

## COMMON WITNESS AND PROSELYTISM

### (A Study Document)

*The following document, prepared by a Joint Theological Commission, was received by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches at its meeting in May, 1970, which recommended it for publication.*

*The document was elaborated by the commission on the initiative of the Joint Working Group. The commission held two full meetings (in Arnoldshain, Germany, in 1968, and in Zagork, USSR, in 1969). Various subsequent drafts were submitted to a wide group of consultants. The text being presented now has been formulated in the light of comments received.*

*The Joint Working Group, having examined it, recommends to its parent bodies that it be offered to the Churches as a study document for their consideration. Although there may not be complete*

*agreement on everything contained in the document, it represents a wide area of consensus on the subject of common witness and proselytism which may guide the Churches in their mutual relations.*

*It is, therefore, suggested that the Churches in the same area study it together. The further examination of the theme of common witness will inevitably demand a fuller development of, and agreement on, the content of the witness Christians are bound to give to Christ and his Gospel.*

#### **Introduction**

1. Unity in witness and witness in unity. This is the will of Christ for his people. The Lord has called all his disciples to be witnesses to him and his Gospel, to the ends of the earth (cf. *Acts* 1: 8),

and he has promised to be with them always, to the close of his age (Mt. 28: 20). But for centuries, in their efforts to fulfil this mission, Christian Communions have borne the burden of divisions, even differing about the meaning of the one Gospel. They have not been a clear sign of the one and holy people, so it has been hard for the world to believe (cf. *Jo.* 13:35; 17:21).

2. Today, moved by the Holy Spirit, the various Christian Communions are seeking to restore the unity they have lost, in the hope that one day, when they are fully renewed and united in faith and charity, they may be better able to glorify God by bringing home to the whole world the hope of the coming kingdom. They are striving to overcome whatever indifference, isolation and rivalry has marked their relations to each other and thus has distorted Christian witness even to that unity with which God has already blessed them.

3. This document is an attempt to state the implications of the obligation:

— to bear common Christian witness, even while the Churches are divided;

— to avoid in their mutual relations and in their evangelising activities whatever is not in keeping with the spirit of the Gospel;

— to provide one another, as far as possible, with mutual support for a more effective witness of the Gospel through preaching and selfless service to the neighbour.

4. This document is offered to the Churches. Its reflections and suggestions may serve as a basis of discussion among Christians in varied circumstances, in order to arrive at a line of conduct where they live and witness.

#### MEANING OF THE TERMS:

CHRISTIAN WITNESS, COMMON WITNESS  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, PROSELYTISM.

5. 1. *Christian Witness.*<sup>1</sup> Witness is taken here to mean the continuous act by which a Christian or a Christian Community proclaims God's acts in history and seeks to reveal Christ as the true light which shines for every man. This includes the whole life: worship, responsible service, proclamation of the Good News—all is done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order that men may be saved and be gathered into Christ's one and only Body (*Col.* 1: 8; *Eph.* 1: 22-23), and attain life everlasting—to know the true God and Him whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. *Jo.* 17: 3).

6. 2. *Common Witness.* Here is meant the witness the Churches, even while separated, bear together, especially by joint efforts, by manifesting before men whatever divine gifts of truth and life they already share in common.

<sup>1</sup> Modern languages use several biblically derived terms which denote particular aspects of the announcements of the Gospel in word and deed: Witness, Apostolate, Mission, Confession, Evangelism, Kerygma, Message, etc. We have preferred here to adopt "Witness", because it expresses more comprehensively the realities we are treating.

7. 3. *Religious Freedom.* Religious freedom is not used here in the wider biblical sense (e.g. *Rom.* 8: 21). It is pointing to the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in religious matters. Each person or community has the right to be free from any coercion on the side of individuals, social groups, or human power of any kind; so that no individual or community may be forced to act against conscience or be prevented from expressing belief in teaching, worship or social action.<sup>2</sup>

8. 4. *Proselytism.* Here is meant improper attitudes and behaviour in the practice of Christian witness. Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters, or whatever, in the proclamation of the Gospel, does not conform to the ways God draws free men to himself in response to his calls to serve in spirit and in truth.<sup>3</sup>

### I. Common Witness

9. There is a growing recognition among the Churches that they must overcome their isolation from each other and seek ways to cooperate in witness to the world.<sup>4</sup> In face, however, of difficulties and obstacles, a clear basis and source of power and hope is needed if the Churches are to embark on this common witness.

10. This basis and source is given in Christ. He is sent into the world by the Father for the salvation of mankind. There is no other Name in which men may find salvation and life (*Acts* 4: 12). Christian Churches confess Christ as God and only Saviour according to the Scriptures, and most adhere to the ancient Creeds which testify to this central truth of faith.

11. Moreover, the Churches believe that they live only by the divine gifts of truth and life bestowed by Christ. Most Churches acknowledge that gifts of divine grace are a reality in other Churches which also provide access to salvation in Christ. Thus all

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious liberty in the Setting of the WCC*, of the Third WCC Assembly (1961); *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, of the Second Vatican Council (1965); *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, of the United Nations (1948), esp. N. 18. Since the right to religious freedom operates in society, these documents also mention rules which modify the use of it.

<sup>3</sup> In certain linguistic, cultural and confessional contexts, the term "proselytism", used without qualification, has acquired this pejorative sense. In those other languages and contexts in which the term still retains its more original meaning of «zeal in spreading the faith», it will be necessary always to use "proselytism in the pejorative sense" or some phrase which denotes defective attitudes and conduct.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council Decree, *Ad Gentes*, 6 and 15; and the proposals for "Joint Action for Mission" formulated by the 1961 New Delhi Assembly of the WCC and affirmed by the Report of Section II of the 1968 Uppsala Assembly.

Christian communions, in spite of their divisions, can have a positive role to play in God's plan of salvation.

12. The Churches have the privilege and the obligation of giving witness to the truth and new life which is theirs in Christ. Indeed both privilege and obligation are entrusted to the whole community of Christians to whom God gives a vital role in his plan for the salvation of the world.

13. Therefore Christians cannot remain divided in their witness. Any situations where contact and cooperation between Churches are refused must be regarded as abnormal.

14. The gifts which the Churches have received and share in Christ have demanded and made urgent a common witness to the world. The needs of men and the challenges of a broken and unbelieving world have also compelled the Churches to cooperate with God in deploying his gifts for the reconciliation of all men and all things in Christ. This common witness takes place in many areas of social concern, such as

- the development of the whole man and of all men;
- the defence of human rights and the promotion of religious freedom;
- the struggle for the eradication of economic, social and racial injustice;
- the promotion of international understanding, the limitation of armaments and the restoration and maintenance of peace;
- the campaign against illiteracy, hunger, alcoholism, prostitution, the traffic in drugs;
- medical and health and other social services;
- relief and aid to victims of natural disasters (volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, etc.).

15. Cooperation has also extended to include the production, publication and distribution of joint translations of the Scriptures. Moreover, an exploration is being made of the possibility of common texts to be used for an initial catechesis on the central message of the Christian faith. In this connection, cooperation in the field of education and in the use of communications media is already going on in some places.

16. The cooperation of the Churches in these varied fields is increasingly being accompanied by common acts of worship for each other and for the world. Of particular significance is the " Week of Prayer for Christian Unity " which is now celebrated in many places around the world. This practice of common prayer and of acts of worship has greatly helped to create and develop a climate of mutual knowledge, understanding, respect and trust. The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church have contributed to this improved climate by their studies and guides to common prayer. This fellowship in prayer, nevertheless, sharpens the pain

of the Churches' division at the point of Eucharistic fellowship which should be the most manifest witness to the one sacrifice of Christ for the whole world.

17. The central task of the Churches is simply to proclaim the saving deeds of God. This then should be the burden of their common witness; and what unites them is enough to enable them in large measure to speak as one. Indeed all forms of common witness are signs of the Churches' commitment to proclaim the Gospel to all men; they all find in the one Gospel their motivation, their purpose and their content.

18. Whether in witness or service, the Churches are together confronted by the fundamental issues of the nature and destinies of men and nations; and while they face these questions they encounter men of other religions, or men who are indifferent or unbelievers who hold to a variety of ideologies.

19. But at this vital point of mutual engagement, the Churches become aware not only of their shared understanding of the Gospel but also of their differences. They all believe that Jesus Christ has founded one Church, and one alone; to this Church the Gospel has been given; to this Church every man has been called to belong. Yet today many Christian Communion present themselves to men as the true heritage of Jesus Christ, and this division among the Churches greatly reduces the possibilities of common witness.

20. In the context of religious freedom and the ecumenical dialogue, respect is due to the right of Churches to act according to convictions, which they believe should be held in fidelity to Jesus Christ:

1. While it is indeed aware of its pilgrim condition, a Church can be convinced that in it subsists the one Church founded by Christ, that also in it one can have access to all the means of salvation which the Lord offers, that its witness has always remained substantially faithful to the Gospel.

2. A Church can regard itself as bound in conscience to proclaim its witness to its own belief, which is distinct from that of the other Churches.

3. While the major affirmations of faith, such as those which are formulated in Scripture and professed in the ancient Creeds, are common to almost all the Christian confessions, different interpretations can sometimes call for reservations on this common character.

4. The teaching of certain Churches can place limits on cooperation in social concerns, for example, different positions on family ethics (divorce, abortion, responsible parenthood).

Nevertheless, it is not enough to know the limits which the division of Christians places on common witness. The more the need of common witness is grasped, the more apparent does it become that there is a need to find complete agreement on faith—one of the essential purposes of the ecumenical movement.

21. Differences about the content of witness, because of varied ecclesiologies, are by no means the only obstacle to cooperation between the Churches. The rivalries and enmities of the past, the continued resentments due to the memory of ancient or recent wrongs, the conflicts generated by political, cultural and other factors, all these have prevented the Churches from seeking to bear a common witness to the world. Only the willingness to extend mutual forgiveness of past offences and wrongs and to receive correction from each other will enable the Churches to fulfil their obligation to show forth a common witness to each other and to the world.

22. There is, however, an understandable hesitation of a Church to cooperate in witness where this may trouble and confuse its members. Among other reasons, it may be due also to lack of contact and mutual understanding between the clergy and the laity of Churches. In all such cases, a patient and determined effort should be made to create conditions which favour cooperation.

23. A further obstacle to joint action in witness derives from receiving and interpreting the Gospel in forms so exclusive as to lead to a refusal of all discussion and an unwillingness to recognise that the Spirit can operate in groups other than one's own. This attitude is generally labelled "sectarianism" and such exclusive and excluding groups are often called "sects". When faced with this situation, Churches should first of all recognise the challenge which these groups present to them and examine themselves as to their inadequacy in meeting the profound spiritual needs of their members and of those around them. They must also guard against the very spirit of sectarianism which they so rightly deplore in others. Rather should they strive to hear God's call to renewal and to greater faithfulness to his message of salvation.

24. Moreover, the Churches should pay particular attention to groups which seem open to receive those aspects of the Christian message which those communities have hitherto neglected. The Churches must thus always stand ready for dialogue and to seize every opportunity to extend a fraternal hand and to grasp the hand held out to them.

## II. Proselytism and Relations between Churches

25. Christian witness, to those who have not yet received or responded to the announcement of the Gospel or to those who are already Christians, should have certain qualities, in order to avoid being corrupted in its exercise and thus becoming proselytising. Furthermore, the ecumenical movement itself had made Christians more sensitive to the conditions proper to witness borne among themselves. This means that witness should be completely

— conformed to the spirit of the Gospel, espe-

cially by respecting the other's right to religious freedom, and

— concerned to do nothing which could compromise the progress of ecumenical dialogue and action.

### 1. REQUIRED QUALITIES FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESS

#### A

26. In order that witness be conformed to the spirit of the Gospel:

a) The deep and true source of witness should be the commandment: "you must love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your mind ... You must love your neighbour as yourself" (*Mt. 22: 37 and 39, cf. Lev. 19: 18; Deut. 6: 5*).

b) Witness should be inspired by the true end of the Church: the glory of God through the salvation of men. Witness does not seek the prestige of one own's community and of those who belong to, represent or lead it.

c) Witness should be nourished by the conviction that it is the Holy Spirit who, by his grace and light, brings about the response of faith to witness.

d) Witness respects the free will and dignity of those to whom it is given, whether they wish to accept or to refuse the faith.

e) Witness respects the right of every man and community to be free from any coercion which impedes them from witness to their own convictions, including religious convictions.

#### B

27. Witness should avoid behaviour such as:

a) Every type of physical coercion, moral constraint or psychological pressure which would tend to deprive man of his personal judgement, of his freedom of choice, of full autonomy in the exercise of his responsibility. A certain abuse of mass communications can have this effect.

b) Every open or disguised offer of temporal or material benefits in return for change in religious adherence.

c) Every exploitation of the need or weakness or of lack of education of those to whom witness is offered, in view of inducing their adherence to a Church.

d) Everything raising suspicion about the "good faith" of others — "bad faith" can never be presumed; it should always be proved.

e) The use of a motive which has no relation to the faith itself but is presented as an appeal to change religious adherence: for example, the appeal to political motives to win over those who are eager to secure for themselves the protection or favours of civil authority, or those who are opposed to the established regime. Churches which form a large majority in a state should not use legal methods, social, economic or political pressure, in the attempt to prevent members of minority communities from the exercise of their right to religious freedom.



f) Every unjust or uncharitable reference to the beliefs or practices of other religious communities in the hope of winning adherents. This includes malevolent criticism which offends the sensibilities of members of other communities. In general, one should compare the good qualities and ideals or the weaknesses and practices of one community with those of the others, not one's ideals with the other's practice.

## 2. CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CHURCHES

28. The Lord has willed that his disciples be one in order that the world believe. Thus it is not enough for Christians to conform to the above. They should also be concerned in fostering whatever can restore or strengthen between them the bonds of true brotherhood. Proposed suggestions:

a) In each Church one is conscious that conversion of heart and the renewal of his own community are essential contributions to the ecumenical movement.

b) Missionary action should be carried out in an ecumenical spirit which takes into consideration the priority of the announcement of the Gospel to non-Christians. The missionary effort of one Church in an area or milieu where another Church is already at work depends on an honest answer to the question: what is the quality of the Christian message proclaimed by the Church already at work, and in what spirit is it being proclaimed and lived? Here frank discussion between the Churches concerned would be highly desirable, in order to have a clear understanding of each other's missionary and ecumenical convictions, and with the hope that it would help to determine the possibilities of cooperation, of common witness, of fraternal assistance, or of complete withdrawal.<sup>5</sup> In the same manner and spirit the relations between minority and majority Churches should be considered.

c) Particularly all competitive spirit should be avoided by which a Christian community might seek a position of power and privilege, and concern itself less with proclaiming the Gospel to those who have not yet received it, than with profiting by chances to recruit new members among the other Christian communities.

d) To avoid causes of tension between Churches because of the free exercise of the right of every man to choose his ecclesial allegiance and, if necessary, to change it in obedience to conscience, it is vital:

— that this free choice should be exercised in

full knowledge of what is involved and, if possible, after counsel with the pastors of the two Churches concerned. Particular care is necessary in the case of children and young people; in such cases, the greatest weight and respect should be given to the views and rights of the parents and tutors;

— that the Church which admits a new member should be conscious of the ecumenical repercussions, and not draw vain glory from it;

— that the Church which has lost a member should not become bitter, or hostile, nor ostracise the person concerned; that it examine its conscience as to how it has done its duty of bringing the Gospel to that person. Has it made an effort to understand how his Christian convictions ought to affect his life, or rather was it content that he should remain a nominal and official member of that community?

— that any change of allegiance motivated mainly by the desire to secure some material advantage should be refused.

e) Some points of tension between the Churches are difficult to overcome because what is done by one Church in view of its theological and ecclesiological convictions is considered by the other as implicit proselytism. In this case, it is necessary that the two sides try to clarify what is really in question and to arrive at mutual understanding of different practices, and if possible, to agree to a common policy. This can be realised only if the carrying out of these theological and ecclesiological convictions clearly excludes every type of witness which would be tainted by proselytism, as described above. Some examples of such tensions:

— The fact that a Church which reserves baptism to adults ("believer's baptism") persuades the faithful of another Church, who have already been baptised as infants, to receive baptism again is often regarded as proselytising. A discussion on the nature of baptism and its relation to faith and to the Church could lead to new attitudes.

— The discipline of certain Churches concerning the marriage of their members with Christians of other communities is often considered as proselytic. In fact, these rules depend on theological positions. Conversations on the nature of marriage and the family could bring about progress and resolve in a joint way the pastoral question raised by such marriages.

— The Orthodox consider that the existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches is the fruit of proselytism. Catholics level the same criticism against the way in which certain of these Churches have been reunited to the Orthodox Church. Whatever has been the past, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church are determined to reject not only proselytism but also the intention even to draw the faithful of one Church to another. An example of this pledge is the common declaration of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I, on October 28, 1967. The resolution of these questions, evidently important for the ecumenical movement, should be sought in frank discussion, between the Churches concerned.

<sup>5</sup> In speaking of Joint Action for Mission, the World Council of Churches distinguishes presently three degrees of missionary collaboration: surveying the possibilities of missionary action, joint planning; and joint action. The meaning of common witness is wider than that of joint action for mission.

### **Conclusion**

29. These reflections and suggestions on common witness and proselytism will, it is hoped, offer the Churches an opportunity of moving more quickly along the way which leads to the restoration of complete communion among them. As they travel that path to unity the Churches realise that Christian witness can never be perfect. They can never cease

to strive for a deeper realization and clearer expression of the Good News of the unfathomable riches of Christ (cf. *Eph.* 3: 8), and for a more faithful living in accord with His one message. By fidelity to this striving the Churches will grow together in witness to Christ, " the Faithful and True Witness " (*Rev.* 3: 14) in expectation of that day when all things will be perfectly reestablished in him (cf. *Eph.* 1: 10; *Col.* 1: 20).

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