

**FROM REFLECTION TO RECEPTION
CHALLENGES FACING THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
-WCC COLLABORATION**

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This is the text of a lecture delivered by His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia and Moderator of the Central and Executive Committees of the World Council of Churches, at the 40th Anniversary Celebration of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, held on Thursday 17 November 2005, at the Ecumenical Center, Geneva.

As we, representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Roman Catholic Church, embark on a process of reflecting together on the future of ecumenism, I believe that the Joint Working Group (JWG), which is currently celebrating its 40th Anniversary, has a vital role to play in exploring and shaping the emerging ecumenical perspectives and priorities. The aim of my speech is twofold: first, to make a critical assessment of the relations and collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, particularly within the framework of the JWG; and, second, to identify with a realistic and forward-looking approach those specific areas where deeper collaboration is possible and necessary.

1) A JOURNEY OF CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

The relations and collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and WCC after the Council of Vatican II can be rightly described as a journey of confidence building. After a long period of tension and estrangement, the JWG generated a spirit of *rapprochement* and mutual understanding with the Orthodox and Protestant churches. Vatican II opened a new page in the history of the ecumenical movement. That spirit found expression through

common declarations, bilateral dialogues, agreed statements, and mutual visitations. The creation of the JWG was a concrete manifestation of the *aggiornamento* and the ecumenical openness of Vatican II. However, the ecumenical journey that was opened by Vatican II was not an easy one. After so many years of doctrinal controversies, attitudes were not easily transformed. Yet, in spite of the many difficulties and challenges on global, regional and local levels, the JWG continued its journey, although with slow pace, and remained faithful to its mandate.

As a member of the Central Committee, and since 1991 as Moderator, I have followed this journey closely. I have made specific suggestions, shared critical remarks, and voiced my expectations from this important structure of ecumenical collaboration. I consider the Roman Catholic Church-WCC relations and collaboration a special area of vital concern. We still have a long way to go together. We have before us many critical questions and pertinent issues of common concern that require frank dialogue and serious scrutiny. We are called to broaden our mutual understanding, deepen the spirit of fellowship and strengthen our commitment to work together. We are called, therefore, to enhance, with renewed engagement, our common journey of confidence-building.

2) JWG: A FRAMEWORK OF DIALOGUE

One of the most significant contributions that the JWG made to the ecumenical movement was to create the opportunity for the major traditions of Christianity to engage in multilateral dialogue. Although the multiplication of bilateral dialogues has weakened the churches' commitment to multilateral dialogue, the JWG continues, though in a limited scope, to provide a challenging ecumenical forum to address common issues, share our experiences, exchange views and clarify prevailing misunderstandings. In fact, listening to each other carefully has made us to realize that,

a) Although the ecumenical movement is one, we have different understandings of ecumenism. We in the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church have repeatedly emphasized the "oneness" of the ecumenical movement and strived to promote one ecumenical cause. Yet, we have different ways of doing ecumenism. We have different ecumenical priorities. We have different expectations from the ecumenical movement. But we are partners and have a firm engagement in ecumenism. We are called to strengthen and articulate the "oneness" of the ecumenical movement. But how are we to do this? To what extent are the differences

legitimate or divisive? Is it possible to develop a shared vision of ecumenism where the diversities interact creatively and coherently?

b) We have carried on our ecumenical witness on the basis of different ecclesiological assumptions. Vatican II was a turning point in the ecclesiological attitude of the Roman Catholic Church vis-a-vis the other churches. However, in my view the Roman Catholic Church did not completely drop the concept of "return" to the "fullness" of truth and unity that subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church continues to remind us about the "incomplete" communion existing with other churches. More significantly yet, the Roman Catholic Church considers other churches as "churches and ecclesial communities". The ecumenical implications of this new approach are clearly seen in the studies undertaken by the JWG. The question is: after so many years of dialoguing and reflecting together, can we develop a common ecclesiological basis that may provide a proper framework or entry point to tackle controversial matters such as mutual recognition of baptism, ministry and eucharist, the primacy and authority, in the church, etc?

c) Because our vision of unity is based on our ecclesiological self-understanding, we have a different understanding of visible unity. In this context, it is important to remind ourselves that, first, even within the WCC churches differ considerably in their perceptions of unity; second, through the continuous efforts of Faith and Order, the churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, have reached a common agreement concerning the basic requirements and assumptions necessary to manifest the full and visible unity of the church. Although we may maintain different approaches to unity, our commitment to it is firm, because we believe that visible unity constitutes the *raison d'être* of the ecumenical movement. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church's growing participation in councils of churches and the Vatican's publication of a new Ecumenical Directory are tangible signs of the Roman Catholic Church's "irreversible and irrevocable commitment" to the ecumenical movement. The question is: can different models of unity developed over the years by Faith and Order help us to reach a consensus model? Can the concept of "conciliar fellowship", encompassing different concepts of unity, become a mutually accepted model?

3) A COLLABORATION OF UPS AND DOWNS AS WELL AS INCOMPATIBILITIES

a) Our relationship and collaborations have not been always smooth. They sometimes underwent moments of serious difficulties; they faced crises of various nature and scope. We experienced moments of hope and moments of frustration as well. I would like to mention some of the difficult situations related to the last fifteen years: the strong reaction of the Roman Catholic Church to the consultation on Uniatism (1991) organized by WCC upon the request of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the critical attitude of the WCC towards the Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) and the Encyclical letter by Pope John Paul II, “*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*” (2003). For the Roman Catholic Church the increasing participation of ecumenical partners in the WCC has remained a source of concern in spite of the Council's assurance that they are not ecclesial bodies and may not change the major goals of the Council.

b) The fact that one of the partners of the JWG is a church and the other is a fellowship of churches often creates problems and inconsistencies. This incompatibility is seen clearly in the decision-making and implementation process. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, decisions are forwarded to local churches for implementation. Since the WCC has no authority over its member churches, the decisions are conveyed simply as recommendations.

c) The question of reciprocity has often generated sensitivities. For example, reciprocity on the part of the Roman Catholic Church has not been on the level expected by the WCC. As a church, the Roman Catholic Church probably looks at this matter from a different angle. All these mean that too much expectation from Roman Catholic-WCC collaboration may create unnecessary disappointment. We must accept the limits and limitations imposed by different ecclesiologies, institutional requirements and styles. But, at the same time, our common and firm engagement in the ecumenical cause challenges us to explore the proper means and ways to enlarge the scope and increase the level of reciprocity, on the one hand, and to transform our reactionary attitudes to frank discussion, on the other hand.

4) FROM REFLECTION TO RECEPTION, FROM DIVERGENCE TO CONVERGENCE

a) These concerns and challenges must lead us to move slowly and carefully from reflection to reception, from divergence to convergence. The JWG has initiated more than ten studies dealing with controversial matters and timely issues pertaining mainly to christology,

pneumatology, ecclesiology and ethical and pastoral areas. These rather comprehensive and solid studies, prepared with ecumenical spirit, retain their theological validity and ecumenical relevance. However, the problem is that they still remain on the shelves of the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU). How many churches, clergy or theologians are aware of the work of the JWG? Its work is confined to a limited circle of ecumenists. To address this situation, the work of the JWG must be related to the life of the church on the local level, and must be appropriated by the churches through a process of ecumenical education. ***Reaching the local churches:*** I consider this a major task before the ecumenical movement for the years to come.

b) The work of the JWG has also not reached the council's of churches. To what extent have the studies of the JWG impacted the thinking and programmatic life of the WCC? The interest of the governing bodies of the WCC and those of regional and national councils, as well as ecumenical organizations in respect to the JWG has been very low. The integration of the work of the JWG, and collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church in ecumenical life and witness should become an urgent priority.

c) The existing divergences must be eventually directed towards convergence. Differences are integral to our ecumenical life; they are the projection of the diverse historical developments that the churches have undergone, diverse environments that they live in, and diverse doctrinal attitudes and theological teachings that they hold. However, these divergences must not generate tensions and polarizations. They must not lead to estrangement and self-isolation. Our divergences must complement and enrich each other through mutual challenge and creative interaction. They must be considered as integral to the one whole. We must give clear articulation to this conviction and commitment. How can we transform divergences into a process of convergence? Here lies one of the major tasks of JWG.

5) THE JWG MUST REMAIN A PROPER FRAMEWORK OF COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

a) The JWG has become mainly a joint study group. Without undermining the vital importance of study, I believe that the study of major theological, doctrinal and ecumenical issues must be reserved to Faith and Order. Taking into consideration the composition and experience of this body, I believe that it may play a pivotal role in initiating major studies and

ensuring broader diversity and participation. The JWG's role may be one of reminder, facilitator and challenger.

b) The JWG may, in its turn, address those issues and concerns that are timely and immediately relevant to the life and witness of the churches. In this context, an attempt to bring together, within a coherent whole and in a form of consensus, the findings and recommendations of bilateral theological dialogues could be of special significance. Furthermore, participation in the week of prayer for Christian unity, more Catholic input in different programs of the WCC, preparation of major ecumenical conferences, bilateral visits and invitation to each other's main events would definitely enhance and deepen the collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC.

c) In a world of uncertainties and tensions, people are increasingly expecting the churches' united voice. The JWG can provide the global framework in which the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church can address issues of common concern together. And occasions and concerns are so many! Such a joint action would make a difference in many respects: it would further the quest for visible unity; it would strengthen the ecumenical fellowship on national, regional and global levels; it would serve as the point of reference for the local churches; it would give spiritual strength to those churches living in a minority situation.

d) And, finally, the JWG must act as a framework for communication and information sharing. Such a role is crucially important in an age where information and communication play a major part in shaping relationships, deepening collaboration, building communities, preventing crises and orienting societies. Therefore, I suggest that in the coming period, the JWG give priority to information sharing rather than to study. Partial information and biased communication may lead us to wrong conclusions. Listening to one another and direct communication must acquire a focal attention.

6) CHALLENGES FACING THE JWG

As the ecumenical movement enters a new period, a period full of new risks and hopes, uncertainties and prospects, I believe that the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church must be ready to face the following challenges:

a) The membership of the Roman Catholic Church in regional and national councils of churches is a significant step forward. And let us bear in mind that Roman Catholic-Orthodox - Protestant collaboration in national and regional councils is far beyond that in the JWG or even in the WCC. This reality needs to be seriously discussed and its implications clearly spelled out. The JWG must remain a consultative body, not an "operative agency"; yet, a more organized and efficient collaboration needs to be established with regional and national councils. The JWG is responsible for overseeing and fostering relationships and collaboration between Roman Catholic Church and WCC. I wonder whether this collaboration should be confined to the "headquarters" alone. In my view, the mandate given to the JWG implies a broader context and a larger scope.

b) The agenda of our ecumenical collaboration needs revision. The major doctrinal and ecclesiological issues have already been treated both by the JWG, Faith and Order and bilateral theological dialogues. Furthermore, our churches today are more divided in respect to moral, ethical and pastoral issues than doctrinal ones. They need guidance and help to heal the intra-church and inter-church divisions on these questions. Hence, it is high time that we focus our attention on areas and concerns that touch the daily life of churches and Christians.

c) As we celebrate our achievements and assess our relations and collaboration in the last 40 years, we must also seek new ways of working together. Reviewing the mandate of the JWG, which was originally set in 1966 and modified in 1975, is a must in a world that is in radical change. Such an engagement requires that structure, style and agenda be revised. We must aim at new patterns of relationship and a new quality of collaboration.

d) On several occasions the Roman Catholic Church has made it clear that "the time is not yet ripe" to join the WCC. It looks as though the Roman Catholic Church retains that position. Therefore, we, in the WCC, must not have high expectations. We must be realistic and patient. "Inspired by the same vision" (CUV, 4:1 and title of a JWG study), we must reaffirm our common commitment to bear united witness to Christ's Gospel and its call to visible unity, remembering that a WCC with the full participation of the Roman Catholic Church will become more complete, global and efficient on the way to visible unity.

e) By initiating the reconfiguration process, the WCC made it clear that this is not a Council-related concern but a pan-ecumenical concern and process. Therefore, it is my hope that the Roman Catholic Church will take the reconfiguration seriously. The ecumenical predicament and its imperatives were different 40 years ago. Today we face a new ecumenical

landscape. In fact, changing faces and centers of Christianity and emerging new ecumenical realities and challenges have strong implications for Roman Catholic-WCC relations and collaboration. They must not be neglected by the JWG as it embarks on a new period of its history.

f) Ecclesiology will clearly dominate the ecumenical agenda in the years ahead. Hence, the concept of "communio", which I developed in my report to the Central Committee in 1999 and H.E. Cardinal Kasper addressed at the plenary of PCPCU in 2001, needs to be revisited by the JWG. "Communio" ecclesiology, which was at the heart of the early church, displays challenging perspectives that merit deeper investigation. In this context, particular attention should be given to conciliarity, primacy and authority. Some of the earlier studies and statements of Faith and Order and the JWG could be of immense help in this respect.

g) According to the mandate of the JWG, it must deal with issues and areas that "foster or hinder WCC-RCC relations". Thus far we have mainly emphasized matters that may "foster" collaboration, and have avoided touching issues or areas of an explosive or divisive nature. I believe that 40 years of collaboration must have given us the experience, courage and hope to deepen and enlarge our common ground, to give clear articulation to our shared ecumenical vision and wrestle pro-actively with controversial issues, considering them as challenges. This requires not only a change of agenda priorities, but also a change of approach and methodology.

h) A few years ago, when the idea of a Global Christian Forum was introduced, I had some doubts and reservations about it. In view of the growing pace of charismatic, pentecostal and evangelical forms of Christianity, I wonder whether the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, which have played an important role in giving shape to the idea of forum, should not assume a particular responsibility of bringing the various expressions of Christianity together within the framework of a global forum? Furthermore, in view of the widening gap between the churches and institutional ecumenism, again, I wonder whether the Global Christian Forum could strengthen the ecumenical spirit among those churches that are out of the scope of ecumenical life and, further, promote the ecumenical values and goals?

i) Reflection and action, relationship and collaboration without a solid spirituality will lose much of their relevance and credibility. Ecumenism in all its forms and expressions must be underpinned by the kind of spirituality that will take it to the roots of Christian faith. I welcome the Roman Catholic Church's strong emphasis on spiritual ecumenism.

Strengthening spiritual ecumenism is a major priority for all of us and we must take it most seriously.

j) The question of local and global has been a major concern from the very inception of the modern ecumenical movement. Globalization and growing inter-religious dialogue and contacts have sharpened the relevance of this issue in its diverse dimensions and manifestations. A greater interaction between the local and global is imperative. Hence, this ecumenical issue, with its new challenges and implications for the ecclesiological and missiological self-understanding of the church, must be revisited in the 21st century.

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We are moving to a new period in our ecumenical history. Some depict the present juncture of ecumenism as ambiguous, stagnant and uncertain. Others believe that the ecumenical movement is acquiring new forms and is calling for a new style and agenda. I myself opt for the second.

We may have a different grasp of and respond differently to the changing ecumenical panorama. We may even have different priorities. But our common calling impels us to continue, with renewed impetus and ever-growing engagement, our ecumenical collaboration for the visible unity of the church.

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Antelias*