ it is already given for us. It will become visible in our midst as and when

we turn to him in faith and obedience and we realize fully in our churches what he expects from us. We firmly believe that the unifying power of the Holy Spirit must prove stronger than all the separation that has occurred through our human sinfulness. This confirms our conviction that we must work for the ultimate goal of full communion in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship" (146).

In order to measure better the ecclesiological relevance of the already existing communion we should ponder the significance of the common confession of faith presented in the second chapter of the report. In the light of an ecclesiology of communion such an assessment shows that communion — be it still notably imperfect, goes beyond the bonds that have been created by baptism. It is alive already in a common confession of faith and makes us thus partners in search for a full communion.

It is the merit of the report to have charted and inventoried the discussion on the Church as it is present in a dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Protestant tradition. The complexity of the issue is related also to the fact that discussion on the Church is never a merely theoretical and doctrinal matter. It touches also the concrete *practice* of the churches, their order, their way of living, their identity and many historical and contingent forms and idiosyncrasies. Dialogues on the Church will continue to be frustrating. It is therefore important that the commission went beyond a comparative ecclesiology and began from the awareness of commonality. So it was able to look at the divergences within the horizon of the common confession of faith and of living already in a community of forgiveness and of kinship (65). Upon such a common ground one can move forwards, as partners in a search for full communion. That goal is not external to the journey. It is lived in a provisional and imperfect manner en route, by conversion to God and to one another, by continual reconciliation and forgiveness, by living relationships, by common prayer and service. On that road the churches will be called to recognize formally and authoritatively the various stages of a growing together in communion. The ecumenical endeavour being a process of growth, the challenging question will return again and again, "whether or not the reasons which brought about our separation are still of such a nature as to justify our division" (65). This question is a goad for further progress. It is an invitation to discern continuously how the Holy Spirit is leading his Church to a witness of full and visible communion.

<sup>5</sup> *Breaking Barriers*. Nairobi 1975, ed. by David M. Paton. Geneva: WCC 1975, pp. 272-275.

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