

John George HUBER

A Scenic Experience of Christian Unity:

On the Way to the World Council of Churches in Brazil

Thirteen ecumenically committed tourists began their journey to South America with me on February 9, 2006. I had recruited these lay people and clergy for this adventure in order to acquaint them with the work of the World Council of Churches, which was holding its ninth assembly on the spacious campus of the Pontifical University in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from the 14–23 February.

We represented six different Christian traditions: **Roman Catholic**, **Episcopal**, **Presbyterian**, **United Church of Christ**, **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**, and my own ecumenically cautious denomination, **The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod**. Thus we were literally an ecumenical movement, on the move together to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Buenos Aires in Argentina, and Iguacu Falls on the border of these two beautiful countries.

It was at the majestic Iguacu Falls—more dramatic than Niagara or Victoria—that I was reminded how the World Council of Churches (WCC) has sometimes been depicted as a river flowing through a long series of interchurch gatherings. But it would be more accurate to say the WCC is actually a confluence of at least three streams, each representing an emphasis in the quest for Christian unity.

There is the *Mission* stream that started with the World Mission Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, with the goal of strengthening the churches' united witness around the globe. This event is regarded as the birth of the ecumenical movement in the XXth century, 52 years before Vatican II.

The *Life and Work* stream, seeking peace and justice, began at a world conference in Stockholm in 1925. Those advocating this prophetic approach to unity at first rallied around the slogan “doctrine divides, service unites.” But it is the *Faith and Order* stream, tracing its early beginnings to a world conference at Lausanne in 1927, that dared to examine doctrinal differences openly, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit toward agreement on such divisive topics as the sacraments, Christology, and how the church is to be ordered.

A convergence statement, *Baptism,*

Eucharist and Ministry, was finalized by Faith and Order in 1982. It represents the diligent work of Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and even Pentecostal scholars, bringing the World Council of Churches a bit closer to its goal of “visible unity” and “one eucharistic fellowship.”

These three accents—Mission, Life and Work, and Faith and Order—were evident in the deliberations of the WCC at Porto Alegre, where more than 3,000 Christians worldwide gathered under the ambitious and prayerful theme, “God, in Your Grace, Transform the World.”

This was the fourth time that I was privileged to attend a WCC assembly. Once again, I was given press accreditation to write an article for *The Southern Cross*, the newspaper of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego. Thus, a high priority was to speak to at least one of the 18 Roman Catholic representatives who were present at this assembly. Although this church is not a member of the WCC, it does hold full membership in the council's Faith and Order Commission and also the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

The media staff arranged for me to interview the Rev. Monsignor John RADANO in a quiet room. He is an American priest and theologian assigned to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, under the splendid leadership of Cardinal Walter Kasper, who addressed the WCC assembly during its opening days prior to my arrival.

In response to my questions, Msgr. RADANO said that this assembly can be “a turning point in deepening the ecumenical movement.” One reason for this very positive assessment is that the assembly accepted the report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation which brought about a new consensus approach to decision-making in the Council's work.

He also appreciated the theological criteria that were adopted for accepting new member churches, and also the development of a Global Christian Forum that will foster an outreach to

Pentecostals, Evangelicals and other Christian groups that are not currently in touch with the structure of the ecumenical movement.

Msgr. RADANO calls this a creative period for the World Council of Churches that also advances its own self-understanding. He also affirmed the council's goal of full visible unity, and added: “That's our goal.”

I couldn't resist asking him to comment a bit on the milestone agreement between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed at Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999. He noted that the World Methodist Council and also the World Alliance of Reformed Churches have produced significant reflections on justification, indicating wider ecumenical agreement on this expression of the Gospel. Thus, he says, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration* is growing in its influence.

A highlight of this assembly for me was the rich experience of worshiping together each morning and evening in a huge tent. The hymns and liturgical responses represented a wide variety of cultures and confessional traditions. The Eastern Orthodox led us in their vespers, assuring us that the blessing of bread and wine was not eucharistic. The chanting of the priests was almost operatic. At the end of the service, baskets of bread were distributed to all who attended.

Because of my special interest in the dedication of Faith and Order to the quest for unity, I was especially impressed by the text on ecclesiology, “Called to Be the One Church,” which was adopted in consensus style as the delegates raised their orange cards, indicating that they were warm to this document. The subtitle is “An Invitation to the Churches to Renew Their Commitment to the Search for Unity and to Deepen their Dialogue.”

There are references to “the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has brought our churches into living contact and dialogue.” Through this text, the delegates “confess one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as



expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.”

This is an example of how the text lifts up Baptism as a basis of our unity: “Baptism bestows upon the churches both the freedom and the responsibility to journey toward common proclamation of the Word, confession of the one faith, celebration of one eucharist, and full sharing of one ministry.”

The statement concludes: “Noting the progress made in the ecumenical movement, we encourage churches to continue this arduous yet joyous path, trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose grace transforms our struggles for unity into the fruits of communion ... *Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches!*”

It would be impossible in this brief report to do justice to the eloquent pre-

sentations, the far-reaching pronouncements on everything from AIDS to war and a “just peace,” and the sense of fellowship in the Body of Christ that was felt during our time together.

In the title above I mention “a scenic experience of Christian unity.” Reference has been made to Iguazu Falls as an illustration of how the World Council of Churches can be depicted as a river fed by a confluence of various streams. But there was another scenic high point on our tour of Argentina and Brazil that made me think of this assembly in Porto Alegre.

Soon after we landed in Rio de Janeiro, our guide took us up to Sugar Loaf by a gondola suspended from a cable, and then up another mountain by train where we viewed the famous Christ the Redeemer statue. The figure

of Christ has his arms outstretched, as if to bless the *oikoumene*. That’s Greek for “the whole inhabited world,” from which we get the word “ecumenical.”

In those outstretched arms I saw the incarnation of God’s cross-shaped *agape* love. This is the love that enables us to transform the world. Martin Luther once said that we should become “little Christs.” Perhaps this is the ultimate answer to the prayer and the theme of the assembly, “God, in your grace, transform the world.” Perhaps as little Christs we could also transform the church.

John George HUBER is Evangelical Lutheran, a retired pastor of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, currently the Chair of the Faith, Order and Witness Committee of the Ecumenical Council of San Diego County, California, United States. His e-mail address is john.huber@ecunet.org.

Thorsten NILGES

Poverty Reduction and Human Rights

Today world-wide more than one billion people have to live on less than 1 US Dollar per day. They are regarded as living in extreme poverty. Eight hundred million people are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. We think of development as the movement towards a better and more just society. But what does that mean?

THE BEGINNING OF POVERTY REDUCTION POLICIES

Development politics are known as measures to increase the (economic) wealth of countries to improve the welfare of their inhabitants. Traditionally economic development has been seen as the growth of the gross national product. The key aim of development, the increased welfare of inhabitants, has been seen as the logical result of economic growth.

At the beginning of development politics the impact of measures on the poor were seldom

investigated, while today aid efficiency is becoming a more and more discussed and investigated field of development politics. Factors like sustainability, especially ecological sustainability, have been discovered only later in the ‘80s, while the first UN Development Decade was announced by UN General Assembly resolution 1710 in 1961.

The foreseeable industrialisation and mechanisation of agriculture should “trickle down” to the rest of the developing society. Economists like ROSTOW thought about a “take-off into self-sustained growth.”

At the beginning of the second UN Development Decade in 1970, nearly all Western industrialised countries committed themselves by the UN General Assembly resolution 2626 to spend 0.7 percent of their gross national product for official development assistance, but they never did, except for The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Luxembourg.

In the ‘80s, the third UN Development Decade, the aim of the UN was an economic growth of 7 percent, but growth decreased because of the falling terms of trade. This means that prices of the raw materials which were exported by

the poor countries fell, while the prices of industrial products increased.

The UN world conferences of the ‘90s: The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and its Agenda 21 put the idea of sustainable development on the world’s cultural map. Further conferences have been realized, like the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993, as well as the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and others. While the protection of the environment was the focus of Rio, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 moved the problem of poverty into the centre of the discussion on sustainability.

In September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit, UN member states committed themselves to halve the proportion of the extreme poor by 2015. Following the Millennium Declaration and the goals laid down in it, eight measurable goals with 18 sub-goals and 48 indicators have been announced by the General Secretary of the UN in his Road Map for the Implementation of the Millennium Declaration.