

XIVth Academic Consultation of Societas Oecumenica
Prague 2006
Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge for Academic Theology

Summary of the results

The main contribution of the consultation lay in renewing Christian practice as a source for theological reflection. In the field of ecumenical theology this meant studying experiences of grassroots ecumenism, analysing methods used for the interpretation of such experiences, and considering the implications for theology. At the beginning of the conference it was very clearly stated that to speak about the ecumenism of church representatives, of theologians and of the faithful is to a certain degree problematic, because even theologians and church representatives belong to the category of faithful, and some people belong to all three categories in which they experience and contribute to different versions of ecumenism. The President of the Societas Oecumenica, Bernd Jochen Hilberath in his opening lecture showed that the dialogue that is foundational for ecumenical theology has its external as well as internal aspects. In relation to our theme, it could be seen also as a dialogue of different experiences we as ecumenical theologians have, or are allowed to listen to and thus to include them to our horizon. "Ecumenism of life" was presented among us in a great variety, by theologians from the West as well as from the East, of different church traditions and also of different age. Since our last consultation in Romania our theological reflection has continued to include the high and the low points of the ecumenical life of churches coming out of the communist regime.

Within the first theme: "From Experience to Interpretation: Ecumenism of Life in Different Cultural and Confessional Contexts" there were three presentations, first from Ukraine – by an Orthodox theologian Antoine Arjakovsky, the second from Ireland - by an Irish Anglican theologian Andrew Pierce, and the third one by a German Roman Catholic theologian Johanna Rahner. The first two examined in some sense limit grassroot experiences and their challenges, experiences of breakthrough of reconciliation, of God's love and the unity that comes with that. These present a challenge to the careful ecumenical language of legal limitations which has difficulties in following them. They also considered experiences of inadequacy and of building defence-mechanisms when encountering what we mark as "fundamentalist" partners in a dialogue that no one desires, but which perhaps, ecumenical theologians should attempt with all those who "cohabit" on the Christian scene. The final paper in this section looked at possibilities to find a new paradigm for Roman Catholic ecumenism in order to overcome the stagnation after Vatican II.

The second theme: “Hermeneutical Keys for Ecumenical Theology: Doctrinal Consensus and/or Shared Life” started with a detailed analysis of both options by a German Lutheran theologian Christoph Schwöbel, and continued with a response by a Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, Anton Houtepen. There was a basic agreement between them concerning Schwöbel’s methodological thesis: “going forward to the roots” included the tradition of doctrinal consensus, but did not see it as a limit for further development needed at the grassroots level. In his integrated model of ecumenism lived experience as well as doctrinal consensus contributed to the search for truth, and both needed each other to recognize the eschatological nature of truth. The sub-theme was further developed by a Roman Catholic theologian René Beaupère, who has been for over fifty years pastorally engaged with couples living in mixed marriages in France. His approach, as well as that of the Czech Hussite theologian Ivana Noble, analysed the experience of lived “interconfessionality”, or as Beaupère puts it, of living in two churches, when both partners in their long term love relationship also experience that their churches “have ceased, in a certain sense, to be cut off from one another.” Building bridges between the different churches at the base level as well as the pain that comes from the slowing down of the ecumenical process at the official level during the last decades were seen as the main challenges not only for theology but also for the church authorities.

The third theme: “From Theological Interpretation to Common Witness: Easier Said than Done?” was approached from the perspectives of three traditions, Lutheran, Baptist and Greek Catholic. A German theologian Ulrike Link-Wieczorek examined the need for ecumenical sensitivity in a Christian lifestyle that wants to avoid both fundamentalism and relativism. A Bulgarian theologian Parush Parushev considered positive as well as problematic aspects of ecumenical plurality in the field of mission. And finally, a Ukrainian theologian Myroslav Marynovych analysed his experience of ecumenical cooperation in limit situations, in the Gulag and during the Orange Revolution, in order to show how these experiences can subvert our happy dwelling in divided churches, and how they can provide us with a renewed desire for unity as well as with visions of how such a desire can be put into practice when we open ourselves to the Spirit of God.

The final lecture of the conference was given by a British Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright. He proposed that we need to take more into account that an ecumenical “exchange of ideas” happens together with the “exchange of gifts”, and in the first part of his case study he analysed which gifts have been or can be exchanged between Roman Catholics and Methodists. The second part attempted to advocate reasons for slowing down the ecumenical process, in particular practices standing against intercommunio, and questioned the long term usefulness of dissenting positions. This lecture was followed by a strong discussion, in which different visions of the future of ecumenism were expressed across traditions, and an agreement was reached that

however hard we try to concentrate on other aspects of shared life – like practical implications of common baptism – we are always led to the impossibility of making a split between a common baptism and divided eucharist.

The main lectures and discussions were not the only part of the conference, there were also thematic discussion groups and workshops, during which especially younger scholars presented their projects in the field of ecumenical theology. Three young scholars also prepared an evaluation of the conference and confirmed the ongoing task of Societas Oecumenica – to relate together experiential and doctrinal/conceptual theology.

Ivana Noble