

**Director's Report: Faith and Order Plenary Commission, 8 October 2009**

The Revd Canon Dr John Gibaut

**Introduction**

My presentation this morning is more of an address than a report. It is addressed to you, the Faith and Order Commissioners, guests and consultants, about the nature and mission of the Plenary Commission, about what it means to be a member of this commission, and about our work together in Crete this week.

**Time-line**

They say that the difference between a meteorologist and a climatologist is that a meteorologist thinks of the weather in terms of days, while a climatologist thinks of weather in terms of decades.

Those who are engaged in the work of Faith and Order are more like climatologists because our work for Christian unity by means of theological dialogical can only be seen within the context of decades, not days, weeks or even years. Ours is a long-term project that looks back to 1910 or to 1927, and continues with our own work during these seven days in Crete. Our work this week will only bear fruit in the coming years, if not decades. In a world and indeed, in churches that have come to expect instant results and fast solutions, Faith and Order may appear strangely out of place, misunderstood and unappreciated.

Faith and Order met in Crete over two decades ago when the Standing Commission gathered here at the Orthodox Academy from 6 to 14 April 1984. Where were you in 1984? What were you doing in those days, 25 years ago?

It astonishes and delights me to note what some of us who are present from 6 to 14 October 2009 were doing in Crete in 1984. One of the vice-moderators in that year was HE Metropolitan Bartholomew, now His All Holiness, Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch. Another vice-moderator, Dr Mary Tanner, now Dame Mary Tanner, later became moderator of Faith and Order, and is now a president of the WCC. A newly appointed Faith and Order staff member, Archimandrite Gennadios Limouris, is now HE Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassisma, Vice-moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC, and moderator of the Plenary Commission Planning Committee for this meeting. Mrs Renate Sbejen, a long-time Faith and Order administrative staff member who was there in 1984, is now retired, but is back with us this week. One of the guests was the young Dr Alexander Papaderos, new director of the Orthodox Academy of Crete, now retired after an illustrious career and present with us to offer an original musical composition to mark this occasion. HE Metropolitan Irineos, one of our hosts in 1984,

at that time the Metropolitan of Apokoronon and Kydonias, is now the Archbishop of Crete. The young nun who gave the Faith and Order commissioners a tour of the monastery of Hrisopighi is now Mother Theoxeni, abbess of the monastery; we will meet her again on Sunday. These people remind me that the work of Faith and Order is measured in decades.

Again, think of where you were in 1984. What were the signs in your life in that year that pointed you to the Faith and Order Plenary Commission in 2009? What seeds was God planting in you then that brought you here today?

It is important to see the continuity between the agenda of Faith and Order in 1984 and in 2009. In 1984, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was still fresh in the minds of the churches, capturing our ecumenical imaginations. Its degree of reception across the churches can only have been a source of satisfaction and relief to those who had worked so hard on it. In 1984 Faith and Order was looking back, but also looking ahead. While the reception of BEM was one of the major projects at that time, there were also new initiatives, new directions such as “The Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith”, which eventually became *Confessing the Apostolic Faith*, and “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of the Human Community”, two study projects that would become significant Faith and Order texts that continue to contribute to the unity of the church.

Within these larger studies there are questions that directly link that meeting in 1984 with our own this week. One of the questions surfaced by the responses to BEM was the “nature of the Church”.<sup>1</sup> Another was on the implications for the mission of the church.<sup>2</sup> These are the roots of our work on the “Nature and Mission of the Church.” Another question was on “Scripture and Tradition”,<sup>3</sup> which is resumed in “Sources of Authority: Tradition and traditions.” The study project on “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community” took the Faith and Order agenda to a new place, much like the study project on “Moral Discernment in the Churches”, exploring some of the same issues. More significantly, this project introduced into Faith and Order in 1984 the inductive methodology of the case study.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Role of the Plenary Commission**

The 1984 meeting in Crete began to plan the next Plenary Commission of Faith and Order in 1985. At that time, the Faith and Order Plenary Commission was the body that formally initiated the Faith and Order studies and agenda, and appraised their results. As such, it was the premier multilateral locus of theological debate and convergence in the Christian world. For example, it was the Plenary Commission gathered in Lima, Peru, in 1982 that was able to declare that Faith and Order had achieved a convergence in the BEM text. The moderator at that time, Dr Nikos Nissiotis, rightly claimed that the Faith and Order Plenary Commission was the most representative theological forum in the world; it still is, but much has changed since then.

Following the 1998 WCC Assembly at Harare, the by-laws of Faith and Order were amended in 1999, and with them, the nature and purpose of the Plenary Commission. For instance, it lost its authority to initiate the Faith and Order studies and to name their results as convergence texts.

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission, 1984, Crete*, F&O Paper No. 121, (Geneva: WCC, 1984), pp. 26–27.

<sup>2</sup> 1984 *Minutes*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> 1984 *Minutes*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> 1984 *Minutes*, p. 51.

Much of the older Plenary Commission's authority was assumed by the Faith and Order Standing Commission and the Central Committee of the WCC. The present by-laws from 1999 state:

The plenary commission shall provide a broader frame of reference for the activities of the standing commission and in particular provide a forum for theological debate and a source of membership for participation in study groups and consultations. The members of the plenary commission will share in communicating the programme of Faith and Order to the churches. (F&O By-laws, 4.3)<sup>5</sup>

While there is continuity between the Plenary Commission today and its predecessors since 1999, there is also a discontinuity. It does not have the same authority, and its purpose is unclear. This lack of clarity became apparent during the 2004 Plenary Commission meeting, the first meeting since the change of the by-laws in 1999.

What, then, is the purpose of the Plenary Commission? What is the mandate of the commissioners themselves? How are Plenary Commission members involved in the work of Faith and Order? These are questions that our moderator, HE Metropolitan Vasilios, has posed to us many times, most recently this morning in his own report. Any answers are a "work in progress."

### **The Work of this Plenary Commission**

It was in Cairo during the last Standing Commission meeting in June 2008 that a new approach to the Plenary Commission began. It started one morning in a meeting of the Ecclesiology Working Group, when we realized that we needed "a broader frame of reference" in order to determine what the next steps in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* should be. The Ecclesiology Group decided to seek the counsel and advice of the Plenary Commission. After lunch, the study projects on "Moral Discernment" and "Sources of Authority" had come to the same decision. On that day, a new vision of the role of the Plenary Commission was born.

In my letters to you, and in my reporting to the WCC, I have described this meeting of the Plenary Commission as an expanded Faith and Order consultation, engaging every member of Faith and Order, along with guests and consultants, in the work of all three commission study projects: "Moral Discernment in the Churches", "Sources of Authority" and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. Each of these studies is at a critical stage, and decisions around the next steps will be shaped by this Plenary Commission meeting. The significant contribution of the Plenary commissioners on these topics this week is part of a much larger and ongoing Faith and Order study process that will continue for years to come.

An important feature of the 2009 Plenary Commission is the division of work into 12 small working groups of about 12 people each, to which you have already been assigned. Each working group—which meets to pray together every morning—will engage in the work of the three study

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<sup>5</sup> In *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order 2008*, Faith and Order Paper No. 208 (Geneva: WCC, 2009), p. 114; Cf. the by-laws in 1984, 3.c: "The Plenary Commission will have as its primary task theological study, debate, and appraisal. It will initiate the programme of the Faith and Order Commission, lay down general guidelines for it, and share in its communication to the churches." 1984 Minutes, p. 92.

projects and, through designated facilitators and rapporteurs, will send its reflections and findings to the members of the study projects in 2010, and then to the Standing Commission in 2011.

You have read about the three study projects in the materials that have been sent to you during the summer. You will hear much more in the coming days.

The overarching theme of our gathering this week is ecclesiology, with specific attention given to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. As far as the Commission is concerned, all three study projects are of equal importance, and of equal significance.

### **“Moral Discernment in the Churches”**

It must be admitted that “Moral Discernment” has earned more attention, in part because it is about “morals”, in part because of its methodology, namely case studies, and also in part because the case studies use the concrete and controversial instances of decision-making around globalization, stem cell research, proselytism, and human sexuality.

The co-moderators of “Moral Discernment” have asked me to introduce this topic within the context of my report to clarify early on in this meeting what the work on “Moral Discernment in the Churches” is, and what it is not. This introduction will save time when we begin the work on Saturday, for you will plenary your work immediately in groups that day, without a plenary presentation on “Moral Discernment in the Churches”.

There has been both excitement and alarm that the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order is discussing church-dividing issues of morals and ethics, moving beyond the classical Faith and Order questions, working with issues that are dealt with in different ways within the WCC. For instance, there is a Human Sexuality Referent Group, which in part deals with homosexuality. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has well-developed protocols on proselytism. There is a project between the WCC and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies on stem cell research. And the WCC has long been engaged in questions around economic globalization.

The difference between the work of these groups and our own work is that our interest in the case studies is not the content of these issues, but their methodologies. When our meeting is over, when the results of this expanded consultation and the ongoing work of the study project are complete, Faith and Order will say nothing to the churches about globalization, stem cell research, human sexuality, or globalization. We are examining these four particular case studies in order to analyze *how* the churches make decisions on moral questions. There have been many church-dividing moral questions in the past, going right back to the early centuries of the church, and there will be many more such questions in the future. With its specific mandate “to proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ”, in what ways can Faith and Order speak to the churches about how they make moral decisions without provoking disunity and division?

The study on “Moral Discernment in the Churches” is a continuation of the previous work of Faith and Order that has focused on issues of morality and ethics. More specifically, this study intends to build on the important insights gleaned in two previous studies: *Ecclesiology and Ethics* and *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*.

The purpose of this study is to facilitate a deeper understanding of our common commitments and core values as followers of Christ even as we recognize and address particular moral issues over which diverse communities of faithful Christians hold principled disagreements. This study process will engage in three methodological tasks:

- The case studies provide a descriptive account of the issue that offers examples of how particular communities of Christians engage in moral discernment in relation to particular moral issues.
- Members of the Plenary Commission and other participants will engage in an analysis of the disagreement that focuses on mapping the underlying nature and root causes of disagreement in ways that help us understand our Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree, while helping us to build a foundation for continuing theological debates and conversations across lines of difference.
- The final study document to be developed will offer a constructive response to conflict over moral issues that includes concrete resources to help communities negotiate principled disagreement over moral issues, and “will outline specific suggestions to the Churches for dealing with conflict over moral issues.”<sup>6</sup>

The case studies are not position papers. The authors, who write in their own names, do not represent official church positions. The case studies are not Faith and Order statements. They are working tools.

Case studies reveal how churches respond to particular moral questions. The immediate result will be to develop study material and resources, and to propose ecumenically developed methodologies that guide the churches in their discernment and decision-making on moral questions, with the long-term goal of preventing our differences from becoming church dividing.

Each of you has a specific task in contributing to the study on “Moral Discernment in the Churches”. Each working group has two sessions, in which they are asked to deal with the case study that has been assigned to them. The group will work together to analyze the dynamics of the case with the intention of identifying the points of divergence and disagreement, as well as identifying potential strategies and resources for helping the churches continue to stay in dialogue with one another in the midst of their disagreement. The point of the case studies is not to argue the merits of either side, or to “solve” the issue, but rather to think strategically about how we can engage in meaningful dialogue and debate in the midst of theological diversity and disagreement.

The data produced by the twelve working groups on “Moral Discernment in the Churches”, as well as “Sources of Authority” and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, will be sent to the study groups, which will begin to analyze the results in 2010; from there, the work will continue for years. There will be no rapid results this week. Although our work may be measured in decades, not days and weeks, the plan for this study project is that it be completed in 2012, in order to be sent to the WCC Assembly in 2013.

### **The Work of the Guests and Consultants**

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<sup>6</sup> 2008 *Minutes*, p. 103.

To the nearly 37 younger theologians, guests and consultants who are here this week with us, thank you for responding so positively to the invitation to be here. Some of you are important partners and collaborators of Faith and Order. Some of you bring a valued expertise to our work. Some of you represent not member churches, but Christian World Communions. You are with the Faith and Order Commission this week not as observers, but as participants: in the working groups, in prayer, in the life of the commission-community this week. We hope that you will still “observe” and take back to your churches, ecumenical organizations, and faculties of theology what you have seen and heard this week.

I would like to extend a particular word of thanks to those coming from the Higher Ecclesiastical School of Crete, the university faculties of theology of Athens and Thessaloniki, the Greek Bible Society, and to the younger theologians from Greece and Cyprus. In the tradition of Nikos Nissiotis, your presence here is a living witness to the place of Faith and Order in the life of the Hellenic Orthodox churches.

### **The Work of the Plenary Commission Members**

To the Plenary Commission members: your work in Faith and Order began long before you arrived in Crete, long before you started preparing for this meeting. In a sense, it began when you accepted to be nominated by your church to be a member of Faith and Order, or when you accepted to be nominated as a proxy, guest or consultant to this meeting. In a deeper sense, just to have been nominated means that your work for Christian unity has been recognized. Your work here is not to make decisions—this task belongs the WCC Central Committee, on the advice of the Standing Commission. Your work is to engage in each of the study projects in order to advise. Your authority is not a legal one, but a moral one, and it will shape the directions of the three study projects in the coming years. When the projects reach maturity, with your help, they will be offered to the churches to call each other in the coming decades to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.

### **The Work of the Plenary Commission After the Meeting**

To the guests and consultants to this meeting, your proven experience has brought you here. Continue to create and maintain the links between Faith and Order and your own work in your churches, ecumenical organizations, faculties and universities, church headquarters, as well as in your dioceses, parishes, and congregations, religious and monastic communities.

To the commissioners, especially to the 80 percent of you who are new, your appointment to the Commission on Faith and Order is not to attend a one-week meeting in Crete. Until the WCC Assembly of 2013, you are a member of this Commission. You are a member of the most representative theological forum in the world, the most important multilateral dialogue in the Christian world today.

Your work continues after this meeting. Some of you will be invited to participate in ongoing consultations; many of you have already contributed in this way. Once the work comes to completion, all of you who will have participated at this pivotal juncture will be the natural

spokespeople to promote this work, to study it, to teach it, to explain it and to evaluate it. Above all, “share in communicating the programme of Faith and Order to the churches.” (By-laws, 4.3)

We quite rightly avoid using language that includes words like “status” and “elite”, but being a member of the Commission on Faith and Order gives each of you a certain status and standing within your churches and within the ecumenical movement in your regions and communities. Use this status to proclaim the oneness of the church of Christ, and to further the work of Faith and Order in your own contexts to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.

We will be in touch with you in the coming years to hear how you are living out this call, this mandate, in your own communities. We expect great things from you.

There is one task that I have been asked to bring before you that is not a Faith and Order project, but touches our work in many ways. That task is to make individual responses on the “Initial Statement towards an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace: Glory to God and Peace on Earth”. This text was prepared for the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) that will take place in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 2011, which brings to conclusion the Decade to Overcome Violence. As a commission of the WCC, the Faith and Order Plenary Commission is being asked to respond to this text. There is not the time in our meeting to do so, but please read and evaluate the text and offer a response. Identify yourself as a Faith and Order commissioner, which will bring an important perspective to the text and will be a sign of the commitment of Faith and Order to the wider witness of the WCC.

### **Goals of this meeting**

I have written many planning documents and reports over the past two years about this meeting of the Plenary Commission, and many more reports wait to be written in the coming months and years. A question that is raised every time is about “outcomes”. What are the expected outcomes or goals of this particular meeting? I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this question when it comes time for discussion. Here are some initial thoughts of my own to consider.

The Commission on Faith and Order represents the widest diversity of Christian traditions from around the world. Through study and theological dialogue, Faith and Order has been able to propose to the churches convergence or consensus texts that have profoundly contributed to the unity of the Church. Our meeting will be an important landmark in this long trajectory.

#### *Expected outcomes:*

We anticipate a large body of data from the working groups that will give direction and support to the three Faith and Order study projects, that will guide this work in the coming years and decades. Every meeting of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission has been a signpost or a landmark on the way to Christian unity. This meeting will be no different.

#### *“Uncontainable” outcomes:*

There will be many outcomes that are both uncontrollable and unpredictable, the gifts of the Holy Spirit to us and to the churches through our prayer, work, fellowship and pilgrimages together this week. I call these “uncontainable outcomes”, and there is no place for such categories in the WCC reporting mechanisms. Some of these “uncontainable outcomes” will happen in the plenary and small-group discussions; they are just as likely to happen at times of prayer or at meals, or in small gatherings of two or three discussing the day, or sharing their lives. But the effectual working of God’s providence will happen this week because the Risen Christ promises that when two or three are gathered in his name, he is in the midst of us, and Christ makes all things new.

In the report on the 1984 meeting, the Director of Faith and Order at that time, Dr Günther Gassmann, wrote:

The meeting in Crete was marked by a joyful, co-operative and creative spirit .... The positive experience of so effectively working together ... gives us reason to look with much confidence and hope toward the future tasks of Faith and Order in the service of the visible and effective unity of Christ’s Church.<sup>7</sup>

None of us knows exactly how this experience will happen to us, but I believe that God will bring it about, and that when the report of this meeting is written, Dr Gassmann’s words of 25 years ago will appear again, and that when we leave next week, the Church will be closer to that unity for which Christ prayed than it was before we met.

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<sup>7</sup> Günther Gassmann, “Preface”, 1984 *Minutes*, p. i.