

FOURTH OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE JOINT WORKING GROUP (RCC / WCC)

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PREFACE

In the course of the last three decades, the relations among the churches have changed profoundly. Though continuing to live in a state of division, they have discovered anew, through the ecumenical movement, the bond which holds them together despite their differences. They have entered into dialogue. They have begun to witness and to work together. They have begun to experience a common spiritual joy. Attitudes of mutual exclusion have been replaced by a common search for that true unity the disciples are called to show forth in the world.

In this development, the World Council of Churches has played a significant role. It has been an instrument helping the churches to engage in encounter and exchange and calling them to bear witness together to Jesus Christ and to the salvation he has brought to the world.

The Second Vatican Council gave a decisive further impulse to the ecumenical movement. In the documents of the Council, in particular in the constitution *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree on Ecumenism, the Roman Catholic Church has given new expression to its understanding of the unity of the Church and committed itself to participation in the ecumenical movement. This decision opened the doors for mutual discovery and made possible, in some measure, common witness and collaboration.

Inevitably, the question arose as to how the Roman Catholic Church would relate to the World Council of Churches. In 1965, after many preliminary contacts and conversations, it was decided to set up the body known as the Joint Working Group, a commission with the mandate to explore the possibilities of dialogue and collaboration. More than ten years have passed since the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated and the Joint Working Group brought into existence. Therefore, it has to be asked : where have we been led during these years? What has been achieved? What should and can be our goal in the years to come?

The Joint Working Group has served to strengthen the links between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. In a number of fields, joint study and collaboration have been initiated. On the other hand, the regular contacts and the common reflection have also made the two partners more fully aware of the implications of their collaboration. They have come to see more clearly the obstacles which need to be overcome if fellowship and collaboration among the churches are to grow.

Both the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches are determined to continue their collaboration and to seek together ways to serve the ecumenical cause. Therefore, after ten years of common experience, it is appropriate to ask anew the question how they can, together, best further the ecumenical movement. How should the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches be related to one another? What areas require primary attention? What kind of common structure should be adopted?

The present report attempts to answer these questions and submits to the parent bodies a number of recommendations as to the next steps to be taken.

PART I THE COMMON GROUND

Before turning to any specific considerations, it is essential to recall the common ground shared by the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. In the course of the last ten years, three perspectives have gained increasing importance. They should guide the planning for the future.

a) *The Existing Communion*

Despite all divisions which have occurred in the course of the centuries, there is a real though imperfect communion which continues to exist between those who believe in Christ and are baptised in his name. They confess that Christ, true God and true Man, is Lord and that it is through him and in him alone that we are saved. Through the Spirit, they offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father who, in his Son, reconciles the world to himself. They proclaim the love of God, revealed by the Son who was sent by the Father bringing new life to the human race, and who through the promise and gift of the Holy Spirit gathers together the people of the New Covenant as a communion of unity in faith, hope and love.

Through the development of the ecumenical movement that communion has been experienced anew. This is not to claim that it has been created anew. Since it is beyond human power and initiative, it precedes all ecumenical effort for the restoration of the unity of all Christians. The gift of communion God has bestowed in Jesus Christ remains a

reality, even where Christians may obscure or damage it by their lack of understanding, their disobedience and mutual estrangement. The ecumenical movement is therefore the common re-discovery of that existing reality and equally the common effort to overcome the obstacles standing in the way to perfect ecclesial communion. It is at the same time a return and a new departure. It is a return to the original gift in many ways distorted by human failures in the course of history and an attempt to understand and accept the way in which God wants to lead us to His Kingdom. The ecumenical movement is a constant invocation of the Spirit; that he may lead us into new awareness of the original revelation, and guide us to the future God is preparing for us.

The joy of the ecumenical movement lies in the fact that the power of this communion has become more evident among the churches. Christians have been gathered together. They have been enriched in their experience and have been given new strength. They have been seized by the vision of unity in Christ, a unity which is not necessarily free from tensions and conflicts, but a fellowship in which Christians are committed together to proclaim the Gospel, not in uniformity, but so rooted in Christ that they are able to bear the diversities which arise between them as they seek to fulfil the will of Christ for his Church. Though this vision of perfect unity is far from being fulfilled, and even its concrete shape cannot yet be fully described, it has already become part of the life of the churches. They can no longer move back from it nor hold to the former separation. Thus work for the unity of the Church is a vital and inescapable necessity. It is not a luxury which can be left aside, nor a task which can be handed to specialists but rather a constitutive dimension of the life of the Church at all levels and of the life of Christians themselves.

The nature of the communion by which we are held together cannot yet be described together in precise terms. The language we use is marked by the divisions of history. Each church has its own approach and its own ecclesiological terminology. But since the churches meet in Christ's name and share in his gift, their fellowship must have ecclesial reality. As they move forward together, both the nature of the present communion they already have and the future unity they seek may become clearer and their divisions may be healed.

b) *The Need for Common Witness*

The gift of communion calls for common witness in the world. The ecumenical movement does not only aim at healing the divisions among Christians. It seeks at the same time to enhance the credibility of the churches' witness in the world.

Ecclesial unity is a sign destined for all people, a sign testifying that God has reconciled them in Jesus Christ, a living invitation to believe in him as their Savior. The churches' search for the restoration of unity among all those who are baptised and believe in Christ as Lord and Savior will be genuine only if they live in the constant expectation that this sign will become manifest through them to the world. They will, therefore, not only engage in dialogue about unity, but will bear witness to Christ wherever the partial communion in faith and life, as it exists among them, makes it possible (vid. *Ad Gentes*, 15; *Common Witness and Proselytism*, 9-13, 17, 19). As they seize these possibilities of common witness, their search for union will in turn advance. In the perspectives of common witness, their search for union will in turn advance. In the perspectives of witness many of the problems which divide them will appear in a new style.

For some churches, the scandal of division came to be felt first as they faced the missionary task and they were led into the search for unity by this experience. It is significant that it was the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910) which gave the impulse for the movement on issues of Faith and Order! For other churches the starting point was the consideration of the essential oneness of the body of Christ. They asked how could the one Church founded by Jesus Christ in history ever be divided. Thus their first interest was in the restoration of unity between Christians, and common witness in the world was not their primary motive for ecumenical involvement. The two approaches had to learn that mission without unity lacks - the perspective of the body of Christ and that unity without mission is not a living reality. In recent years the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches have come to see more clearly the implications of the intimate relationship between unity and common witness.

c) *The Call to Renewal*

Christians in their relation to Christ need to be constantly renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So also do the churches. This is particularly true in today's world where change seems to have become a permanent factor. New problems and new tasks arise and if the churches are to respond to them in obedience they need to be prepared for renewal.

There is a growing awareness that the churches need to engage themselves in the struggle for justice, freedom and community. Sin is manifesting itself not only in personal failure but in injustice, oppression and dehumanization. Salvation is spiritual liberation and new life for each individual person, enabling him to offer himself as a living sacrifice through prayer, praise and new obedience. But salvation is also a liberating force pointing to a more human society.

Christian faith calls for the commitment to struggle for that society and by this very commitment to proclaim Christ and the good news of salvation.

The Spirit speaks to the churches in the actual event of history, calling into question the outlook they have come to be accustomed to. In all churches, historical, political and cultural factors, sometimes of many centuries standing, obscure the true meaning of the Gospel. The Spirit urges Christians to discern and interpret together the signs of the times. He is the power of renewal.

The changes in today's world are so great that they fill many Christians with a feeling of uncertainty. There is a wide-spread crisis of faith. Can the inherited faith be maintained in the transformations the present generation is experiencing? Many respond with timidity to this challenge; many regard the maintenance of the status quo as the only expression of tradition and identity. But should it not be seen as a challenge of the Holy Spirit to fresh obedience of mind and soul? Is it not our task to go forward together? Are Christians not called to interpret together the signs of the times and to discern the will of Christ for the present generation? Unity is required to face the challenge; and as the churches respond they will in turn be led into fuller unity.

Already very similar concerns occupy the churches. To give only a few examples, the theme of the World Missionary Conference in Bangkok, "Salvation Today," is very close to that of the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops in 1974, "Evangelization in the Contemporary World." The biblical concepts and realities of "liberation" and "communion" which are at the heart of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches with its theme, "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites," are analogous to the theme of "Renewal and Reconciliation" which is central for the Holy Year, 1975. Does this not indicate that the Churches are offered the "kairos," the propitious time, to commit themselves together to the task of renewal?

PART II THE COLLABORATION 1965-1975

Since the Joint Working Group was formed in 1965, cooperation and collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches have developed progressively. There have been the jointly sponsored studies on "Common Witness and Proselytism" and "Catholicity and Apostolicity." Roman Catholic membership in the Faith and Order Commission has come about, and the Roman Catholic Church has set up consultative relations with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and the Christian Medical Commission. The preparation of material for use in the annual Prayer for Christian Unity is done jointly. The concern for development and peace was taken up in partnership by the formation of the joint Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX).

It was this growth of collaboration that created the atmosphere in which the Joint Working Group was led to consider the possibility of membership by the Roman Catholic Church in the World Council of Churches.

At its meeting in Gwatt (Switzerland), in 1969, the Joint Working Group decided that the "advantages of... a closer and more permanent association of the Roman Catholic Church with the World Council of Churches" should be studied. Thus a study got under way and the consideration given to this question occupied on both sides a great amount of time and energy. The results of the study were published in 1972¹ but by this time it had been made clear that an application by the Roman Catholic Church for World Council membership would not be made in the near future.

Why did it not prove possible to give this form of visible expression to the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches? There is no doubt that the Roman Catholic Church could accept the Basis of the World Council of Churches, but there are factors, some theologically based, which at present militate against membership as the visible expression of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. To a much greater degree than other churches the Roman Catholic Church sees its constitution as a universal fellowship with a universal mission and structure as an essential element of its identity. Membership could present real pastoral problems to many Roman Catholics because the decision to belong to a world-wide fellowship of churches could easily be misunderstood. Then there is the way in which authority is considered in the Roman Catholic Church and the processes through which it is exercised. There are also practical differences in the mode of operation, including the style and impact of public statements.

The decision at present not to apply for membership was not intended to weaken or downgrade the need for close collaboration. Cardinal Willebrands and Dr. Eugene C. Blake, in their preface to the report on possible Roman Catholic membership, stated this quite clearly: "Cooperation... must not only continue, it must be intensified"². The same conviction was reiterated and confirmed in the message sent by Pope Paul VI to the Central Committee on the occasion of the silver jubilee celebrations of the World Council of Churches, on August 26, 1973, when he said: "It is our sincere desire that this collaboration may be pursued and intensified in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican

Council”³. The decision also does not mean that the question of membership has been closed. At its meeting at Windsor, in 1973, the Joint Working Group explicitly stated that it could be “re-opened at a later date.” But for the immediate future another question has to be asked: how can the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, without forming one structured fellowship, intensify their joint activities and thereby strengthen the unity, the common witness and the renewal of the churches?

At Windsor, the Joint Working Group had an extensive discussion on this question and came to the conclusion that for the planning of the future collaboration a careful analysis of the actual ecumenical experience in different national and local situations was required. It was recognized that the progress of the ecumenical movement largely depends on the commitment of Christians in their actual life situations and thus interaction of ecumenism at the local level and the international level is of fundamental importance. Joint activities at the international level must therefore be intimately related to the experience of the churches and seek to serve their needs. For this reason, the Joint Working Group decided to undertake a survey on the present state of the ecumenical movement. What are the problems the churches face as they carry out their mission? What are their consequences for the ecumenical movement? This survey formed the basis of discussion at the following meeting of the Joint Working Group in Venice, 1974, as it sought to discern appropriate programs and patterns of collaboration for the future⁴.

The debate resulted in the recommendations which follow.

PART III GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE JOINT WORKING GROUP

a) *Continuation of the Joint Working Group*

There continues to be the need for a forum enabling the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches to evaluate together the development of the ecumenical movement. Therefore, a joint group with continuity of membership and sufficient breadth of representation from both sides should be appointed. As an instrument of the parent bodies it will be in close contact with them and accountable to them.

b) *The Functions of the Joint Working Group*

The Joint Working Group will primarily aim at discovering and assessing promising new possibilities for ecumenical development. It has the task of stimulating the discussion on the ecumenical movement in being a challenge to the parent bodies by proposing new steps and programs.

The Joint Working Group will endeavor to interpret the major streams of ecumenical thought and action in the Roman Catholic Church and in the member churches of the World Council of Churches. It will facilitate the exchange of information about the progress of the ecumenical movement, especially at the local level.

The Joint Working Group will seek to establish the collaboration between the various organs and programs of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. In accordance with the principles and procedures of the parent bodies it should encourage the genuine development of any ecumenical collaboration. It should draw upon the insights gained from local experience to foster such collaboration. As in the past, it will remain a consultative group, not an operative agency. It may be empowered by the parent bodies to develop and administer programs it has proposed when this is called for.

As the joint Working Group seems to initiate and help keep alive the discussion on the implications of the ecumenical movement in the Roman Catholic Church and in member churches of the World Council of Churches, it will seek the best means of communicating its findings and recommendations.

An essential aspect of its task is to share its findings with its parent bodies.

c) *Expanded Relationship*

The Joint Working Group will be in contact with a large number and range of ecumenical organizations and programs, especially on the local level. It may call upon various offices and programs of the parent bodies for assistance when special help is needed in certain areas in the process of collaboration. It will also seek information and advice from individuals and organizations which have particular ecumenical experience and competence.

d) *Flexible Style*

As the joint Working Group seeks to meet the needs of the churches, the style of collaboration must be kept flexible. It must be adaptable to the various and changing needs. Therefore, it will seek to keep new structures to a minimum, while concentrating on ad hoc initiatives, as they are required by the actual developments within the ecumenical movement. On occasion, of course, particular projects may call for some structural organization which will be set up after due authorization. Flexibility of style does not mean unplanned activity or lack of accountability. It rather means more careful attention to the setting of priorities and to the use of resources.

e) *Suggested Structures*

On the basis of these general considerations the following is proposed:

- 1) The Joint Working Group shall be a group of approximately sixteen members, some of whom shall be chosen from the staff of the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (and other organs of the Curia).
- 2) The Joint Working Group will normally meet once a year. Further, enlarged meetings could be held on occasion to deal with specific issues. Such meetings may be arranged to coincide with some important regional event when this is judged useful.
- 3) A small Executive Group of six members shall be responsible for the ongoing work between meetings and for preparing the meetings of the Joint Working Group.

PART IV
THE WAY AHEAD

What are the priorities for the joint activities in the coming years? The following section attempts a first answer. Obviously, further developments may bring to the fore new tasks. At this stage, the Joint Working Group submits to the parent bodies the following program for approval and authorization.

1) JOINT PROGRAMS

Joint programs are proposed in the three areas of the Unity of the Church, Common Christian Witness, and Development and Peace.

a) *The Unity of the Church*

The progress achieved in mutual understanding in recent years is considerable. Bilateral confessional dialogues and multilateral ecumenical conversations are leading to doctrinal convergences. Although these findings still have to be submitted to the judgment of the churches involved, they have decisively contributed to a new climate. There is a new readiness to recognize a plurality of expression in confessing the same faith. There is also the considerable growth of local ecumenism which constitutes an important factor in the growth towards unity.

Only a small beginning has so far been made in the evaluation of the relationship of bilateral confessional dialogues to one another and to multilateral conversations. An attempt needs to be made to bring together and share widely the various insights gained in the course of these discussions so that it may be seen more clearly how they interact.

Roman Catholic membership in the Faith and Order Commission offers a promising opportunity for collaboration. The instrument of the Faith and Order Commission should be made use of to the fullest possible extent. Certain studies of the Commission deserve special attention, e. g., its studies on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, and on "The Teaching Office in the Church."

The Joint Working Group should explore ways of facilitating the exchange of information and initiating joint reflection on all of these activities, with a view to preparing a report on this.

Finally, the question needs to be examined as to the role of ecumenical structures of collaboration, such as regional, national and local councils. In many places Roman Catholic dioceses and parishes are full members in councils, and in other places, membership is proposed. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity has recently worked out a document on ecumenical collaboration at regional, national and local levels. The World Council of Churches, through its desk for relations with National Councils of Churches, is engaged in a fresh evaluation of present structures of collaboration. It has also been agreed that a survey be made jointly of those councils of churches where there is Roman

Catholic membership and an informal paper prepared.

b) *Common Christian Witness*

Both sides agree that their ecumenical commitment should find expression also in common witness. In October, 1974, the Bishops' Synod in Rome stated this need in the following terms: "In carrying out these things we intend to collaborate more diligently with those of our Christian brothers with whom we are not yet in the union of a perfect communion, basing ourselves on the foundation of Baptism and on the patrimony which we hold in common. Thus we can henceforth render to the world a much broader common witness to Christ, while at the same time working to obtain full union in the Lord. Christ's command impels us to do so; the work of preaching and rendering witness to the Gospel demands it"⁵.

The Joint Working Group has already undertaken a study and produced a document on "Common Witness and Proselytism"⁶ which spoke of the conditions for common witness. It now seems appropriate to take up the study again in terms of the possibilities and limits of such common witness with regard both to its content and method. It is proposed that the Joint Working Group arrange such a study. It should draw on the documents of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent official documents of the Roman Catholic Church, the reports of the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches, the results of the World Missionary Conference on "Salvation Today," the Faith and Order study "Giving Account of the Hope that is within us," the section on "Confessing Christ Today," of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, and on the findings of the Roman Synod of Bishops, "The Evangelization of the Contemporary World."

Consideration should also be given to the renewal in catechetics in the churches. The issue has already been considered in documents such as the General Catechetical Directory⁷ and the Ecumenical Directory, Part II, on Ecumenism in Higher Education⁸. It is suggested that organized common reflection should determine what possibilities there are for a common basis for religious instruction.

All of these developments point to another area for discussion and mutual stimulation. It is proposed that the Joint Working Group consider how new common insights from this relationship might best be used, and report their findings to their parent bodies.

c) *Development and Peace*

For six years, the Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX) has been in existence, and has enabled the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches to face together vital issues of international social justice and to bear common witness in this field. The experience of these years suggests that the cooperation should be continued in the future. Efforts should concentrate on the role of the Church in the search for a new, more just and viable world order. Both sides have given approval in principle for the continuation of the Committee on Society, Development and Peace for a new term of three years, beginning on January 1, 1976, under the sponsorship of the Roman Catholic Church (Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace) and the World Council of Churches (Unit on Justice and Service).

i) A joint secretariat with at least two full-time staff members will be maintained.

ii) It is agreed that the main purpose of the Committee on Society, Development and Peace be education and motivation of Christians in these fields; it should also draw the attention of the parent bodies to the important aspects of the joint research and suggest steps to be taken either separately or together by them, or also through SODEPAX.

iii) It is agreed that the Committee, while continuing its present work, shall initiate a study on Christian community and the search for a new world order. This study should be carried out in close cooperation with regional bodies already in existence on both sides. It may be concluded with a joint international conference on the theme.

iv) The Committee and the Secretariat shall be entrusted with the responsibility for carrying this program and shall report annually to the parent bodies on the progress made; SODEPAX shall be invited to give an account to the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches of the aspects of its work which are relevant for the promotion of the ecumenical movement in general.

v) It is understood that the parent bodies commit themselves to seek the funds required for the administration and program budget of SODEPAX.

vi) The parent bodies will instruct the present SODEPAX Steering Committee to work out the detailed proposals for the future joint program.

2) MUTUAL EXCHANGE AND STAFF CONTACT

There are areas in which collaboration has been at the level of the mutual exchange of information and staff contact. Such areas include dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies, the role of women, the family, human rights, international issues and laity concerns. These contacts have served to discover further subjects for study and to indicate collaboration which might be undertaken together. There are for instance the whole range of important issues such as spirituality, the mystical life and worship, pluralism, and cultural diversity. There are other subjects too which do not require continual study but which need to be considered from time to time, such as mixed marriages.

The present level of mutual exchange and staff contacts ought to continue and collaboration be intensified wherever possible. The consultation on laity formation, held in Assisi in late 1974, under the sponsorship of the Roman Catholic Laity Council and the WCC Unit on Education and Renewal has been a particularly promising example of encounter and exchange.

3) OTHER ONGOING COLLABORATION

There is an amount of ongoing collaboration which should continue and develop. Notable are the following:

a) *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

For several years, a joint Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches' group has been responsible for preparing the material to be used as a help in this annual observance. Since 1972, a small consultation of Roman Catholics and WCC staff has edited the material for international use from initial material prepared by a local committee. A group in Melbourne (Australia) prepared the initial material for the Week of Prayer 1975, and the Caribbean Conference of Churches has prepared the material for 1976.

b) *Christian Medical Commission*

The World Council of Churches Christian Medical Commission seeks to develop an understanding of the nature of the Christian ministry of healing and the role of the Church in health and medical work. The Roman Catholic Church has had observers at several of the meetings of the Commission and has for the past three years appointed a staff consultant to the Commission. A new mandate for the Commission is at present under discussion. It is desirable that Roman Catholic collaboration be continued in the future.

c) *Relations with CWME (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism)*

There are also noteworthy developments in the field of mission. A number of Roman Catholic missionary orders which work with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples have developed links with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. They have accepted a consultative relation with the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism and have named observer consultants to the Commission for a fixed term.

These examples of collaboration, given under the above headings, are not exhaustive. Further forms will need to be developed as Christians in various local situations are informed of what is happening in other places and themselves proceed with appropriate initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church remain open to unexpected possibilities, ready to undertake the new tasks which will be demanded by the developing dialogue and cooperation. Thus the Joint Working Group looks to the future with a renewed commitment to the one ecumenical movement. It will go on trying faithfully to discern the impulse of the Holy Spirit, given by God as guide on the way ahead.

[*Information Service* 30 (1976/1) 18-23]

ENDNOTES

1. *Ecumenical Review* 21, 3 (1972) 247-288.

2. *Ibid.*, 249.
3. Cf. *Minutes and Reports of 26th Meeting of the World Council of Churches Central Committee*, 1972 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1972) 77.
4. *One in Christ* 11, 1 (1975) 30-87; *Il Regno - Documenti* 20, 1 (1975)8-16; *Unité des chrétiens* 17 (1975) 19-22; *Dialogo Ecumenico* 9, 35/36 (1974) 591-616; *Una Sancta* 30, 3 (1975) 156-169.
5. "Declaration of the Synodal Fathers", *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, November 7th, 7 (1974) 3.
6. "Common Witness and Proselytism, A Study Document", *Ecumenical Review* 23, 1 (1971) 9-20; also SPCU, *Information Service* 14 (1971/II) 13-21.
7. Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory*, (London: Catholic Truth Society) 1972.
8. "Ecumenical Directory, Part. II", SPCU, *Information Service*, 10 (1970/II).