

Thirty years at the World Council of Churches

# What future for the ecumenical movement?

Ioan Sauca

*Rev. Professor Dr Ioan Sauca has been one of the most influential members of the World Council of Churches in recent decades. He began working as executive secretary for Orthodox Studies and Relationships in Mission in 1994 and served as director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute for nearly three decades. From 2014 to 2020, Sauca was deputy general secretary of the WCC and later its acting general secretary from 2020 to late 2022. Excerpted below is the concluding part of a February 2023 talk given at the University of Fribourg, in which he reflected on his years dedicated to the ecumenical journey.<sup>1</sup>*

*A call for new ecumenical paradigms*

Today's world, marked by post-modern values and mega-trends and concerns, brings new challenges to the older ecumenical paradigms which were coined in a different historical and contextual situation. Some of those challenges could be summarized as follows: there is no one truth but many truths; there is no unity which makes ONE, but there is a cohabitation of different identities; the institutional expressions of any kind of ideas are challenged and rejected (all international institutions are faced with serious challenges, the family institution included, even the idea of universal human rights are deeply challenged and questioned as "western" values imposed on the whole world and the term human dignity preferred instead); international or global replaced with bilateral; Councils of Churches replaced with the "churches together" concept; platforms and forums preferred to councils and other official institutionalized structures.

Therefore, the older paradigms of Christian unity in relation to the major political and social trends of the time, as promoted by the WCC since its beginning, are considered by the younger generation today as arrogant, imperialistic, centralized unity which expects the dilution of identities and differences. Therefore, the need to look afresh and reflect upon our faith and theology to find adequate and meaningful answers and paradigms for the people of our time constitutes a vital priority.

The Biblical narrative on the descent of the Holy Spirit shows that God's approach is different. The Holy Spirit came personally on each of the Apostles not as ONE cover but as diverse tongues of fire, giving each of them a diverse gift of language. The descent of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, 'What Future for the ecumenical movement?', University of Fribourg special event honoring his work, February 23, 2023.

Holy Spirit did not make the Apostles ONE in a kind of one “spiritual Kolkhoz [*a Soviet collective farm*]” but a *koinonia* of diverse gifts. That diversity of gifts and their *koinonia* in unity is expressed clearly in the ancient Christian prayer of invoking the Holy Spirit that is used until today in the Orthodox Church: “who are everywhere present and fills ALL THINGS.”

*Meeting today's challenges through ecumenical formation.*

In light of the many challenges we face today, searching for a new articulation of appropriate paradigms for the ecumenical movement and understanding of unity becomes imperative. From my point of view, the common sources of our faith from the experience of the Early Church could bring new possibilities for new paradigms of advancing towards the search for the unity that Christ prayed for and was given to us as a mandatory commandment.

The call to unity is not an option; it is imperative and a vocation. It is the very desire of Christ and the heart of the Gospel's message. We either like it or not. It is not a historical imperialistic view; it is not an arrogant desire to unite the world by force, but a spiritual search of bringing together in harmony and *koinonia* God's creation and His people.

The Church and the world cannot be viewed in antagonistic terms or terms of priority. The Church is God's creation, as the world is God's creation too. The Church has no finality in itself. It is not or should not be seen as a human institution. Rather, it is that community filled with and empowered by God's Spirit towards the service and the transformation of the world. *Diakonia* to the world is an expression of one faith and spirituality. It is not an extra and optional good action. In the Church, the vertical should meet with the horizontal realities. Keeping the cross together gives balance and stability to the ecumenical movement.

The WCC assemblies in Busan and, more recently, in Karlsruhe offered a renewed statement on unity that attempted to bring together all these dynamics and approaches and proposed a new ecumenical paradigm for the future that has been widely embraced in all churches, a “Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.” Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and other church leaders extensively use the term and notion of common journey as a new way of describing the ecumenical endeavors of our times.

In Karlsruhe, I proposed to continue the notion of pilgrimage as an ecumenical paradigm for our times, arguing that the image of pilgrimage speaks to our identity. We are a movement and not a static institution. We are people on the way. This very concept has a strong biblical and patristic basis. The first Christians were called “people of the way” (Acts 9:2). We see in the early Christian sources that Christians were called those who walk together (*syn-odoi*), while for St John Chrysostom, the church itself was called a *syn-odos*. The assembly approved having a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity as an overarching concept and paradigm to guide the WCC programmatic work until the next assembly.

Unity in doctrines and commonly agreed theological statements leading to unity in faith and full communion among Christians remains a great desire and goal. However, that is not a precondition of walking together on the pilgrimage of just peace, reconciliation, and

unity of all. Despite differences, by walking and serving together, unity and *koinonia* may be strengthened on the way.

Nicholas Berdyaev has said: "If I have no bread, it is an economic crisis; but if my neighbour has no bread, it is a spiritual crisis." For this reason, the concern for the dialogue with people of other faiths and for affirming religions as instruments of peace, eco-theology, sustainable development, overcoming poverty etc., should also be *sine qua non* issues and concerns in the search for a new ecumenical paradigm that look for the unity God intends for the world.

But to achieve all these *desiderata*, there is a need for education, information, and most of all, for formation. Ecumenical formation of the future generation of church leaders and of the people in the pews is the only key to assuring the stability and strengthening of our faith and communities. As always, but particularly in our times, our ecumenical formation should be a solid pillar in our churches, with strong biblical and theological bases and, while remaining holistic, be imbued with meaningful ecumenical spirituality.