

**TOWARDS THE NEW ECUMENICAL
CONFIGURATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

This the text of the address delivered by His Holiness Aram I at the opening session of the International Ecumenical Consultation on "Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement for the 21st Century" taking place at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, from 17 to 20 November 2003.

It is a profound spiritual joy to greet you in this center of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia. Since its formation late in the first century and its institutionalization at the beginning of the fourth century, the Armenian Orthodox Church, with its theological broadmindedness, ecumenical spirit and firm commitment to visible unity, has made a remarkable contribution to the ecumenical cause. It is appropriate, therefore, to initiate such an important ecumenical process here in Antelias, which has become a center of ecumenical encounter and dialogue.

This is not an ordinary ecumenical consultation. We, a group of selected theologians, ecumenists and church leaders from different churches and regions, engaged in ecumenical witness in different ways, are invited by the World Council of Churches to assess the present situation of the ecumenical movement, identify emerging issues, problems and challenges, and propose a framework for the future course of the ecumenical movement. The purpose of this meeting is not, therefore, to take decisions but, rather, first, to embark on a process of reflecting together with a forward looking vision; and, second, to prepare a working paper, which will be the basis for further discussion. It is very important that immediately after this initial meeting churches, both members of the WCC and those not members, play an active role in this process.

As a person who has been involved in the ecumenical movement for the past 35 years, I would like, at the very beginning of this process, to share with you my own experiences, perspectives and expectations.

1) The ecumenical movement is God's gift and call; it requires human response. Our response to the ecumenical movement is strongly affected and shaped, and largely conditioned, by realities and developments that surround us, as well as by the churches' requirements and needs. The ecumenical movement is not a fixed reality; it

is, and has, throughout its history, always been in constant re-evaluation, restructuring and re-articulation. These features will continue to impact the ecumenical movement, which will thereby acquire different shapes and manifestations until its goals are realized.

Recently, an ecumenist stated that he believes that the main "problems" of the ecumenical movement are the ordination of women, homosexuality, decision-making and proselytism. These are certainly problems for the ecumenical movement. But in my judgment, the ecumenical "problems" go far beyond these issues. The real problems are those associated with global changes, major geopolitical and economic developments, and the resurgence of religion in the public sphere; all of these have profoundly affected the life and witness of the churches, as well as the ecumenical landscape. The ecumenical movement is facing acute concerns and enormous challenges that call for a serious reflection. We must seek a new orientation for the ecumenical movement. We must look for alternatives and new models with and for the new generation. This should be the aim of this process entitled the "New Ecumenical Configuration for the 21st Century".

The dictionary describes configuration as "form", "shape", "structure", "frame", "pattern", "model", "feature", "style", "profile", "outline". We should include all these nuances in this process. We must not simply restructure or re-adjust; we must look at all the aspects and manifestations of the ecumenical status quo and see where it needs changing. It is often difficult and risky to seek change. Yet, such a venture is creative, challenging, transforming and renewing. I believe that ecumenism, at this point in time, is in dire need of such a creative venture.

2) For many years, the ecumenical movement was dominated by Protestant conservative thinking, which paved the way for a theological interaction and ecumenical collaboration with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The emergence of Western liberal Protestant ecumenism has created a new situation. As a result, the two ecumenical ethoses, namely *conservative ecumenism* and *liberal ecumenism*, are in tension. The signs of tension are seen in nearly all aspects and at all levels of ecumenical life, even within the same confessional family or church.

Conservative ecumenists maintain that visible unity is the goal of the ecumenical movement, and therefore, the whole ecumenical work must be directed towards it; whereas liberal ecumenists believe that working for justice and peace should become *the* priority for the ecumenical movement. Marked by activism the liberal ecumenism is spreading in many regions and within churches, shaking the ecumenical paradigms. New faces of ecumenism, new patterns of ecumenical

reflection, and new ways of living ecumenically are emerging. The ecumenical panorama has already changed considerably. We cannot ignore these changes and become captives of our ecumenical ethos. The conservative and liberal approaches must not become mutually exclusive. We must provide space for them to engage in creative dialogue and to move towards convergence. We need to explore again new ways of being, reflecting and working together "ecumenically".

3) We speak of ecumenical crisis. In my view, it is not the ecumenical movement, but its institutions, that are in crisis. Because of our deep concern to preserve history, memory and tradition, we have encouraged institutional ecumenism and have perpetuated it. Institutions are both a necessity and a handicap. Let us not confuse movement and institution, instrument and vision. The institutional expressions of the ecumenical movement have become incompatible with the new ecumenical realities and expectations.

The ecumenical vision, and particularly the way we have articulated it through the CUV, cannot be confined to the present ecumenical structures, patterns and forms. It takes us beyond the present institutional ecumenism. The ecumenical movement should not be "paralyzed by institutionalism" (CUV). But we cannot, as some suggest, de-institutionalize the ecumenical movement; it requires structures to survive and to function. At the same time, the ecumenical movement cannot progress and re-vitalize so long as it resides only in self-contained and self-centered institutions. Therefore, the ecumenical movement needs an "effective organizational structure" (CUV) to function properly. For a structure to be sustainable, it must respond to concrete needs. Clearly, our vision and the context of the present world must determine the ways and means, and the structures and forms by which the ecumenical movement is articulated and practiced. The question is: can we design a new ecumenical configuration that preserves a proper balance between movement and institution, vision and context? In such an attempt we must a) develop an ecumenical vision that is not conditioned and overwhelmed by its institutional expression; b) articulate the ecumenical vision in a way that makes it relevant and inspiring; c) shape the sort of ecumenical structures that widen the ecumenical circle, the scope of our witness and participation; d) and set the kind of ecumenical institutions that respond to present circumstances and meet the expectations of the churches.

4) The modern ecumenical movement was built mainly on the personal commitments of a group of church leaders and theologians. With the gradual involvement of the churches, the ecumenical movement has acquired ecclesiastical character and has become church-centered and church-controlled. In fact, the emergence of new expressions of "being church", on the one hand, and the strong

reaction to institutionalized ecumenism, on the other hand, took the ecumenical movement beyond the strict control of the institutional churches and made it an open space where *intra-ecclesiam* and *extra-ecclesiam* developments, problems, agendas and tensions are on display.

This shift from ecclesiastical to what I call *people-centered* and *oriented* ecumenism has generated different reactions: a) Some churches want to control the ecumenical movement without owning it. b) Some churches feel more secure opting for bilateral or at best confessional ecumenism. c) A few churches have made ecumenism integral to their self-understanding and self-affirmation. d) Finally, some churches have simply become anti-ecumenical, because they believe it threatens their own identity.

The present ecumenical panorama indicates that the ecumenical movement is at a crossroads and needs clear orientation. Therefore, we must decide. What kind of ecumenism do we want: an ecumenism of institutional churches or an ecumenism that embraces the whole people of God? Speaking about the WCC, Dr. K. Raiser says that, it must have "more freedom and flexibility in its work and liberate itself from the exclusive control of its member churches" (Report to CC, August 2003). I agree. We can no longer keep ecumenism in its frozen institutionalism; it must enter into a dynamic dialogue and a creative interaction with changing realities. Further, we must take the ecumenical movement to the people at the grass roots and open it to new horizons. I would, however, disagree with Dr. Raiser's approach if that approach threatens to push the churches to the periphery of the ecumenical movement. Although the churches should not possess the ecumenical movement, they should become its primary agents. The ecumenical movement is first and foremost a challenge to the churches to come out of themselves and engage in dialogue with each other and with the world. It is a reminder for the churches to become more credible, relevant and united in their witness to the world.

Therefore, in my view, people-centered and oriented ecumenism is the right way to follow. Such a perception of ecumenism will first, take the ecumenical movement beyond the institutional churches, as well as beyond the institutional boundaries of ecumenism; second, it will generate new ecumenical models, which will then enable the churches to interact closely with the grass roots movements and with the civil society at large.

Such a vision of ecumenism calls for an active role by church-related agencies, specialized ministries and ecumenical partners. There should be a real partnership between the churches and these ecumenical bodies; and mutuality and

complementarity should become the defining elements of this partnership. We must be careful, however, for such a partnership may also create problems. With their organized networks, alliances and advocacies, donor agencies and specialized ministries have strong impact on media and development programmes. They organize humanitarian assistance better than the churches and even, in some cases, the state-run institutions. Therefore, with their financial resources and expertise, and with their ecumenical commitment, these ecumenical partners may move to the center of the ecumenical movement and that, in turn, may, sooner or later, change the whole nature of the ecumenical movement. It is vitally important that the nature and the scope of partnership between the churches and the ecumenical partners be clearly spelled out.

5) Can this shift from the church-centered and highly institutionalized ecumenism to a rather holistic perception of ecumenism lead the churches to *conciliar* fellowship? The ecumenical movement will lose its integrity and credibility if it is not expressed through a common life, shared decisions and common action by its constituting bodies.

One of the major contributions of the ecumenical movement was the revival of conciliarity. In fact, sharing, trust-building, listening, accepting each other and praying together helped the churches to experience and articulate conciliarity, though not in its fullness. However, conciliar ecumenism is in decline, and confessionalism and bilateralism are replacing multilateral ecumenism. The experiences we have gained through conciliar ecumenism must help us to move forward towards conciliar fellowship.

After more than 50 years of common journey, and in spite of significant developments in conciliar ecumenism, the ecumenical structures have not enabled the churches to take concrete steps towards this goal. The "Global Christian Forum" is emerging as a new form of multilateral ecumenism. Can the "forum" with a *Charta Oecumenica* ensure a broader basis and bring all the churches together? Can it, with its open participation, less institutionalized structures and complex procedures, help the churches to deepen their fellowship and experience and express a deeper sense conciliarity? The time for institutionalized ecumenism is coming to an end. The time for conciliar life, conciliar decision and conciliar action must begin. The ecumenical structures and decision-making processes should be reshaped and developed in a way that challenges the churches to grow together towards conciliar fellowship. The conciliar fellowship is, indeed, a strong challenge to confessionalism, parochialism, universalism and bilateralism.

6) We must bear in mind two other concerns when discussing reconfiguration: *responsiveness* and *coherence* in the ecumenical movement. Although these are not new concerns, they have re-emerged more acutely and with new urgency. Let me briefly make a few remarks:

a) Our ecumenical reflection and action are basically *reactive*. We set our ecumenical agenda to protect and defend the positions of the churches; and they react strongly whenever they perceive their identity and position threatened. The ecumenical movement must become *responsive* rather than reactive or protective, so that it may be contextual, discerning, dialogical and interactive. The Programme Planning Document for 2003-2005 calls for "a new ecumenical configuration which will effectively respond to the challenges of the 21st century". This is precisely what the ecumenical movement should do. As it wrestles with a changing world, it should re-configure itself and articulate its goals clearly.

b) *Unity, mission* and *diakonia* have been the major goals and the permanent foci of the ecumenical movement. However, the question of their priority and their inter-connection has generated serious debate. The Orthodox Churches have always considered the visible unity of the church as *the* ecumenical issue, and have always complained that it is not given a clear priority on the ecumenical agenda. The churches of the Protestant tradition have always sought the centrality of mission in ecumenical engagement. The ecumenical partners have always struggled for the urgency of social diakonia. Since these approaches and concerns are legitimate and will continue, we must try to establish coherence, interaction and complementarity between them. Let us remind ourselves that the ecumenical movement emerged as the churches' common commitment to witness the Gospel together to the world. Therefore, all issues that concern the Gospel are ecumenical issues. In order for the ecumenical witness to become more effective, it must first become coherent, integrated and contextual. If we fail this critical task, the ecumenical movement will suffer fragmentation and departmentalization and will lose much of its integrity and wholeness.

c) Ecumenism does not deal with concepts; it deals with *realities*, not with structures but with *people*. The driving force of the ecumenical movement is a vision that determines its form, shape and structure, its reflection and action in a given time and place. What is the call of God through the ecumenical movement today? The conceptualization of the ecumenical movement will take us away from the concrete realities of life. The ecumenical movement must discern the "signs of the times", and must be continually reviewed and renewed, reconfigured and reshaped in response to God's call, vis-à-vis the needs of the churches and the challenges of the times. Can we

develop new models, new structures and new frameworks that will enable us to organize our ecumenical life more effectively, harmoniously and creatively?

d) The growing pace towards *regionalization* and *polycentredness* may play a pivotal role in this process. These feature belong to the very esse of the ecumenical movement. The CUV points towards this direction. Therefore, the reconfiguration must be organized in a way that encourages regionalization and multi-centredness, which will ensure broader participation and deeper fellowship.

7) What should the ecumenical movement become in the 21st century: a forum, a context, a framework for *collaboration* among the churches, or, a *fellowship* of churches aimed at the visible unity? Probably the re-configuration process must start with this crucial question, since most of the problems that we are facing in the ecumenical movement are, in one way or another, related to it. Those who consider the ecumenical movement as a fellowship-builder, look with great suspicion at the growing openness of the ecumenical movement to secular organizations, non-church related structures and other religions. Those who perceive the ecumenical movement as an inclusive reality transcending the boundaries of the institutional churches, and as an effective global instrument to promote justice, peace and human rights, are frustrated by the limited scope of the ecumenical agenda. If this dichotomy is not reconciled and converged within a holistic vision and articulated through a dynamic and comprehensive framework, it will eventually lead the ecumenical movement to disintegration and polarization.

The problem, in my judgement, is not so much between the Orthodox and Protestant Churches, or, between the WCC and the Catholic Church; it is essentially between the ecumenical movement and the churches, as well as between the ecumenical movement and the new world situation. If the aim of the ecumenical movement is to help the churches to take God's call seriously in the world today, it must engage in a serious process of renewal. I consider reconfiguration as only one important dimension of renewal. The youth have expressed their concerns and outlined their perspectives. The churches and the ecumenical partners are now invited to take an active part in this process.

Some may say that the ecumenical boat is left alone in a stormy sea without any clear orientation. Others may even say that the ecumenical boat is sinking. The ecumenical movement is in the hands of God; we are called, in obedient response to God's call, to protect and enrich it. The ecumenical movement is future-oriented. From time to time it must pause to look ahead more clearly in order to move forward more confidently. This is the time for critical self-reflection and discernment, a time

for prayer and to listen to the Holy Spirit. How do we understand, define, articulate and live out the ecumenical vision as we enter the 21st century? This is the urgent call and a serious task before us.

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