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Theology and Liturgy  
as Life in Community and Shared Spirituality

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## *Abstract*

Theology and Liturgy are two important dimensions of the Christian faith. Since faith can only be thought of in a holistic way, both Theology and Liturgy must have a place in the lives of the faithful. Theology as a reflection on faith is not a science that uses only methods of empirical sciences, but is first and foremost the experience of communication with God. The fundamental form of communication with God, however, is Liturgy. Therefore, Theology as well as Liturgy must always be practised in community as “church”. The Ecumenical Institute at Bossey aims at such a holistic approach of Theology, Liturgy and life in communion. This perspective has implications for the upcoming 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe, Germany.

## *Keywords*

Theology | Liturgy | Spirituality | Ecumenism | World Council of Churches

## Theology and Liturgy as Life in Community and Shared Spirituality

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Theology and Liturgy belong to one and the same reality. One without the other cannot exist in a meaningful way.<sup>1</sup> The Liturgy has a vital importance in the life of the church. She constitutes the living breath of the church as she incarnates the most authentic expression of the theology of the church. It is interesting to note that even the term “orthodoxy” which has been used in relation to the teaching of the church is in fact a liturgical term. Orthodoxy means rather “right doxology” in a much wider and comprehensive sense of theology than the restrictive and limited “right doctrine” as it has usually been translated. Spirituality, therefore, is the living out of theology. It has to be holistic, encompassing the person as a whole like theology. Spirituality is the concrete incarnation of theology as it is witnessed, expressed and lived in the Liturgy. This is something that has become very clear in the 24 years I spent at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, first as professor for missiology and then as director, and now as the World Council of Churches (WCC) prepares for its 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly in August-September 2022 in Karlsruhe, Germany.

In what follows, I wish first to consider how God is the final object of theological study to be understood through a life of communion with and in God. Then I will turn to what this means concretely in the life of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, as the foremost setting for ecumenical edu-

<sup>1</sup> This article draws from two earlier articles of mine published in *The Ecumenical Review*, the quarterly journal of the World Council of Churches: Ioan SAUCA, Ecumenical Formation in Bossey. The Holistic and Inclusive Model of Academic Study and Research, Life in Community and Shared Spirituality, in: ER 57 (2005) 66–81, and *id.*, God is Love. The Experience of the Just, Compassionate, and Merciful God: Ecumenical Considerations Inspired by Orthodox Spirituality on the Theme of the Karlsruhe Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in: ER 73 (2021) 349–363.

cation and formation, before concluding with some reflections on the implications of such a holistic perspective for the theme of the WCC's forthcoming assembly in Karlsruhe.

### *Theology as the Knowledge of and Communion with God*

Christianity has the reality of the Son of God's incarnation at its very heart. Its teaching and the whole of its life arises and is conditioned by that affirmation. Since through Incarnation God has assumed history and through the great kenosis has become a "historical event", Christianity itself has been permanently called to incarnate its message and its specific way of life within the contexts of historical realities. Looking back at the holistic, appealing, and effective theology of the patristic period, we have to say that the empiricomonistic theology as it came to be understood and practised in some circles in modern times is one-sided, narrow, and extremely limited. It is one-sided because it limits its study and research to the manifestations of and the witnesses to the one reality which should be in fact the object of theological study: God. For early Christianity this was very clear: theology had to do primarily with the knowledge of God, with growing communion with and life in God. In that process the Bible, the Tradition, history, philosophy were important but none of them could be fully and irreversibly identified with God. Even the Bible is but an icon, a source, a witness of God's presence and action in history, but the Bible is neither God nor even fully the truth itself.<sup>2</sup> The Bible's word is full of power but must never be identified as God. The study of and reflection on its text is important on the way to a full "theologizing", but a study of the Bible or of the Tradition alone, using whatever methodologies, cannot be considered fully theology.

To be even clearer, God, the final object of theological study is in essence a *metempirical* reality. To come closer to and have communion with God, the study and knowledge of epistemological realities, be they textual or historical, are not sufficient. Even the *cataphatic* methodology which tries to describe God by means of empirical realities, human categories

<sup>2</sup> See Georges FLOROVSKY, *Bible, Church, Tradition. An Eastern Orthodox View* (Collected Works 1), Belmont/MA 1972, 48.

and feelings is in itself limited or even non-realistic. God, in essence, cannot be studied by the means of commonly accepted empirical scientific methods. For this reason, Nikos Nissiotis pleaded that we must be honest and say clearly that, from this perspective at least, theology is not a “science” like any other science:

We have to admit that in its main phase – final, last – theology is not a science. It has not the function to demonstrate its well-founded bases and does not verify its propositions through objective experimentation. It does not prove experientially – in a psychological or rational sense – the relation between the thinking subject and the object of its thinking, who is God alone.<sup>3</sup>

For the early church fathers, the knowledge of God remained central for theology, but the methodology of approaching it was a different one: inter-relational and experiential through a life of communion with and in God. “Knowledge” was understood in a much wider sense than a rational category; it was integral, holistic and strongly intimate. Theology was not a simple discourse about God on the basis of an intellectual effort and logical gymnastics, but rather the voicing of an existential relationship with God. According to Evagrius of Pontus in the fourth century, the theologian had to be a person of prayer: “If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; and if you pray in truth, you are a theologian.”<sup>4</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa described that type of knowledge as “metousia of God” and as the “vision of God” which is the life of the soul.<sup>5</sup> Without the real experience of that life in God, theology will remain at the simple level of “argument”, and the theologian will be but “the one who argues” instead of being a “companion

<sup>3</sup> Nikos A. NISSIOTIS, *La Theologie en tant que science et en tant que doxologie*, in: *Irénikon* 33 (1960) 291–310, here: 292. See also Constantine SCOUTERIS, *Doxology, the Language of Orthodoxy*, in: *GOTR* 38 (1993) 153–162.

<sup>4</sup> EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, or. 61: “Εἰ θεολόγος εἶ, προσεύξη ἀληθῶς· καὶ εἰ ἀληθῶς προσεύχη, θεολόγος ἔση” (SChr 589, 274; ΓΕΗΙΝ). Previously the saying was attributed to St Nilus of Sinai (PG 79, 1180).

<sup>5</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *infant.*, 11: “Τὸ δὲ βλέπειν τὸν θεὸν ἔστιν ἡ ζωὴ τῆς ψυχῆς” (SChr 606, 162; HÖRNER). For more details on the sense of “knowledge” in the biblical and patristic period, see NISSIOTIS, *La Theologie en tant que science*, 299–301.

of the Word”, who is the only God and “the theologian of the true theologians”, wrote St Gregory Palamas.<sup>6</sup>

The Greek fathers in particular developed this holistic understanding of theology because of their strong emphasis on *pneumatology*. While the Incarnation and Christology in general remained the central point of their theology as in the West, it was always conditioned by and intimately linked with pneumatology. The emphasis on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit gave vitality to theology, to the Liturgy and life of the church and kept alive the witnessing ethos and enthusiasm even during the most severe persecutions. The pneumatological perspective gives wholeness, integrity and a holistic nature to theology, opens new horizons of understandings and gives new and fresh meanings to the whole of Christian life. Christian life itself is a life in the Spirit, a life filled abundantly with the grace of the Holy Spirit. If we pray, it is the Holy Spirit who prays in us and teaches us how to pray (Rom. 8:15–17); God placed in our hearts the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6; 2 Cor. 1:22); who is the guarantee of our inheritance

<sup>6</sup> As quoted by A. RANDOVIĆ, 1er Commentaire, in: Procès-verbaux du Deuxième Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes, 19–29 Août 1976, ed. by Savas Chr. AGOURIDÈS, Athens 1978, 91–97, here: 95 (commentary to the presentation of Constantine ANDRONIKOFF, Liturgie et spirituality, in: *ibid.*, 79–91). St Gregory Palamas was confronted with similar approaches which considered the theological approach less scientific than the one based on philosophical sources. In confronting such attitudes he wrote: “Certain men speak contemptuously of the end proposed to Christians under the pretext that it is too lowly: those unutterably good things that are promised to us in the world to come. They accept nothing but knowledge of ‘experience’ and would bring it into the church that lives by Christ’s own wisdom. Those who possess no scientific knowledge, they assert, are ignorant and imperfect; all must devote themselves to Hellenic studies, forsaking the teaching of the gospel (for those teachings are of no use in dispelling ignorance of science), and mockingly abandon him who says ‘Become perfect’ (I Cor. 14:20; cf. Matt. 5:48), ‘If a man is in Christ, he is a perfect man’ (Philip. 3:14–15; Col. 1:28) and ‘We preach to be perfect’ (I Cor. 2:6) [...]” (Triads 1,1,4; SSL 30, 15; MEYENDORFF), quoted in John MEYENDORFF, St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality [French original: St. Gregoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe], Crestwood/NY 1974, 109. Analyzing the whole debate of St Gregory Palamas on this topic, John Meyendorff concluded: “The whole controversy between Barlaam and Palamas turns chiefly at this point: the opposition between Scripture and Hellenism, Jerusalem and Athens, the apostles and the philosophers, the religion of the incarnation and of the bodily resurrection and the religion of disembodiment and of immortality of the soul” (*ibid.*, 11).

(Eph. 1:13–14); in and through the Spirit we will get the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16); in and through the Spirit we “are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18).

The presence of the Holy Spirit makes theology an exercise in experiential participation. The lives of the saints throughout history are living witnesses to that reality. The presence and work of the Holy Spirit makes of the theological discourse “theology”. The presence of the Holy Spirit assumes past history in the present and orients it to the future. Through the Holy Spirit, the eschatological realities are already lived and experienced here and now, though as “already and not yet”. Without the emphasis on, and special attention to, the work of the Holy Spirit, theology could easily become ideology, projecting a utopic secular messianism, proposing a Marxist type of eschatology or using the “Christian story” as the basis for an ideal type of society. Without the ecclesial experience of life in the Holy Spirit, a “religious” discourse based on the Bible or on the Tradition, in order to prove whatever theory one might want, would be anything but theology in its holistic, patristic sense. Vladimir Lossky, in his book *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*,<sup>7</sup> wrote that the concept of *aphophatism*, which refers to seeking the knowledge of God through a negative method, teaches that theology cannot exist outside experience, and in order to have that experience one has to be a new and changed being. One cannot be a theologian unless one walks on the path which leads to union with God.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [French original: *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*], Cambridge 1968.

<sup>8</sup> The intimate relationship between a human and God has been expressed through a famous sentence of ATHANASIUS, incarn. 54,3: “Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐν-ηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν [...]” (SChr 199, 458; KANNENGIESSER) and by some other Church Fathers such as IRENAEUS, haer. 4,38,4: “[...] non ab initio dii facti sumus, sed primo quidem homines, tunc demum dii [...]” (SChr 100, 958; ROUSSEAU); ORIGEN, Cels. 3,28: “[...] ἴν’ ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη τῆ πρὸς τὸ θεϊότερον κοινωνία γένηται θεία οὐκ ἐν μόνῳ τῷ Ἰησοῦ ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς μετὰ τοῦ πιστεῦν ἀναλαμβάνουσι βίον, ὃν Ἰησοῦς ἐδίδαξεν [...]” (SChr 136, 68; BORRET); GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, or. 30,14: “[...] ἕως ἂν ἐμὲ ποιήσῃ Θεὸν τῆ δυνάμει τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως [...]” (SChr 250, 256; GALLAY); BASIL THE GREAT, Eun. 2,4: “Οὐκοῦν ἐπειδὴ οἱ κατ’ ἀρετὴν τέλει οἱ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ προσηγορίας ἡξίωνται, ὁμοούσιοι ἂν εἶεν τῷ Θεῷ τῶν ὄλων οἱ ἄνθρωποι” (SChr 305, 22; SESBOUÉ).

For this reason, the church has recognized only three persons in its history with the name of “theologians”: St John the Evangelist, St Gregory of Nazianzus, and St Symeon the New Theologian. Furthermore, in the ancient eucharistic liturgies of St Basil the Great or that of St John Chrysostomos the emphasis on the *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit’s transforming and sanctifying presence and experience are central. At the very beginning of these liturgies, in the opening prayer, the Holy Spirit is implored to “come and abide in us.” Both before and after the consecration of the gifts of bread and wine, the communion of the Holy Spirit is particularly invoked.

Prayer and invocation combine both an intellectual formulation and conceptualization but also feeling and experience; the whole being is engaged in intimate relationship with God. Through the Holy Spirit Christ is made truly present in the life of praying Christians. Through Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit, the life of the Trinity flows in the lives of Christians making them its shelters and abiding in them (John 14:23; 1 Cor. 6:19). Partaking of the eucharist, of the body and blood of Christ, leads the theologizing process of the Christian from the doxological experience to the more empirical communion and participation. The liturgical hymn after partaking of the Eucharist is in fact a joyful witness of the pragmatic and realistic experience that Christians have had: “We have seen the true light; we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity, for the Trinity has saved us.”<sup>9</sup> Other liturgical terminologies such as “see”, “taste”, “partake”, “listen”, “stand”, “kneel” etc., are a few indications of the experiential and holistic nature of early Christian theology as expressed in the Liturgy of the church, within the ecclesial community.

In placing theology within its initial liturgical framework and linking it anew with its pneumatological foundations, it will become clear that even if we reduce its meaning to doctrine or dogmas it can no longer be limited to theoretical principles, or truthful formulations which have no connection with the experience of the church. The nature of the theology formulated by the early Ecumenical Councils was at the same time pneumato-

<sup>9</sup> English translation taken from: GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA, The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church. URL: <https://bit.ly/3ybCohR> [accessed: July 1, 2022].



logical, ecclesial, mystical, experiential, and ethical. It was not based on the high intellectualism of specialists in the field but expressed the “truth” as it was experienced already by the church. The church as a whole and its holistic experience promulgated in the end the orthodoxy of the councils’ decisions. Theological formulations had to express faithfully the experience of the church and, in turn, the new formulations and expressions of faith have become parts of the proper theology of the church only to the extent that they have been received and fully lived by the whole people both in liturgy and in daily life.

It is not by a simple coincidence that the first credal formulations were elaborated for and used within baptismal liturgies. Later, the creed became an integral part of the eucharistic liturgy, a liturgical and doxological expression of the faith of the church. According to the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras,

theology is not a theoretical development of some axioms and ideas, but the expression and formulation of an experience. Before being a teaching, the good news of the church is an event. The knowledge of this event is participation in it, living it as a way of life [...]. Because theology is linked to experience, it cannot be separated by ethos; dogma formulates the ethos of the church, and the ethos is the incarnation of the dogma. A faithful theology is “mystagogy” in a bipolar yet inseparable unity.<sup>10</sup>

The signs of our times indicate that this may be the moment for theology to recover its initial, holistic meaning. The search for spirituality and meaning has become one of the characteristics of our time. Paradoxically, however, the tendency is to search for spirituality but to reject theology understood as the dogmatic formulation of faith; to look for experience of God but to avoid the church as institution; to affirm spiritual experiential life but to reject religion.

<sup>10</sup> Christos YANNARAS, ‘Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ δύση. Ἡ θεολογία στὴν Ἑλλάδα σήμερα [Orthodoxy and the West. Theology today in Greece] (Σύνορο 5), Athens 1979, 54, quoted in: Karl Christian FELMY, Einführung in die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart (Lehr- und Studienbücher zur Theologie 5), Berlin <sup>3</sup>2014, 11 [my translation]; see also Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia [WARE], The Witness of the Orthodox Church, in: ER 52 (2000) 45–56, here: 50–52.

In my opinion, the main responsibility for the present situation rests in the churches themselves. Theology, over time, has become a dry expression of a pure intellectualism divorced from the Liturgy of the church and from the spiritual life of the people; a church built on spiritual foundations has become a heavily institutionalized monument which has pretended to control or even to suppress the charismatic as a negative, emotional or sentimental category; and Christian life has become emphatically moralistic rather than a joyful experience of theology as participation in the life of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. These are some of the leading reasons for the crisis Christianity is facing in our time.

### *Life in Community and Shared Spirituality at Bossey*

I now wish to turn to the experience of theology and liturgy as experienced at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey as life in community and shared spirituality. In my view, the experience of Bossey shows that the recovery of holistic theology within an academic setting is not only possible but strongly desirable and necessary. In Bossey, faith requires a liturgical expression and both dimensions are lived as joyful, liberating, and transforming experiences in the daily life in community

From the very beginning, the academic programme of Bossey has been structured intentionally on the basis of a holistic, integrated approach. The WCC's first general secretary, W. A. Visser 't Hooft, who played a leading role in the establishment of Bossey in 1946, had identified as early as the 1940s the three pillars of Bossey – Bible, Church, and World<sup>11</sup> – which, to a great extent, are still faithfully respected today. The lectures in the plenary hall, as well as the research in the library, constitute an important part of the programme at Bossey. Until late at night, the library, full of light, is the only place which is shining brightly like a lighthouse in the surrounding forests and fields of Bossey. Inside, the students can be seen going up and down the stairs. The Bossey methodology, however, requires that the theoretical side be always and necessarily complemented by the

<sup>11</sup> See Hans-Ruedi WEBER, *A Laboratory for Ecumenical Life. The Story of Bossey 1946–1996*, Geneva 1996, 18.

practical, experiential one. To this second aspect belong *worship, spirituality, and community life*.

Worship is indeed at the centre of the community of Bossey. The academic programme starts every day with worship. In the chapel, the academic theology of books becomes life, a reality that one can see, touch, and experience. A great diversity of biblical and theological reflections are expressed and brought to life through manifold types of liturgies and cultural patterns. At times, it is shocking and intriguing. Often, even disturbing. Faced with new realities, the traditional way of prayer and worship as experienced by each participant at home, as well as the traditional methodology of doing theology, are being challenged or even questioned. Praying and worshipping becomes in Bossey a way of doing theology. The chapel, with its diversity of worship styles and meditations on the Bible, is the place where the students become aware that *cultural differences*, if they are not understood in relation to their contexts, are elements which may divide people more than the doctrines. The chapel is integrated into the overall academic setting of the Ecumenical Institute. From that perspective, it would be a big mistake to consider the worship the “pious” daily event which may help students to grow more comfortable with each other and to facilitate the building up of the community.

The more than 75-year experience of Bossey is that the chapel is the most challenging, provoking, transforming, and educational place in the institute. The chapel and the worship, rather than the plenary lecture, prove to be the most complex and delicate realities to handle. The ecumenism of books, although itself complex and difficult, can be dealt with through a certain diligent intellectual effort. The lived ecumenism as experienced in the chapel and in the daily life of the community is even more difficult. The worship and the chapel have often divided the community. Mutual accusations have often been voiced; either the worship was too “alive” with too much movement, dance, and gesture, or it was too boring, silent and meditative; either it was too traditional and not relevant enough for the people of our time or the liturgical formulas used did not follow the orthodoxy of traditional Christian liturgical patterns. Accusations of syncretism and “pagan” influences were also heard. While during the five months in Bossey the students come to the point of sharing many things in common and have established close friendships, in front of the eucharistic chalice

they had to realize that they were still divided. In no other place have I seen the acute awareness of Christian division as in Bossey. At times, tears were shed, and the whole community was sharing the pain. Such events have always provoked discussions. Under the emotional impulse of the moment, the tendency was to look for a scapegoat: somebody must be “right” and the other “wrong”, one more open and another more conservative, self-righteous, arrogant, exclusivist or intolerant. Such realities encouraged people to continue their research, to go deeper into one another’s traditions, the better to know one another. The events in the chapel sent people to the library; the results of the research in the library brought people back into the chapel to live and test them ecumenically. Worship itself became a frame for research, for doing theology, and the chapel a school of learning, an integral part of the *academia*.

What remains vivid in the minds of students after their time in Bossey are the worship and the community life. These have been recognized as the strongly educational, formative and transformative factors.<sup>12</sup> Through its holistic approach, combining intellectual research with worship, spirituality and life in community, Bossey offers to the wider ecumenical family a vital, attractive and efficient model of ecumenical formation.

The Bossey academic model of ecumenical formation is particularly important today as it reaffirms the holistic nature of theology, rearticulates its intrinsic link with worship and spirituality, and reintegrates it within the wider reality of the church as a whole and that of the world in which it lives.

### *Looking to the 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC*

Such a holistic approach also has implications looking toward the 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which gathers around the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” The theme is inspired by Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, where the

<sup>12</sup> Linda-Marie DELLOFF, *Embracing Estrangement*, in: TEd 34/Suppl. (1997) 15–22, here: 17; B. David ROWE, *Bossey Worship. Negotiating Worship Practiced in an International Christian Community* [unpubl. Master thesis, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta/GA], 1992, as quoted by John H. ERICKSON – Eileen W. LINDNER, *Worship and Prayer in Ecumenical Formation*, in: TEd 34/Suppl. (1997) 23–29, here: 25 f.

apostle speaks of the love of Christ “that urges us on” (2 Cor. 5:14) and suggests that through Christ, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation that we might be ambassadors of Christ’s love (2 Cor. 5:18-20). When Paul speaks about the love of Christ, he speaks about the love of God manifested in Christ, through incarnation. In Christ, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Out of love for humanity and the whole of creation, through kenosis he became human. He assumed all suffering and weaknesses of human nature and of the whole of creation, becoming one of us and identifying with us in order to heal and restore and reconcile humanity and creation with God (Phil. 2). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of God’s plan “for the fullness of time, to gather up [ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι] all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). In Christ, God intended to bring about reconciliation and unity in the realm of the whole of creation:

He himself is before all things, and in [Christ] all things hold together [...]. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:17-20)

According to these texts, the purpose of God is reconciliation and unity – not only of one people or of a Christian group, but of the cosmos.

St Irenaeus is known as the theologian of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century who shaped and articulated the redemptive recapitulation in Christ, based on the biblical texts above. This theology has marked Christian thinking in both the East and the West for almost a millennium. Apart from St Irenaeus, the theology of recapitulation is also found in the writings of other early church fathers such as Hippolytus, Methodius, Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine. In the era of post-patristic thought until today, the East remained faithfully attached to this theology and further articulated it in its liturgical expressions and spirituality. Discussions and exchanges within the ecumenical movement helped the revival and rediscovery of this old and common Christian affirmation, which is further developing in our times. At the WCC’s assembly in New Delhi in 1961, it was the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler who, in his masterful reflections on the Colossians text, said:

For it is here declared that the sweep of God's restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six- times repeated *Ta panta*. Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man who is God with us and not God for us – and all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him.<sup>13</sup>

So in the love of God, in Christ, we see the call for unity and reconciliation of the whole of the cosmos.<sup>14</sup> This is also the perspective that we find in the WCC document "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC" (CUV), presented to the WCC's 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Harare in 1998.<sup>15</sup> This document speaks of "the conviction that the object of God's reconciling purpose is not only the church but the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation" and a vision that "encompasses the renewal of church and world in the light of the gospel of God's kingdom. In the face of all threats to life it affirms the Christian hope of life for all."<sup>16</sup>

The love of Christ that is central to the Karlsruhe assembly theme is thus placed within a trinitarian context and develops further the vision of the CUV document. It opens new horizons and possibilities of approach: it will concentrate on what it means for churches and for Christian unity to confront together the many challenges of the world we live in and to witness to our common gospel values. It will not stop there, as the purpose of God's love in Christ is for the whole world. This naturally requires open-

<sup>13</sup> Joseph A. SITTLER, *Called to Unity*, in: ER 14 (1962) 177–187, here: 177.

<sup>14</sup> See T. K. THOMAS, *WCC, Basis of*, in: DEM<sup>2</sup>, 1238 f., here: 1239. URL: <https://bit.ly/38WKzpP> [accessed: June 7, 2022]. The article points out that the reformulation of the WCC Basis at the WCC assembly in 1961 in New Delhi "underlines the ontological priority of what God in Christ has already accomplished," and that the "final doxological formula sets the Christocentric affirmation in a Trinitarian setting". The dynamic character of the reformulated Basis "creates a 'basis beyond the Basis'" that was evidenced in the CUV document (s. fn. 15) presented to the Harare assembly.

<sup>15</sup> *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches. A Policy Statement*, printed in: *Assembly Workbook: Harare 1998, Geneva 1998*, 97–116. URL: <https://bit.ly/3xaUG2u> [accessed: June 7, 2022]. On the background to the CUV document, see also Marlin VANELDEREN, *Common Understanding and Vision: A Survey of the Discussion in the WCC*, in: ER 49 (1997) 3–12.

<sup>16</sup> CUV, § 2.4 and § 2.8.2.

ness and care for the whole world, for dialogue and cooperation with the people of other faiths or of no faith who share the same values.

Speaking of the love of Christ also means “our” love for Christ and our working in and with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, manifesting our “compassion”, taking on and identifying ourselves with the suffering of the world. In this way, the assembly is expected to deal with the ways Christians today respond concretely to the many challenges of our times through a “transforming discipleship”. As an “eschatological community”, experiencing the values of the kingdom to come as a foretaste, the church is expected to be a vector of unity and reconciliation for humanity and creation, thus remaining obedient to the goal that God’s love has in its manifestation in Christ (healing, unity, reconciliation). As the reflection on the assembly theme produced by an international WCC group has underlined, the life of the church, in its worship and service to the world, is called to be a sign of the love revealed in Christ and lived out by the apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit: “This is the love that can move the world to reconciliation and unity. The unity of the church, as witness to reconciliation, is also always to be identified with and connected to its service in and for the transformation of the world”:

Christ, out of love, prayed for the unity of his friends and disciples (John 17). He prayed “that they may be completely one,” not only for their own sake but also so that the world might believe. What the church is to be and what the church ought to do are two sides of the same coin. The church is one, according to the scriptures and the apostolic faith, and is also called to be a sign of unity for a broken world. From the heart of the loving Christ comes the prayer for unity. In Christian worship, the eucharist conveys the reality of the love of God made known in Christ through the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. It is this love that moves Christ’s followers to love not only one another, but also the world for which he died.<sup>17</sup>

To have the expected impact and to be credible to the world, Christians must continue their search for deeper unity and reconciliation among themselves and continue their pilgrimage of justice and peace, strength-

<sup>17</sup> Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity. A Reflection on the Theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe 2022, Geneva 2021, 16–17.

ening their fellowship and also cooperating with all people of good will for the healing of creation. With the choice of the assembly theme, the exchange of such theological reflections and conversations about them need to inform the preparations for the WCC's 11th Assembly. The message of the assembly must address the signs of the times and transform their intrinsic logic. Daring to speak of Christ's love in the present context, and thus of the love of the triune God, of God's mercy and God's justice, the assembly will find its purpose and goal.



## *Abbreviations*

CUV	Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC
DEM	Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, ed. by Nicholas Lossky et al., Geneva <sup>2</sup> 2004
ER	The Ecumenical Review
GOTR	The Greek Orthodox Theological Review
PG	Patrologia Graeca
SChr	Sources Chrétiennes
SSL	Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense
TEd	Theological Education
WCC	World Council of Churches

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