

Ecumenism as Celebration *

ALEXANDROS PAPADEROS

It is the day of resurrection.

Let us be glorious in splendour for the celebration,
and let us embrace one another.

Let us speak also, brothers and sisters, to those that hate us,
and in the resurrection let us forgive all things;
and so let us cry: Christ has risen from the dead, by death
trampling upon death, and has bestowed life to those in the tombs!

The feast of the resurrection

Christian celebration celebrates the resurrection. It is possible thanks to the resurrection, and only in the light and in the spirit of the resurrection can it be authentic celebration, fulfilled and fulfilling. It is a feast of the children of God who are children of the resurrection (Luke 20:36); a feast of life with its source in God who raised from the dead the Christ who is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). It is a festival of love, the love which God has shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5). Christians celebrate because and while they continue to be united with Christ in the resurrection (Rom. 6:5), with Christ who is their hope (1 Pet. 1:3). By their celebration they are witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 1:22). Their joy springs from the resurrection (John 20:20) and, thanks to the resurrection, they know that their faith is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:17). The resurrection is for me, for you, for all, for all things!

The resurrection, O Christ our Saviour,
enlightened the whole *oikoumene*, and recalled
Thine own creation — Pascha! Pascha of the Lord!
— which “hath passed us... from death unto life and from earth unto
heaven”.

● This text has been translated from the German by the WCC Language Service.

* Reprinted from: FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS
Essays on contemporary ecumenical themes
A tribute to PHILIP A. POTTER
World Council of Churches, Geneva 1984

One of the ways whereby this all-compassing cosmic dimension of the resurrection is highlighted in the liturgical tradition of the East is the reading aloud of the holy gospel of the resurrection (John 20:19-25) in various languages at the Easter Sunday vespers, known also as the "Vespers of Love", signifying that the good news of the resurrection is addressed to all human beings and to all peoples, in all ages and in all places. At these same Vespers, the hymn quoted at the beginning of this essay is also sung. As the choir sings this hymn, the worshippers, friends and strangers alike, embrace one another, exchanging the greeting of peace and the kiss of love. On Easter day, human beings themselves are bedecked with light and glory (*doxa*). Even enemies now call each other "brothers and sisters"; forgiveness and reconciliation seal their confidence in the victory over sin, suffering and death and in eternal life with God.

Joy in the house of God

Ecumenism as celebration — an aspect of Christian life today, on which I have the privilege of reflecting — is also possible only because of the resurrection, in which it also finds its substance, its spirit, its justification and its hope. Throughout his many years of responsible service to the ecumenical movement, Philip Potter, the man to whom this message of gratitude is specifically addressed, has been enabled by his charismatic gifts, gifts which he never hesitated to share lavishly with us all, to enlighten each ecumenical event with the aura of resurrection joy in such a way that even difficult situations have never completely lacked some glimmer of hope of a solution. As recently as in his Vancouver address on the "living stones", he stressed that the task of the church is "so to live and witness before all peoples that the whole *oikoumene* may become the *oikos* of God through the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the life-giving Spirit".

Christians are being led into unity from every part of the inhabited earth. In joy they participate in this new creation and rediscover the unifying divine act of salvation in Jesus Christ for all humanity. They seek the unity already given us which transcends all historical, racial or social divisions. They reflect on our common apostolic faith and its reactivation in the service of the church's sanctification, proclamation, and diaconia. They look to its renewal and the renewal of the entire human family, and to the defence and preservation of the world in face of all that threatens its destruction. Seen against the

background of past church history with all its divergent experiences, this ecumenical convergence in heart, determination, understanding and readiness to serve is already in itself a festival, a new reality in the life of world Christianity, a new reality of resurrection experienced and attested. "The most important event in the recent history of Christianity" — as Ireneos, the Metropolitan of Kissamos and Selinon in Crete has called the ecumenical movement — is a "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22), a gift of the Paraclete who is leading the churches out of the bondage of division, self-imposed isolation, mutual ignorance and hostility into closer union one with another. Alongside the profound ecclesiological import of this unique event in church history there are also the myriad interpersonal encounters on the part of individual Christians experiencing and celebrating once again their security in the love of God. As "living stones" they therefore participate in the upbuilding of the *oikos* of God and at the same time know "how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity" (Ps. 133:1).

Hagios, Kyrios Sabaoth

At first, this *synagoge* — this reassembling of God's people from all parts of the world in Christ's name and for the same purpose — came as a shock to many because it brought them up against the enormous diversity of forms of Christian thought and life. Meanwhile it has become clear that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we could transform this initial ecumenical shock into that delight in rich spiritual diversity and in the Christian permeation of the world and culture which we so often encounter in the life of the ancient church. Let me give just one typical example.

On Easter day in the year 399, John Chrysostom spoke to the Goths assembled in the Church of St Paul in Constantinople. As is well known, he had made a church available for these "migrant workers" in the Byzantine army and also made provision for them to celebrate the liturgy in their own language. With the help of an interpreter, he told them in the opening words of his address:

If only the Greeks had also been here today to hear the readings and to discover how great is the power of the Crucified, how great is the power of the cross, how great the magnanimity of the church, how great the vitality of the faith, how great the shame of error, how great the absurdity of the demons! For even the wisdom of the philosophers themselves is confined to those who speak the same language (the homoglots) whereas our

wisdom (sc. the gospel) is by contrast mighty even among these who speak other languages (the heteroglots); the former proved easier to dismantle than a spider's web whereas the latter has become hard as diamond. What has become of the wisdom of Plato and Pythagoras and the rest of the Athenians? Obliterated! What has become of the wisdom of the fishermen and the tent-makers? It shines forth brighter than the sun, not just in Judea but even in the languages of the barbarians, as you have heard today. Scythians and Thracians and Sarmatians, and blacks and Indians, and those living on the furthest boundaries of the *oikoumene*, philosophize on all this, once they have each translated it into their own language!¹

The great church father went on to speak of his delight in this diversity and richness, which we too are privileged to experience over and over again in ecumenical gatherings — this diversity of faces, colours, languages, sounds, gestures, which is precisely the harmony of contrasts! Those of us, of course, who shrink from exposing their distinctiveness and their “purity” to the “risk” of shared delight, who, like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, remain defiantly outside and aloof, see this diversity only as confusion, as a “dark wood” in which each tree reaches up to secure more light and more room for itself. Those, on the contrary, who are prepared to let Paul be their guide in this new *agora* of the Christian world soon learn that “God who created the world and everything in it — created every race of humanity of one stock... to seek God and, it might be, touch and find him” (Acts 17:24ff.).

Every race of humanity and, above all, their young people! Without the young, ecumenical celebration, indeed celebration of any kind, would remain poor and perhaps even boring. In Vancouver especially, we were so richly blessed by the freshness, the *élan vital*, the effervescent joy of young Christians from every part of the world. The many new hymns and styles of music, expressive of a wealth of spiritual experience, point the way of deliverance from the endless wailing which is still so typical of much church hymnody and church attitudes. A breath of renewal and of refreshing gaiety — the breath of the Holy Spirit in fact — presides over these products of contemporary Christian art. Whether drawing their inspiration from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, or wherever else, they all testify to the one faith, the faith that Jesus Christ is the life of the world, the life to which all peoples, and our young people

¹Migne, PG 63, 499.

especially, have a right and which they are also eager to share joyfully with all others. An ecumenical assembly of this kind is thus an assembly of prayer, praise and doxology to the triune God who is summoning the world community back to unity and enabling it to exult with one voice:

Hagios! Hagios! Hagios! Kyrios Sabaoth!

The transparence of unity

In moments such as this, when the liberating resurrection message penetrates to the depths of our being, many of the clouds disperse and a new horizon opens up for those who want to see. Teilhard de Chardin advanced the somewhat paradoxical view that the great secret in Christianity is not really the "epiphany" but rather the *diaphany* (transparence) of God; not God's "appearing to", in other words, but God's "shining through"; not the lightbeam that plays on the surface but the lightbeam which pierces and makes the "divine realm" visible.

Applying this idea to our present concern, we can surely affirm that it directs our attention to what is perhaps the deepest level of ecumenical reality: it is not primarily the visible corporeal epiphany of a uniform pattern of church life and of a formal consensus on dogmas which guarantee unity; in this stage of initial convergence, what is far more important is its transparence by virtue of God's all-encompassing and fulfilling love. Only in this love, which is communicated to us most directly in ecumenical prayer and celebration, do we learn that what still divides us is not an unbridgeable abyss. Only in this love can we delight in the wealth of diversity, and praise God for the manifold gifts of God's Spirit. Experienced and practised in this way, ecumenical celebration unites human beings who in other respects live at different levels of historical awareness, cultural reality, religious experience and social context.

It has become customary for us in such ecumenical celebrations to hold hands, as in that poster where many hands of different colours grasp one another, instead of being raised to strike a blow! We thus form a long chain of committed fellowship around the holy altar and, in doing so, know at a deeper level that none of us lives to himself or herself alone (Rom. 14:8) — none of us, not even our churches. We are no longer isolated and alone in our joys, no longer isolated and alone in our sorrows. We no longer have to bear our

burdens alone. Nor is anyone, whether individual, church, race or nation, at liberty to take an interest only in his or her or its own salvation. More and more the individual *certitudo salutis*, which has developed an ethos of individual assurance of salvation independently of other fellow human beings, independently of the whole church and the whole world, is yielding place to the knowledge that it is not enough to stretch out one's own hand in order to "feel after God and find God". In such moments of ecumenical fellowship and celebration in particular, we realize more clearly than ever what de Chardin said — "that the only human embrace which can really comprehend the divine worthily is the embrace of all human arms, all stretched out together to call down and to receive the fire. The sole subject capable, in the final analysis, of this mystic transfiguration is the whole community of humanity constituting in love one single body and one single soul."

Harkening to the word

In our ecumenical gatherings we not only join together in praise of God but also harken to God's *word*. What we *discuss* together is God's word and what we *reflect* quietly upon is God's word. However much we may try to transcend the old scholasticism, we nevertheless often go on dealing with our theological questions in terms of intellectual concepts and proofs, seeking to subordinate the holy to our paltry reasoning. In my daily dealings with scientists I am struck again and again by the important role of the little word "perhaps" in their scientific method and theorizing. A Nobel Prize winner in physics recently confided: when we think we have solved a problem we are immediately faced with ten new questions! This "perhaps" is, alas, almost completely missing from our theological discourse with its axiomatic form and its over-eagerness to objectify. Even we Orthodox theologians frequently succumb to the western longing for discursive rational understanding. After these discussions on the *logos* and on the basis of the *logos*, which are often more an exercise in dialectics than in dialogue and become occasions for confrontation with one another and thus divide us even more deeply instead of bringing us closer together, it is refreshing and liberating to turn once more to God in common prayer. Here we no longer need to "define" God as *actus purus* or *causa prima*. Here we humbly bow before God's majesty and make our own the words of Gregory of Nyssa:

O Thou beyond all things! How else can we define Thee?
How could any word possibly praise Thee?
No word can express Thee...

Harkening to God's word and reflecting on this word, however, can help us also to learn a further truth which is supremely important for the ecumenical movement. Let me illustrate this by an incident from Vancouver.

Early in the afternoon of 25 July 1983, I hurried off to the section meeting accompanied by Theodoros Stylianopoulos who, a little earlier, had delivered his plenary address on the Assembly theme. Orthodox bishops and theologians embraced and congratulated him: "Brother, you spoke as a true *Orthodox*!" Arriving shortly afterwards in my study group, I heard a Brazilian saying with delight: "You know, this Orthodox spoke in a truly *evangelical* way, taking a thoroughly biblical line!" Other Protestants agreed with him. And I realized that ecumenism is first and foremost the simple yet magnificent experience of *recognizing oneself in others*! Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker is reported to have said once: "Before 1517 I, too, was Catholic!" Erhard Gästner took that a little further: "Before 1054 we were all Greeks!" Meanwhile, we are digging down deeper to the root of our apostolic faith. And the deeper we dig, the closer we come to the common ground of our being and to one another. As place and symbol of mutual recognition, the word of God brings us closer to the reactivation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed for the whole church — a step which justifies joy indeed.

Altum silentium

Silent meditation, said Goethe once, is celebration. In the language of the Bible, meditation means, not least, *penitence*. And in the language of the ecumenical movement, penitence means, above all, the growing awareness of what is perhaps our worst sin of all, our *offence against unity*. There is no need here to pass judgment on others and to measure the respective guilt of one or the other. We are all guilty here! Some of us because we have destroyed unity (seldom unilaterally!), others of us because we have made too little effort to restore unity, and all of us because we have prayed and worked for unity too luke-warmly. Ecumenical celebration is not to be practised without tears, therefore, nor without trembling at God's justifiable indignation, God's *orge* at the great disorder we have produced in God's *oikos*. An *altum silentium* — a profound silence of meditation — is necessary, therefore, and the psalmist's words: "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11) surely apply exactly to our ecumenical situation!

Festival without masks

Meditation also means self-knowledge, however. Within the *oikoumene*, this self-knowledge can sometimes also come about in an unexpected, direct and even brutal fashion. Since I am writing these words in honour of a brother from the Caribbean, I may be permitted to offer the following example to illustrate this process of self-knowledge.

A few years ago, a small group of us from Europe visited the Caribbean area with the object of studying third world problems at first hand. On one of the islands there, I wanted to take a photograph of an old beggar. His splendid dignified Indian face deeply impressed me. Not wanting to behave like a typical tourist, I tried first to engage him in conversation. But glancing immediately at my camera and probably reading my intention, with his patient wisdom he invited me with outstretched hands to take his picture. Whereupon, a black girl appeared behind him and indicated that she, too, wished to be photographed. The following conversation then ensued:

Girl: Where are you from?

I: Crete!

Girl: Crete?....

(Disappointed, I thought to myself: Has she really never even heard of Minos, of Knossos, of El Greco, of Kazantzakis?...)

I: Crete, in Greece!

(The girl still showed no sign of recognition. Annoyance stirred in me: had she never even heard of the Acropolis, of glorious Athens, of the world's first democracy, of the philosophers?...)

I: Greece is in Europe...

(I noted with even greater disappointment that this little word meant nothing to her either. Then, remembering the poverty of ignorance, I had the inspiration to volunteer the statement:) Europe is in... England!

Girl: (her face lit up with comprehension) Oh, yes!...

(At last I had discovered one positive result of colonialism!)

Girl: (innocently and directly) Do you still have *cannibalism* in your country?

The heir of Socrates and Plato and Alexander the Great, of the church fathers and saints, I suddenly felt like a limp empty sack! I hastened away, deflated and humiliated. But I was also pursued by

the girl's question and her innocent naivety which had succeeded in effecting such a sudden collapse of some of my most cherished assumptions and has continued ever since to pursue me like a whip! I have frequently asked myself since then, indeed, how matters really stand in respect of "cannibalism" in our now baptized Orthodox country of the Greeks, where lemon trees are certainly not the only things that flourish!

In another context² I have spoken of the "stinging 'thou'" in the ecumenical encounter. How frequently we find in ecumenical meetings that what is so holy and sacred and therefore axiomatic for us means absolutely nothing to the others! What we perhaps consider to be the very centre of Christianity and even of the world is, for others, at best only peripheral. Stinging facts, stinging words, stinging experiences! They certainly pain us, perhaps even humiliate us. Yet they are useful stings, helping us to be more realistic, to examine ourselves self-critically. Only through the eyes of the other person do I really know myself; the neighbour is surely my most faithful mirror. Even the critical judgment of my neighbour is liberating, for the worth of a person or institution is shown in his or its openness to criticism. This is the only way for me to find out who I really am. Self-discovery by way of mutual questioning, disclosure and correction, as the precondition of genuine communication, is certainly one of the greatest services rendered by the ecumenical movement today. And only among persons without masks is genuine celebration really possible and meaningful.

Bread and wine

For the peoples influenced by the biblical culture, celebration is hardly conceivable without *bread and wine*. These are essential and basic elements. Even in themselves they are quite sufficient for real celebration. On the contrary, where they are lacking, table and heart are as good as empty, even if everything else is available in plenty. Our dependence, indeed, even our absolute dependence on bread and wine, may help to explain the lack of fulfilment and joy in particular ecumenical celebrations, since both elements surely constitute the fundamental "food" of the Christian life, indeed, much more, part of its ontological reality. "Man is what he eats" — this ancient

²Cf. *Voices of Unity: Essays in Honour of Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, ed. Ans van der Bent, Geneva, WCC, 1981, p.84.

materialist maxim is altogether apposite for Christians. They are literally what they eat and drink: the body and blood of their incarnate Lord. They "live" as they eat him; his flesh is their true nourishment, his blood their true drink. Without this "bread" and this "wine" life ebbs away and dies (John 6:48ff.).

Anyone content merely with bodily nourishment is not nourished with the food of the resurrection but remains abandoned in the realm of death. For the world, considered as being in itself the ultimate reality, is mingled with non-being, and in it death has the final word.³

But, for Christians, *life* does not mean merely existing; it means being in *koinonia* with God and with one's fellow human beings. This *koinonia* is the Christian alternative to the individualism and collectivism of our time. Genuine fellowship with God has as its necessary corollary fellowship with one another as we freely give ourselves to one another in love. The "I" and the "thou" have their true place and find their true fulfilment only in the "we" of the church. The church, as John Chrysostom says, is not a conglomerate of a number of bodies but *one body*. And this one body is nourished and sustained by the "bread" and "wine". Evidently therefore, our ecumenical community can become a feast in fullness only to a qualified and limited degree. Not because there is any lack of good things and goodwill which can uplift human hearts and cause them to rejoice, but because the character of the feast is contradicted when some sit at table while others are only there as spectators or, at most, only join in singing the festal song. And this is precisely the unhappy case with us Christians as long as we are not in a position to break bread together and to drink the common cup. It is just this distance, this lack, this incapacity which gives every ecumenical celebration its accompanying taste of bitterness and sense of hollowness. Not to be able to sit down with our brothers and sisters at their table is always a painful experience for us Orthodox, as it is also painful for us not to be able to invite them to ours.

Many of our non-Orthodox friends find it repugnant when they notice the hesitancy of some of us Orthodox even to cooperate actively in common *prayer*. They fail to realize perhaps the great tensions implicit for us in such situations. In faith we rejoice in being gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, knowing that he is indeed in our midst (Matt. 18:20). At the same time, however, we are confronted with the discipline of our church which expressly forbids

³Maximus the Confessor.

common prayer with those with whom we do not also practise eucharistic fellowship. What is operative here is not some formal and legal *ordo*, authoritarian and disciplinary in character, but a basic element of the all-embracing *taxis* in the body of Christ which cannot, therefore, be divorced from faith and life. Besides this, there are also the no less important pastoral problems we encounter in our congregations when the warmth of ecumenical solidarity and community, and, above all, of ecumenical celebration stretches this order. Meanwhile, of course, this is increasingly becoming our practice. Even if it continues to be connected with certain problems, as *praxis kat oikonomian*, a practice for the sake of the *oikoumene*, it makes some room for common prayer, and recently (as in Vancouver) even for participation in acts of worship. Ecumenism then means not only surmounting interconfessional conflicts but also conflicts within one and the same church family. Despite this impossibility of *communicatio in sacris*, we may regard the level already achieved in interchurch fellowship as a foretaste and an anticipation, and rejoice in the assurance that God will open for us the gateway to the wedding-supper of the Lamb. The continued non-existence of *koinonia* in the eucharist confronts us as a common task and as a theme for our prayers:

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and was gathered together and became one, so let thy church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom.⁴

Miniatures of the future

Finally, let us note the joyful fact that ecumenical celebration is a real occurrence not just in the large-scale official meetings. Above all in a time marked by the massive and the colossal, we need to pay heed to the detailed, the small, the authentically beautiful, spontaneous and momentary, which often has abiding worth. It may be through the many ecumenical "miniatures" all over the world with their harmonious interaction of contrasts, that the great multicoloured living picture of Christian unity is being restored!

A sermon from the past giving a vision of the future

Although I may perhaps be accused by some of being carried away by utopian enthusiasm, I venture to offer this Easter sermon of John Chrysostom as a vision of the ecumenical future:

⁴*Didache*, IX, 4.

Whosoever is a devout lover of God, let him enjoy this beautiful bright festival. And whosoever is a grateful servant, let him rejoice and enter into the joy of his Lord. And if any be weary with fasting, let him now receive his penny. If any have toiled from the first hour, let him receive his due reward. If any have come after the third hour, let him with gratitude join in the feast. And he that arrived after the sixth hour, let him not doubt; for he too shall sustain no loss. And if any have delayed to the ninth hour, let him not hesitate, but let him come too. And he that hath arrived only at the eleventh hour, let him not be afraid by reason of his delay; for the Lord is gracious and receiveth the last even as the first. He giveth rest to him that cometh at the eleventh hour as well as to him that hath toiled from the first. Yea, to this one, he giveth and upon that one, he bestoweth. He accepteth works, as he greeteth the endeavour. The deed he honoureth and the intention he commendeth.

Let all then enter into the joy of our Lord. Ye first and last receiving alike your reward; ye rich and poor, rejoice together. Ye sober and ye slothful, celebrate the day. Ye that have kept the fast, and ye that have not, rejoice today; for the table is richly laden. Fare ye royally on it. The calf is a fatted one. Let no one go away hungry. Partake ye all of the cup of faith. Enjoy ye all the riches of his goodness. Let no one grieve at his poverty; for the universal kingdom hath been revealed.

Let no one mourn that he hath fallen again and again; for forgiveness hath risen from the grave. Let no one fear death; for the death of our Saviour hath set us free. He hath destroyed it by enduring it. He spoiled Hades when he descended thereto. He vexed it even as it tasted of his flesh. Isaiah foretold this when he cried, Thou, O Hades, hast been vexed by encountering him below. It is vexed; for it is even done away with. It is vexed; for it is made a mockery. It is vexed; for it is destroyed. It is vexed; for it is annihilated. It is vexed; for it is now made captive. It took a body, and, lo! it discovered God. It took earth, and, behold! it encountered heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see. O death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory? Christ is risen, and thou art annihilated. Christ is risen, and the evil ones are cast down. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life is liberated. Christ is risen, and the tomb is emptied of the dead; for Christ, having risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those that have fallen asleep. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.