

FUTURE JOINT ACTIVITIES OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Report of
the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches 1973

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For eight years the Joint Working Group has been engaged in promoting collaboration and in studying the appropriate patterns of relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. In 1969, it decided to examine the possibilities of Roman Catholic membership in the World Council of Churches. In summer 1972, the results were made available to the public. The preface of the report, signed by Cardinal Willebrands and Dr. E. C. Blake, made clear that the Roman Catholic Church would not seek membership in the near future. This conclusion does not mean that the question of membership has been closed since it could be re-opened at a later date. The Joint Working Group is convinced that the present decision not to apply for membership ought not to prevent the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches from collaborating in as many areas as possible. Rather collaboration should continue and intensify and adequate patterns for the relationship need to be worked out.

As we in the Joint Working Group try to prepare for our future work together, we are aware of the deepening fellowship between our churches during the years since Vatican II. This has been manifested through the developments of dialogue, exchange and collaboration at many levels. This fellowship certainly has a profound spiritual significance. As yet we experience difficulty in expressing its nature and meaning in ecclesiological terms but we are convinced that it represents in some sense an ecclesial reality. It is this reality which sustains our efforts towards a fuller expression of unity.

Nonetheless our work has come up against difficulties in the course of its development. There have been differences of style, of structure, of method; there has been a shortage of resources, etc. Sometimes we have suffered from misunderstanding. We have known discouragement, even an undue fear. There have been times when unity seemed beyond attainment. So the Lord purifies his people by trial and tribulation. But the reality of our love and the mission which is ours should fill us with joy rather than fear. We can rejoice in the progress of the ecumenical movement over the last 25 years. The will of God is to be discerned both in the ambiguities and in the rich growth that has marked this field. Here the Joint Working Group has to act as a pioneer.

There is even less justification for discouragement if we realize that 1974 with the Roman Synod of Bishops and

1975 with the celebration of the Holy Year and of the WCC Assembly at Djakarta ought to be seen as the “right time”, *a Kairos*. The theme of salvation, evangelization and reconciliation are at the heart of these events. They are linked with the great responsibilities of Justice and Peace. They are centered on the basic Christian realities—justification and the divine life in Jesus Christ.

The present pattern of the Joint Working Group calls for adjustments. The Joint Working Group proposes to study this question further in the coming year. Clearly, this study cannot be dealt with simply on the basis of organizational considerations, but has to be seen in the wider context. Where have the churches been led by the ecumenical movement? What are the real priorities for the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches as they try to advance towards a fuller unity of the churches and common witness? The Joint Working Group wants to undertake a careful analysis of the problems facing the churches as they carry out their mission, and to examine the consequences of these problems for the ecumenical situation. The developments and movements for renewal are a challenge to the churches to read the signs of the times, they can provide impetus for new theological and pastoral understanding. The Joint Working Group ought to listen to and interpret what this is saying for the collaboration among the churches.

This study will also include an analysis of the various types of ecumenical cooperation which have come into being in the course of recent years. It would *not* be an attempt to do a general survey but rather to choose specific varied examples to show the scope of ecumenical cooperation. It would cover the formation of this cooperation, the problems and difficulties which the cooperation is now facing, and the future of the cooperation as viewed by those involved. This would include the developing relations in councils of churches, joint working groups, SODEPAX groups and other ecumenical initiatives.

The Joint Working Group believes that appropriate patterns of collaboration can be better evolved on the basis of such a study. It hopes to conclude this reflection in the course of the next year and to present proposals in summer 1974.

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As we have worked together in the Joint Working Group we have found that the further extension of our collaboration will demand determined efforts. Progress is possible only if we attempt to overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of fuller unity. It may be useful to mention here some of the issues which ought to receive attention in our future work. As we have engaged in collaboration, the following issues have emerged again and again:

a) The role of authority in the Church.

1. How is the teaching and pastoral responsibility conceived? How can these responsibilities be of service to mankind and relate to the needs and experiences of human beings today? It is in this context that the evangelical and pastoral significance of new developments and decisive happenings must be viewed.

2. What is the place of the *sensus fidelium* in the community of the Church?

b) The role of the Church in socio-political questions especially in the field of human rights. Account will need to be taken of the different pastoral approaches and methods as they shape the understanding of human rights as a constitutive part of the Gospel.

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Collaboration can and must continue while this study is in process and as we deal with these fundamental question. We now outline on the following pages where collaboration should be continued or realized without delay.

I. AREAS OF COLLABORATION FOR THE PERIOD 1973-1976

It is hoped that the respective authorities will find it possible to give general approval to the following areas of cooperation:

A. Faith and Order

Since 1968, Roman Catholic theologians are full members of the Faith and Order Commission. At the moment, they represent approximately 10% of its membership. Roman Catholic theologians participate in all the studies.

At present, the Commission is engaged in three major studies:

a) “Giving Account of the Hope that is in Us”: It is an attempt to articulate the reasons for Christian hope in contemporary terms. The Faith and Order Commission has issued an invitation to the WCC member churches to participate in this study. In response to this invitation, many local groups have been formed—some of one confessional tradition, others ecumenical in composition. Roman Catholics participate in several of the local groups. The Secretariat for Christian Unity has transmitted this invitation to the ecumenical commissions of episcopal conferences, thus providing the opportunity to participate in the study process.

b) “Concepts of Unity and Models of Union”: The developments of the last years have added new elements to the ecumenical debate on the nature of the unity we seek. There is need to clarify the implications of these elements and, if possible, to arrive at a common vision of the unity we seek as the goal of the ecumenical

movement. As the World Council of Churches prepares for the next Assembly, a fresh effort in this field is required and it is vital that the Roman Catholic Church will be closely involved in the preparatory process.

c) "The Ministry": The subject of the ministry is being discussed in many countries. Therefore, the Faith and Order Commission has initiated a study bringing together representatives from various countries. The results so far reached independently are to be brought together in a coherent way. Roman Catholic participation is essential if a theological agreement on this issue is to be reached.

B. Mission

a) The existing relationship and cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has been given new impetus by the preparatory study and the conference on "Salvation Today" at Bangkok in which eleven Roman Catholic observer-consultants took part.

The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity plans to hold a meeting in Rome later this year to study further certain aspects of the problems dealt with at Bangkok. The meeting will include a number of the observer-consultants who met at Bangkok, theologians and missiologists, representatives from some curial offices and some WCC people.

b) During the CWME Assembly, 9-13 January 1973, a constitutional change was adopted which offers the possibility for groups to maintain a consultative relationship with the Conference without becoming affiliated. This would allow Roman Catholic missionary groups also to have such a relationship. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity is giving consideration to this possibility with a view to bringing it to the attention of the appropriate authorities and missionary groups.

C. SODEPAX

Several programmes are under way and in preparation. Of particular interest are:

- a) the East Asia Research Project, concerned with trade and economic justice in Asia;
- b) catalytic work in Ireland, with an international ecumenical campaign of prayer for peace and reconciliation, and a projected meeting between some Irish and Continental Christians to discuss mutual problems of justice
- c) a projected survey, analysis and evaluation of local, national and regional ecumenical collaboration in some specific issues of society, development and peace.

Recommendation

The Joint Working Group encourages the continuation of SODEPAX programmes until the conclusion of the mandate at the end of 1974. Discussion about the renewal of the mandate should be initiated by the Cabinet in the course of 1973 so that the Joint Working Group can offer recommendations at its meeting in 1974.

D. Laity

Staff consultations between Unit III and the Laity Council are a regular feature of their relationship and the Joint Working Group encourages their continuance.

Recommendation

That the Laity Council and Unit III move ahead with the preparations for the joint consultation on "New Trends in Laity Formation" planned for 1974.

E. Education

It was noted that mutual consultations held between the staff of the Education sub-unit of the World Council of Churches and representatives of corresponding bodies in Rome led to a decision not to hold the world consultation originally planned for 1974 but suggested instead a series of specific initiatives listed below:

Recommendations

- a) Regular informal staff meetings;
- b) Joint evaluative study of common syllabi for religious instruction on the basis of case studies;
- c) A survey on the use and value of "Ecumenism in Higher Education" (Ecumenical Directory, part 2).

F. The Synod of Bishops 1974

The Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church will meet in Rome in 1974. The Joint Working Group considers this a significant event which ought to bring an ecumenical dimension. The theme of the synod will be "Evangelization of Today's World", which is closely linked with that of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism at Bangkok.

Cardinal Willebrands will investigate the possibility of making an ecumenical contribution to the preparatory studies.

G. WCC Assembly 1975

The fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches will be held in Djakarta in 1975. The Joint Working Group considers this Assembly as a significant event and as such should seek the Participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Preparatory process and in the event itself. The preparation could also serve to stimulate local ecumenism

efforts no least in Indonesia. In the Assembly, it is expected that the Roman Catholic presence will be secured by the appointment of delegated observers.

Recommendation

That the 1974 meeting of the Joint Working Group prepare a report of the RCC/WCC relationships for presentation to the Assembly.

H. Local Ecumenism

It offers challenges and opportunities. It is important that information about these be kept up to date for purposes of communication of stimulation. It is hoped that the 1974 Joint Working Group study will give fresh direction to the continuing interaction between local groups and the Joint Working Group.

II. ONGOING COLLABORATION

A. Christian Medical Work

Roman Catholic collaboration at the central administrative level has been expressed by the participation of four observer-consultants at the June 1972 annual meeting of the Christian Medical Commission and by the appointment on the Roman Catholic side of a staff consultant for a further period of eighteen months.

In the immediate future the presence of Roman Catholic observer-consultants at the annual meeting will be continued and it is hoped these may be named for a two or three-year term.

On the Roman Catholic side plans are being made for the convocation of a meeting to look at the possibility of a Roman Catholic association which would coordinate efforts in the medical and health fields. It is hoped this might foster a more systematic collaboration with the Christian Medical Commission in its regional initiatives, many of which involve the local Roman Catholics.

B. Ecumenical Institutes

Roman Catholic participation in the Graduate School and other programmes of Bossey continues apace and is complemented by the presence of a Roman Catholic as a member of the board of the Ecumenical Institute.

The Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies at Tantur near Jerusalem has agreed to collaborate with some Faith and Order work especially the study "Giving account of the hope that is in us".

C. Church and Society

Three or four consultants continue to take part in the annual meeting of the ongoing studies and the working committee. In addition, several Roman Catholics have contributed to the studies in the capacity of technical experts.

D. Prayer for Unity

The Joint WCC/RCC group responsible for organizing the annual observance continues to meet. However, in light of the decision at the 1972 Joint Working Group meeting its task will be carried out henceforth in collaboration with local committee. A particular country will be made responsible in given year, and will prepare materials appropriate to their situation. The WCC/RCC group will then take from this the elements suitable for wide use made them available. This new pattern will come into operation for the Week of Prayer 1975.

Note

Regular staff consultations are held in several areas other than those mentioned above, e.g. Youth, Women, Family Life.

III. AREAS WHERE THE POSSIBILITY OF FURTHER COLLABORATION IS BEING EXPLORED

A. Service and Relief

The Pontifical Commission is in charge of coordinating the service and relief activities of the Roman Catholic Church. It is specifically its responsibility, in connection with the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, to take all appropriate steps favoring a more fraternal collaboration in the Christian world between Roman Catholics and non-Catholics, within the field of service and relief. Considering the very particular importance of such a collaboration to increase the witness of our enterprises in service and relief and to improve their efficiency, the Joint Working Group expresses the strong hope that *Cor Unum* be soon able to proceed with the Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service and the Commission on Church Participation on Development to make arrangements regarding the regularity and aspects of their mutual relationships.

B. Development, Justice and Peace

In addition to the joint responsibility for SODEPAX, the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace and the Churches Commission for Participation in Development of the World Council of Churches keep in contact through informal staff consultations with a view to assessing existing collaboration and seeking out further areas as appropriate.

C. Dialogue with People of other Faiths

The Joint Working Group notes the ecumenical importance of this concern and desires that there be further cooperation between the Secretariat for non-Christians and Dialogue between People of Living Faiths and Ideologies.

D. Holy Year

As 1975 is to be observed by the Roman Catholic Church as a Holy Year for spiritual renewal and reconciliation, it could be an occasion for ecumenical dialogue and efforts on local and regional level.

[*The Ecumenical Review* 24, 3 (1972) 247-288]