



*For action*

### **MODERATOR'S ADDRESS**

Dear sisters and brothers,

It is an honor and a joy to see you here. To see you in Colombia. Bringing the Executive Committee together in this place was not the original plan. The original plan was an online meeting. When we changed the original plan, many people had to change their schedules. And yet I have not heard of any complaint, but I immediately felt a strong spontaneous willingness amongst us to make the trip to this country in Latin America. The reason for this was not the beauty of this country, which alone would be a reason to come. The reason was also not to discover another exciting country on this globe, which would also be a good reason. The reason for our intuitive agreement was that making the effort of this trip was part of our mission as WCC.

In our document "The Things that make for Peace" the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe has described this mission: "The calling to dialogue, encounter and the pursuit of mutual understanding is the very essence of ecumenism and central to peace-making. It is the role of churches to embody *'Christ's love [that] moves the world to reconciliation and unity.'*"

In our last meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, we were informed about the newest developments in the struggle for peace and reconciliation in Colombia. We heard about the important role the churches can play in this struggle. And we all felt a great readiness to do whatever we can to support all those who are engaged in the peace process. When we got the invitation of the Colombian churches and the government to hold our meeting here and support the peace process with our presence, it was soon clear that we would accept this invitation. How could we not, if "the calling to dialogue, encounter and the pursuit of mutual understanding is the very essence of ecumenism and central to peace-making"?

Our visit takes place during a time that the Colombian government, churches, and people are collaborating in the design, implementation, and advocacy for the construction of peace in the country. In September 2023, the WCC, with the Colombian Episcopal Conference, the UN Mission in Colombia, and the Organization of American States, was appointed as a permanent accompanier for peace talks between the Colombian government and the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) FARC-EP group.

During my visit in New York in April I had a very intense talk with Virginia Gamba, UN under-secretary-general for Children in Armed Conflict. She showed great engagement and competence concerning the Colombian peace process and appreciated the role of the World Council of Churches

in this peace process very much. She was particularly concerned about children as the most vulnerable members of the community and asked us for advocacy when it comes to former child soldiers who need intense accompaniment when beginning a new life. I was very impressed by Virginia Gamba's great commitment and her expertise. I felt very much encouraged for the meeting we are having here now in the coming days.

We come to Colombia to reaffirm our ecumenical conviction that violence is never a solution but produces only losers and creates new suffering. Working for a just peace is the only way.

### **Words of gratitude**

If I look at the schedule that our general secretary Jerry Pillay had to complete since we saw each other in Abuja, I am not only in awe about the incredible workload that he has accomplished but also want to affirm that his many trips with different delegations have exactly served the mission of reconciliation that is so much at the core of WCC's calling – whether it was his visit to Israel and Palestine, to Lebanon, to Cuba or to Sudan, where he engaged with church leaders, politicians, presidents and other groups trying to work for peace. He will tell us more about these important visits and many other trips in different parts of the world in his own report. But I want to take the opportunity, dear Jerry, to express my deep gratitude – and I suppose I can say the gratitude of the whole executive committee – for your wonderful work and all the blessings that come from it. And I ask you to convey our great thankfulness also to the whole staff of WCC who do an amazing work – with limited means, but with an all the more remarkably great effect. It is a joy for us all to work with you!

I would also like to thank my co-moderators who have also traveled in their WCC leadership function, for all their work. I am very well aware of their very challenging schedules in their main offices. And I treasure all the more their strong commitment for the WCC. I expand this gratitude to you all in the Executive Committee for all your time you devote to WCC. I know you do it out of love and passion for the ecumenical movement. It is all the more a great gift you give that I celebrate.

### **A wounded world**

Amidst all other armed conflicts and natural disasters, such as the flooding in Eastern Africa and in Brazil, with all its victims, the terrible suffering in the war in Israel and Gaza and the ongoing and growing death toll of the Russian invasion in Ukraine have burdened my heart every day in these past months. Our brothers and sisters there keep being in our prayers. And our prayers keep being accompanied by advocacy for overcoming the violence that continues to cause so much destruction and despair.

I have found the words we agreed upon in consensus on these two conflicts at the Karlsruhe assembly and in our last executive committee meetings very helpful in my own personal and public communications. They have helped opening hearts for understanding that the suffering must end. In both cases we have been very clear that, what we must thrive for, is a just peace. The first step to achieve a just peace must be to stop the killing. That is why we continue to ask for an immediate ceasefire both in Ukraine and in Gaza. Justice that is bought with an endlessly continued loss of lives ceases to be justice. That is the deep meaning of the principle of proportionality that has been part of the Peace Ethics tradition for many centuries. In its traditional place in the theory of just war, the goal was never to legitimize war but to delegitimize war by putting the justice argument in perspective.

Already Martin Luther, who is not known as a pacifist, pleaded for an end of violence where the principle of proportionality is no longer fulfilled. He speaks about a prince suffering an unjust aggression and then continues:

"So also a prince must punish the wicked in such a way that he does not pick up a spoon and crush a bowl and, for the sake of one skull, bring hardship on the land and people and make the land full of widows and orphans.... Therefore, this is his rule: Where he cannot punish injustice without greater injustice, let him forsake his justice, however it may be. For he should not respect his own harm, but the injustice of others, which they must suffer because of his punishment. For what do so many wives and children deserve to become widows and orphans, that you should take revenge on a useless mouth or on an evil hand that has done you harm?"<sup>i</sup>

Neither the cruel attacks of Hamas fighters on October 7, with brutal killings of civilians, sexual violence against women and innocent hostages taken, nor the terrible response by the Israeli army with tens of thousands of victims, many of them children, and with devastation and starvation as a consequence, can be justified by the conflict history. It was good that, in our statement in Abuja, we put the suffering of the people in the center and urged both parties to end this suffering by taking steps towards a just peace.

In Ukraine we continue to underline that the Russian invasion is an illegal and immoral war. It was important that our Karlsruhe statement includes a passage in which we explicitly reject "any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred."

In light of this clear statement, recent testimonials from a secular body yet closely connected to the Russian Orthodox church have raised serious questions. The World Russian People's Council, which is chaired by Patriarch Kirill has published a statement at its meeting in Moscow on March 27 and 28, which interprets the Russian invasion in Ukraine as a "Holy War:"

"From a spiritual and moral point of view," it says, "a special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the single spiritual space of Holy Rus,' fulfill the mission of 'Holding,' protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism." And it continues: "After the completion of the Northeast Military District, the entire territory of modern Ukraine should enter the zone of exclusive influence of Russia."

These words sound like a programmatic statement to legitimize the military aggression against the whole of Ukraine and even call it explicitly a "Holy War." This seems to not only be in clear contradiction to the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox church but also to former words by the patriarch. I am grateful to the general secretary for his letter asking for a meeting to clarify whether this is really the position of the Russian Orthodox Church. This clarification is – in my view – absolutely necessary for our future relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church.

## **Creation**

Climate change and saving biodiversity on this planet continue to be major issues for the WCC. I am glad that our new commission on climate justice and sustainable development has been constituted. Just like all the other commissions, which have meanwhile met for the first time with new members, the first meeting was promising. It will be crucial for our work as WCC that we are not just some other NGO concerned about overcoming human destruction of nature. When we confess God the creator, we celebrate that we as human beings, together with non-human nature, are wonderfully made. Both human and non-human nature carry this inviolable dignity of being God's good creation.

Epecially Indigenous<sup>ii</sup> and feminist<sup>iii</sup> theologies have helped us discover this theological truth. Our commitment to an ecological transformation of economies and societies on this globe is therefore deeply rooted in our spirituality.

Together with a whole delegation of WCC I have participated in an inspiring ecumenical meeting, which intensely reflected upon the inseparable connection between our faith in the triune God and our ecological commitment. The meeting took place in Assisi on March 15-16 under the title "The Feast of Creation and the Mystery of Creation: Ecumenism, Theology, Liturgy, and Signs of the Times in Dialogue." The event aimed to deepen the collective understanding and appreciation of the Feast of Creation, observed on 1 September, originally initiated by the Ecumenical Patriarch, and to give it a more prominent place in Western Christianity. The initiative is seen as a modern way of giving the Nicene Creed, whose 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary we will celebrate in the coming year, new meaning. Not only were all the great global church families represented in the meeting, but the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, as the head of the Anglican communion, gave encouraging messages to the conference. The new prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith Cardinal Victor Fernandez and myself as the moderator of WCC central committee were asked to give theological lectures. We both supported the idea of honoring the Orthodox initiative by celebrating a feast of creation also for Western Christianity. Telling you about this idea now, I am very well aware that it can only be successfully pursued if the church families respond positively and support further steps.

Let me explain the idea by recalling a WCC meeting 33 years ago. From October 24 to November 2, 1987, more than 40 theologians from 12 Orthodox churches met in Sofia, Bulgaria, at the invitation of the World Council of Churches to discuss "Orthodox Perspectives on Creation." In the final declaration the central theological starting point for their definition of the position of the Orthodox tradition was the Trinitarian grounding of creation theology. The declaration explicitly referred to the Nicene Creed:

"We believe," it said, "that the created world itself is a 'mystery.' It is founded in the sovereign will of God, which has been realized through the action (*energeia*) of the Holy Trinity. In the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (325/381), we confess the Father, who 'created all things, heaven and earth, the visible and invisible world,' the Son, through whom 'all things were created,' and the Holy Spirit, who 'gives life' (*zoopoion*). The three persons thus created the world together. The world is the fruit of the joint action of the Holy Trinity, which flows out of the one essence."

In the final declaration of the consultation, the idea of human being as a microcosm is taken up and explained in more detail: "By using this idea, the Church Fathers teach that the human body contains within itself all the levels of existence of the natural world that preceded it in the order of creation, and they thus saw the physical elements that make up the human body as in no way different from those that constitute the physical world. This means that the natural world is fully integrated into the human being and into creation as a whole."

In Catholic theology the impulses of Pope Francis' Encyclica "Laudato Si" have generated an enormous response in the Roman Catholic church and way beyond. The fact that the Laudato-Si-Institute was one of the organizers of the Assisi meeting gives clear witness to this.

In my Assisi lecture I tried to show how WCC was one of the forerunners of modern ecological consciousness by relating God's work of creation already in its Assembly 1961 in New Delhi to a relationship of care for nonhuman nature.<sup>iv</sup> In Protestant theology a most impressive ecological

theological interpretation of creation can be found in Jürgen Moltmann's groundbreaking book "God in Creation. An Ecological Doctrine of Creation," first published in 1985. Moltmann, who just turned 98 this year, understands *creatio ex nihilo* as *creatio ex amore*: "If God creates the world out of freedom, then he creates it out of love. Creation is not a demonstration of his limitless omnipotence, but the communication of his unconditional love".<sup>v</sup>

The central place that love takes in this new interpretation of creation reflects its crucial Christological dimension. If what the Colossians hymn so impressively describes is really true, that Christ is the firstborn before all creation, that in him all things were created that are in heaven and on earth, that they were created through him and for him (Col 1:15f), then the consequences are immeasurable. For then, what is said so emphatically in the Gospel of John and in the letters of John, that God is love, that God is love in which God the Father and God the Son are united in the Holy Spirit, then, the whole cosmos must also be included in this force field of love. Then God works in overcoming the "groaning of creation," then God works in "that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Rom 8:21). Then, overcoming the destruction of nonhuman nature by human selfishness and finding a new way of life in human self-limitation, in caring for creation, in discovering the beauty of the earth rather than simply using it for exploitation becomes part of salvation history. It has clear political dimensions, but it is deeply rooted in a firm spiritual basis.

It is my hope that by strengthening our faith in the triune God and our amazement in seeing and enjoying God's *creatio ex amore* in a feast of creation widely introduced in our church calendar, we can give a firm spiritual basis for our ecological commitments.

I conclude with a call to get involved in the struggles of the world by affirming hope.

### **Hope as the mother language of the church**

God's covenant with creation implies human involvement in and for the world, including in politics. In societies in which citizens often show apathy or even disgust for politics, churches must be a source of encouragement for involvement. We will have several elections this year with consequences for the whole world, above all, the election of the European parliament and the elections in the USA. The polls suggest that rightwing populist movements will experience considerable gains. I urgently appeal to Christians who will have to decide on their votes in these and all other elections to reject political aspirations deeply contradicting everything our Christian faith stands for.

At a conference on "Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration," co-organized by the WCC and the Vatican, delegates of churches from all over the world gathered in Rome from 18-20 September 2018. In our final message, we spoke up against populist movements, which instigate hate and exclusion against vulnerable minorities and especially against refugees:

"We call on all Christians and all those who support fundamental human rights to reject such populist initiatives incompatible with Gospel values. This should inspire political life and public discourse and inform fundamental choices especially at the time of elections."

And we added forceful words addressed to the media: We "call on all media platforms to refrain from disseminating divisive and dehumanizing ideas and initiatives, and commit to engaging media for the promotion of positive messages."

This is not just politics. It is a deeply spiritual matter. If it is true that God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, that whoever believes in God should not perish but have eternal life and if God sent God's Son into the world, not to condemn the world, "but that the world might be saved through him" (RSV, John 3:16–17), then this implies consequences. Christians must be a source of solidarity for marginalized and disadvantaged people, as well as for nonhuman natural environment which has become increasingly vulnerable. Politics is an indispensable, sometimes even decisive, dimension of such advocacy.

It is in a spirit of hope that we come together here in Colombia. Let me express my great gratitude to our local hosts for their wonderful hospitality, our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian church of Colombia, but also the Colombian government.

The fact that we have been invited to this country, struggling for a lasting peace, mirrors the great responsibility we have. As executive committee we are the elected representatives of 600 million Christians in all regions of this globe, from the remote areas of the rainforests to the highly populated areas of the great metropolises. The brothers and sisters in our member churches are deeply rooted locally and at the same time connected and universally oriented by our common faith. Let us make something of it! Let us really witness the love of Christ, which moves the world to reconciliation and unity!

It is this love, which moved Dietrich Bonhoeffer to say: "It may be that the Day of Judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case we will gladly stop working for a better future. But not before."<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sein, Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften, hg. v. K. Bornkamm und G. Ebeling, Bd.IV, Frankfurt 1982, 36-83 (79f). My own translation.

<sup>ii</sup> Stan McKay, An Aboriginal Perspective on the Integrity of Creation in D. Hallman (ed.), *Eco Theology. Voices from the South and North*, Geneva/New York 1994, 213-217.

<sup>iii</sup> F.ex. Rosemary Radford-Ruether, *Eco-Feminism and Theology*, in D. Hallman (ed.), *Eco Theology. Voices from the South and North*, Geneva/New York 1994, 99-204.

<sup>iv</sup> For a more thorough account of the role of WCC as a forerunner of the ecological movement see my book "Schöpfung", Göttingen 2001, which I intend to translate in English in an updated form.

<sup>v</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, München 1986, 89.

<sup>vi</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York 1972, 15f.