

On the statement of the 11th Assembly of the WCC on unity and the war in Ukraine.

It is always a moving experience when representatives of the churches from all over the world meet in one place and thus the catholicity of the church becomes visible and tangible. This was the case at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe (August 31 - September 8, 2022). The wonderful worship services, which impressively expressed the liturgical and spiritual richness of the churches, will be remembered. The many meetings with old friends and the acquaintance with new friends were a great gift. The following is not intended to be a report on the Assembly; rather, it is a brief look at the "Unity Statement" - this is, after all, the statement of particular importance for the ecumenical movement.

The introduction indicates the perspective in which the "Unity Statement"¹ is to be understood: The declaration is "written in a pastoral voice" (n. 1). In accordance with the theme of the Assembly ("Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity"), it wants "to offer hope to the churches and the world in their situation. It is founded in confidence in God's indefatigable love". It "reflects on the significance of that undaunted love [...] for the ecumenical movement" (n. 1). Thus, one should not expect a doctrinal development of the understanding of unity. The emphases that previous assemblies have placed on the conception of unity are briefly reviewed (nn. 9-13), and the question is asked "what we are being called to say in our own time" (n. 8). However, it is noted, "In these times, the vision of unity sometimes seems less clear than we would hope for and more difficult to pursue, but the call to unity is still urgent and compelling." (n. 14) While there is "a deep commitment to the goal of visible unity" (n. 14), there "remain questions about the limits of diversity in our understanding of unity" (n. 16), especially in moral terms. Both are true, but the tension is not taken up and acted out in the "Statement."

Instead, it promotes an "ecumenism of the heart": "The search for unity that is inspired by love and rooted in deep and mutual relationship may be termed an 'ecumenism of the heart.' It is Christlike love that moves us to walk honestly and wholeheartedly beside one another, to try to see the world through the eyes of others and to have compassion for one another, to build the trust that is such a vital part of our ecumenical journey." (n. 20) But has not what is here called the work of "Christlike love" characterized ecumenical work from the beginning? Have doctrinal dialogues been conducted without love for one another?

"Can we open our hearts so that Christ's love may move us in ways that breathe new life into the search for full visible communion?" (n. 17) It is people who have hearts; they are addressed here, in keeping with the pastoral focus of the statement. But when it comes to "full visible communion," churches are in view. Both, the individual ecumenically committed, who are to be encouraged, and the churches are here directly confronted with each other, but precisely the mediation between the two does not want to succeed. For long stretches, the declaration is a hymn to love and what love does: "It is love that will reject any distorted kind of unity that overcomes, overpowers, or coerces the other" (n. 20), "This truest and deepest love then also enables a genuine and critical accountability" (n. 21), "Love embraces our whole being to unify mind, body, and soul in igniting true affection" (n. 21). So many

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/A05rev1-Unity-Statement.pdf> (visited December 7, 2022)

beautiful things are said of love that even the apostle Paul, who wrote 1 Cor. 13, would pale in the face of it. But it is one thing to praise love, another to ask where and in whom this love is realized. Sometimes the phrases become intemperate, as when it is said, "Out of love, we commit ourselves to build a world for the common good, for all humankind" (n. 23) The WCC has never built a world, and it will not do so in the future. What a boundless presumption! At the end it says more modestly: We "call one another now [...] to love one another, as Christ himself commanded his disciples" (n. 25). What can a "Unity Statement" contribute to the awakening of this love?

The text vacillates between indicative statements about what love does, imperative statements ('Open yourselves to love!') and relatively few statements about the unresolved problems: "Despite Christ's invitation to unity, the churches continue to remain divided" (n. 7). Nevertheless: "In a world of separation, inequality and injustice, Christ calls his followers to witness to the unifying power of the love that is a gift of the Spirit." (n. 23) - even if the churches do not experience this among themselves? One gets the impression that by invoking love, one can leapfrog the recalcitrant reality.

"It is when we are kind to one another as churches, warmly welcoming of each other, building profound and evident friendship in sincerity and respect [...] we will find the grace to search for that common faith, the truth together held that will overcome our separation." (n. 19) Let our goodness summon grace! An ecumenism of life should come before the ecumenism of doctrine; the latter should grow out of the former. The following sentence says: "Unity in apostolic faith, in sacramental life, in ministry, and in the work of sharing in common action together, all need our heads, hands, and feet, the whole of us, to be fully engaged." (n. 19) Here the traditional three dimensions of ecclesial unity are abruptly invoked (the third in a modified way) and linked to the commitment of individuals ("our heads, hands and feet"). What "unity in faith and sacramental life" should mean *today* - a basic ecumenical question - is not further explained. But love will do it! Does it mean: 'Love one another, you Christian people from different churches, at the local level where you are dealing with one another, and if questions of doctrine arise from loving one another, pursue them?'

Not "formal agreements," but "experience of ecumenism" - an inappropriate alternative - is said to be more valuable." This goes hand in hand with "a recognition that as we first walk together on our common pilgrimage of reconciliation and unity, we are then also led to reflect together on questions of faith and truth." (n. 15) But there has already been decades of reflection on these questions, reflected precisely in the programmatic texts of the earlier assemblies; indeed, these are recalled in nn. 9 to 13. The text contains no indication of how this reflection of the Fathers and Mothers of ecumenism might be taken up and recast in the present stagnation. Although the document "The Church: Towards a Common Vision" and the churches' reactions to it are mentioned (n. 14), the document shows no traces of work on the concept of unity. Thus, one is tempted to say that here the word of wisdom "love covers all offenses" (10:12; 1 Pet 4:8) is transformed into: love covers all ecumenical blockages, regressions, fatigue.

It is disconcerting that the Unity Statement is content to remind us only twice: "Once again, in some places, Christians are killing each other." (n. 6) And, "Some ecumenical conversations are difficult even to begin. Sometimes, even those in communion with each

other are, tragically, at war." (n. 16) The war in Ukraine is in a sense outsourced to the statement "War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region."² There, the condemnation of the Russian attack on Ukraine as "illegal and unjustifiable," issued by the WCC Central Committee on June 18, 2022,³ is reaffirmed. Further, the Assembly states, We "reject any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed attacks and hatred." The blasphemous justification of Russia's war of extermination against Ukraine by Patriarch Cyril, the head of a member church of the WCC, is the gravest threat to the unity of the WCC since its inception. The Assembly has passed over with silence the narrative of a "metaphysical struggle of good against evil," which is what the Russian Orthodox read Ukraine to be about. The general sentence against the abuse of religious language and authority does not adequately reject this terrible form of perpetrator-victim reversal. "Woe to those who call good evil and evil good," the prophet Isaiah (5:20) calls out to the people. The "ecumenism of the heart" has not been able to bring itself to make such a cry of woe to Moscow, although a "Unity Statement" would have included the admonition that the Russian Orthodox Church separates itself from the communion of the churches with that "theological" justification of this war of annihilation. This is not a plea for the exclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC, but it would have been the task of the fellowship of the churches to admonish the patriarch in a brotherly and sisterly way to finally turn back from his wrong way. When, if not now, would it have been necessary to take seriously the demand for mutual accountability?

In many places at the Assembly there have been laments about the injustices done to indigenous people in the course of Christian colonialism, admissions of guilt and confessions of repentance, and rightly so. But the indigenous people of today are the people of Ukraine! And the Assembly, which so eloquently lamented the past injustice to the indigenous people, did not make the position of the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church the subject of a plenary debate. The topic has been worked on in a drafting group and the text has been briefly submitted to the plenary for voting. The reference to not wanting to block opportunities for discussion by a critical appeal to Patriarch Kyrill does not apply; there are situations in which the speech and behavior of a church is such an injustice against God and people that Christian people cannot remain silent if they do not want to be complicit in the injustice.

The Unity Statement wants to be pastoral, to encourage and to spread hope. A declaration could also be pastoral, of course, if it brought the experienced misery before God in a lament. It is not always the time of hopes. The "ecumenism of the heart" reveals rather than exposes the problems. It does not accept the difficult situation of the churches; but here, too, the old insight applies: only what is accepted can be overcome. This Unity Statement does not lead us to expect that the new age of ecumenical love has dawned with the assembly in Karlsruhe.

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² <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ADOPTED-PIC01.1rev-War%20in-Ukraine-Peace-and-Justice-in-the-European-Region.pdf> (visited December 7, 2022)

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-central-committee-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine> (visited December 7, 2022)