

PROVISIONAL TEXT - CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Third European Ecumenical Assembly
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Sibiu / Hermannstadt
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The Light of Christ and the Church Cardinal Walter Kasper

The theme of this third European Ecumenical Assembly, "The Light of Christ Shines upon All", is tailor-made for the city of Sibiu / Hermannstadt. For hundreds of years Hungarians, Romanians, Orthodox, Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Evangelical Christians have lived together here in Siebenbürgen / Transylvania. Nearly all Europe's ecumenical questions are reflected in the life of this region. It is not for nothing that Sibiu is a European capital of culture in 2007.

1. The complex history of this region shows that the theme *The Light of Christ Shines upon All* is no "dainty dish"; on the contrary, it raises questions which, in their turn, provoke disagreement for some. Does the light of Christ really shine upon all – on non-Christians and Muslims, too? Does it also shine on those who know nothing of Christ and on those many people in today's Europe who, although they do know Him, reject his message and – to speak in biblical terms – prefer the darkness to the light (Jn 3,19)? Does it even shine on those who persecute Jesus and his followers?

It is by no means a lightweight, harmless theme. However it is not a theme that was thought up by some clever ecumenical preparatory committee; it is a loose quotation from the prologue of John's Gospel, which speaks of the true light that enlightens all people and definitively came into the world through Jesus Christ (Jn 1,9). Jesus Christ described himself as the light of the world (Jn 8,12); so, from the outset, we need to situate the theme given to us, "The Light of Christ and the Church", in the broader context of "The Light of Christ and the World".

In that way we are on solid biblical ground with our theme, and I want to add: we are all on the same solid ground. For whatever divides Orthodox, Evangelical and Catholic Christians, confessing our faith in Jesus Christ binds us together. As Christians, we all believe that in Jesus Christ the light of life is given to us, that this light shines upon us in the baptism we share, which the Church Fathers described as enlightenment (*photismos*). We all say in the creed that we believe Jesus Christ is light from light, true God from true God. We all believe he is the redeemer and saviour for all people, the saviour of the world.

I think it is important that, at the beginning of our assembly, we should not get caught up in the differences there are between us, but think of the shared basis of our faith. Ecumenism is not simply a matter of human togetherness. Ecumenism is about the shared proclamation of faith in the *one* God, in the *one* Lord Jesus Christ, in *one* baptism and *one* Church, to which we bear witness in our common Credo. The ecumenical movement is – according to the basic formula of the World Council of Churches – "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour..., and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". This shared basis must be our yardstick and inspiration in the coming days. Without it we should be building on sand or building castles in the air.

Ecumenism's gift to us is the fact that we have recognised this basic closeness and rediscovered that we are not alien to each other or in competition, but brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot be sufficiently grateful for this gift. We should never let our joy about this go sour, if differences and problems crop up. We should also never let ourselves be talked out of it by those for whom ecumenism is a mess. For us, ecumenism is a task given us by Jesus Christ, who prayed "that all might be one" (Jn 17,21); it is set in motion by the Holy Spirit (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 1; 4) and answers a need of our time. We have stretched out our hands to each other and do not want to let them go again.

2. We carry this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4,7). We live with the same foundation, Jesus Christ, but in divided churches. We do this against Jesus' will and command, and so we ought not to take these divisions between us as something normal, get used to them or gloss over them. They go against the will of Jesus and as such are an expression of sin; they are a sign that we have failed in our historic task of giving testimony to all people of Christ's light and together working for unity and peace amongst all people.

Through our divisions we have obscured the light of Jesus Christ for many people and made it hard for them to take seriously anything to do with him. As history shows, our divisions are partly responsible for divisions in Europe and for the secularisation of Europe. Our divisions are partly responsible for the fact that many people despair of the Church and question it. Thus we ought not to be satisfied with the state of our churches; we cannot go on pretending it is "business as usual". There is no responsible alternative to ecumenism. Anything else would contradict our responsibility to God and the world. The question of unity ought to disturb us; it needs to burn within us.

3. What can we do? Before any therapy there needs to be analysis. In a recent document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith my Church, the Catholic Church, set out differences that unfortunately exist and, in doing so, reminded us of the task that lies before us. I know that many, especially many of my evangelical brothers and sisters, felt hurt by this. I am not unaffected by it, either; I, too, had problems with it. For the hurt and pain of my friends is my hurt and pain as well. It was not our intention to hurt or belittle anyone. We wanted to bear witness to the truth, just as we expect other churches to, and just as other churches already do. The declarations other churches make are not all to our liking, and nor does what they sometimes say about us. But what are we to expect? Cosy ecumenism and fake ecumenism, which are all about being nice to each other, do not get us very far; the only way forward is dialogue in truth and clarity.

What is, of course, important is that, beyond differences and so-called profiles, we do not lose sight of what we have in common, of which there is so much and which is more important. This is clearly expressed even in the document in question. It says there explicitly that Jesus Christ is also salvifically present in a saving way in the churches and ecclesial communities that are divided from us, too. That is really no small thing. A few decades ago such a statement would still have been totally unthinkable, and I am not sure that all our ecumenical partners would say it of us. So differences do not affect being a Christian; they do not affect the question of salvation; differences are linked to the question of the way salvation is mediated and the visible form of the Church. For Catholics and Orthodox, these are not irrelevant questions. For the Church is formed according to the analogy of the mystery of the Incarnation (LG 8). She is visible as Church, visible also as institution. And – sadly – who can deny that there is still no consensus between us on this question?

On this point we touch the real Gordian Knot that has, unfortunately, still not been unravelled. Since we are not as one in our understanding of the Church and, to a great extent, the eucharist, we cannot gather at the one table of the Lord and eat the one eucharistic bread or drink from the one eucharistic cup. This is offensive and, for many, a heavy burden. But it does not help to conceal wounds; we need to leave them open, even when there is pain; only then can we treat them and, with God's help, heal them.

4. So after this analysis let me say something about therapy. We should not blame other people entirely for the awful pain that has already resulted from our divisions. All historical commissions that have met in recent years have shown that, in the vast majority of cases, one-sided attributions of guilt do not stand up to historical investigation; there is usually guilt on both sides. We ought to confess this sincerely and ask God and our brothers and sisters for forgiveness. A new beginning is possible only through the purification of memory. There is no ecumenical progress without conversion and penance. This demands the readiness for renewal and reform that is necessary in every Church, whereby every church must begin with itself.

In the attempt to move beyond divisions towards a consensus, the method used so far, that of pointing out convergences, has proved fruitful and led to progress in many previously controversial questions. I am thinking, for instance, of the basic agreement on the doctrine of justification. But with time this method has gone stale; at the moment we are not getting much further on this road. For me, that is no reason for resignation. We can present our current

position to each other in an honest and appealing way. We can do it in a positive way that is neither polemical nor narrow. We can do it in the hope that thus an “exchange of gifts” – as Pope John Paul II called it – will be possible. In other words: we can learn from each other. Instead of reducing ourselves to the lowest common denominator we can enrich each other with the treasures that have been given to us.

Along the way much that is positive has also happened in the last decades. We Catholics have learned from the Evangelicals about the meaning of the Word of God; at the same time they are learning from us about the meaning and form of the liturgy. Catholics and Evangelicals are grateful to their Orthodox sister Churches for a more lively sense of mystery; thus in the West there is a growing love for icons, for example. These are examples that could easily be multiplied. We still do not know each other well enough and so we still do not love each other enough.

Of course we have to be aware that, in the end, we do not “make unity happen”; it cannot be our achievement. It is a gift of God’s Spirit; he alone can reconcile hearts. We must pray for this Spirit of unity. That is why spiritual ecumenism is the centre and the heart of ecumenism (*UR* 8).

5. The unity of the Church is not an end in itself. Nobody, not even the Church, lives for himself. Jesus prayed that all should be one, in order that the world might believe (*Jn* 17,21). Christian unity is ordered to the unity of the world, in our situation particularly to the process of European unification. It was the light of Christ that united Europe and made her great. Figures of great holiness are at the beginning of European history and throughout it: Martin and Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Ulrich, Adalbert, women like Elisabeth of Hungary and Thüringen, Hedwig of Poland, Silesia and Germany, Bridget of Sweden and many others. One cannot think of Europe without the Reformers or Johann Sebastian Bach, or witnesses like Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Those who would question Europe’s Christian roots should be invited to make the journey from Gibraltar across Spain, France, Germany, Scandinavia and Poland as far as Estonia or from Rome via Constantinople and Kyiv to Moscow. They would meet extremely different peoples and hear the most varied languages, but everywhere they would find the cross and, in the centre of all ancient cities, cathedrals. One can argue against Europe’s Christian roots only if one has one’s eyes closed. Even in modern times, Europe’s Christian roots have not been fruitless. The modern idea of the dignity of the human person and of universal human rights have their origin in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. So we should not dismiss modernity at a stroke; but we must protect it from self-destruction.

Sadly, Europe has often betrayed her mission: in so many wars between Christian peoples, in colonial plundering and the subjugation of other peoples, with two terrible world wars in the last century, two dictatorships that were the enemies of God and of man, through the holocaust of 6 Million Jews at the heart of Europe. Today, Europe is in danger of not only betraying but also – in a banal way – simply forgetting her ideals. The primary danger is not the objections of atheism but forgetting God, a forgetfulness that goes beyond God’s commands, indifference, superficiality, individualism and a lack of readiness to work for the common good and make sacrifices for it. It is almost as if we dancing on a volcano or on a powder keg. The new challenges have long been clear to all our observant contemporaries. I shall mention just a few: the call for justice in the globalised world, where injustice often cries to heaven, the threat from ruthless terrorism, the hopefully peaceful but also necessarily sincere encounter with Islam.

A vague, wishy-washy religiosity will get us nowhere. Christians were never saved by adapting to the world. “Do not adapt yourselves to this world, but be changed and renew the way you think”, the Apostle Paul tells us (*Rom* 12,2). A new evangelisation is called for. What is needed is the solid fare of committed, lived faith. For Europe cannot be just an economic and political unit; if she is to have any future, Europe needs a shared vision and the a shared set of basic values. Europe, in other words, we Christians in Europe, must eventually wake up; Europe needs to stand by herself, her history and the values that once made her great and are the only thing that can give her a new future. That is the task we share.

Our goal is the unity, not the uniformity of Europe. The variety of cultures is an enrichment. But what unites us is the idea of the God-given dignity of every person, the sanctity of life, a coexistence in justice and solidarity, care for creation and a new culture of mercy and love.

We all ought to be signs, witnesses and tools for these choices from the spirit of the Gospel. We ought thereby to respect the otherness of other religions, but to have the courage of our own otherness, too. We need the courage to stand up for our difference as Christians, to witness to the light of Christ, which shines upon all, and to bring it out into the world, which needs it so urgently. For who can give us anything better? Where else can we find such words of life?! (*cf. Jn 6,68*).