



Lukas Vischer: The World Council of Churches and the Vatican Council

1. Place and Date of Publication

World Council of Churches (ed.): The Ecumenical Review, Vol. 14 No. 3, April 1962, 281-295.

2. Historical Context

From 19 November to 5 December 1961 the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) had been convened in New Delhi, India. The Second Vatican Council (Concilium *Oecumenicum* Vaticanum Secundum) of the Roman Catholic Church was due to be opened few months later: on 11 October 1962. When writing the following article, Lukas Vischer had participated at the Delhi Assembly as recently elected Faith and Order secretary. Shortly afterwards he was designated to represent the WCC as one of the ecumenical observers at the Vatican Council.

3. Summary

There is an obvious comparison to be drawn between the Assembly of the WCC at New Delhi and the Second Vatican Council at Rome. Each gathering is representative of a large section of Christendom. Each is concerned with the renewal of the Church. Each gives cause for hope that it will promote the unity of all Christians. Nevertheless a WCC Assembly is fundamentally different both in origin and in ecclesiological importance from a Council of the Roman Catholic Church. If this difference is neglected, people will expect the impossible and be disappointed in the end.

The WCC is a *fellowship of churches*. It has no authority to solve the problem of division. Giving visible expression to God's gift of unity in Jesus Christ is the task of the churches. A Vatican Council, in contrast, is the representative gathering of *one self-contained church*. It is entitled to exercise authority over the church which it represents, and to take definite decisions. While the WCC could be described as a permanent consultation in preparation for an ecumenical council, the Vatican Council claims to be already the Ecumenical Council and to express the truth for the whole of Christendom. From the point of view of the WCC the Vatican Council is not an ecumenical council but a confessional synod. From the point of view of the Vatican Council the WCC is an indeterminate movement towards unity, whereas unity is already a fact in the Roman Catholic Church. The two gatherings compel both the WCC Assembly and the Vatican Council to re-examine themselves respectively in terms of awareness of the existence of the "separate brethren", of the importance of truth and the possibility of error, and of ecclesiological clarification.

The fact that the WCC Assembly is gaining increased importance for the churches compels us to ask which *form* a representative, decision-making gathering of the one Church should take. In this question the Councils of the Early Church make an obvious starting-point. Their respective historical uniqueness gives us freedom to take our bearings from the situation today, to esteem highly the co-operation of laity, and to stress the need of reception by the churches.

A strong tension exists in the WCC between the will to truth and the will to maintain the wide fellowship of all who confess Jesus Christ. Who are we that the Holy Spirit should speak through us? If we pray for the WCC and for the Vatican Council, our prayer must be that God may show us his grace and mercifully spare us from his judgement.

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THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE VATICAN COUNCIL

by

LUKAS VISCHER

There is an obvious comparison to be drawn between the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi and the Second Vatican Council at Rome. Each gathering is representative of a large section of Christendom. Each is concerned with the renewal of the Church. Each gathering gives cause for hope that it will promote the unity of all Christian people. It is therefore only natural that they should constantly be mentioned in the same breath. Comparisons between the two "great ecclesiastical gatherings" are on everybody's lips.

The comparison is, of course, justified. Even if the two events had not followed close upon one another's heels, there would have been ample reason to reflect upon the relation between a WCC Assembly and a Council of the Roman Catholic Church. The inner relationship

between the two gatherings is so strong that a comparison is not only permissible ; it is essential if the situation is to be made clear. At the same time, however, the question arises whether the hasty comparisons which have been heard on every hand during recent years are really adequate, and whether they do much to make things clearer. On the contrary, it seems to me that there is widespread confusion in our congregations concerning the two gatherings : they are regarded too uncritically as being on the same plane and treated as if they were comparable entities. As a result of equating the two gatherings in this way, insufficient account is taken of their inner nature. This makes it impossible to obtain an accurate view of them. People expect the impossible and are disappointed. The result is a lack of clarity which certainly does not make the ecumenical task easier ; it may even make it more difficult.

It therefore seems to me extremely important to begin by drawing a distinction between the two gatherings. It must be made clear that a WCC Assembly is fundamentally different both in origin and in ecclesiological importance from a Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Only then can the two gatherings be compared in a relevant way. The special character of each must on no account be overlooked when comparisons are made between them.

1. The Assembly and the Vatican Council

a) *The World Council of Churches* is a fellowship of churches. The reason for its existence and growth is the division of the Church. The realisation that the divisions of Christendom are contrary to the will of Christ, and that this contradiction is no longer tolerable, led the churches to seek for a visible unity in accordance with God's will. The World Council of Churches therefore has its origin in the divisions of Christendom.

From another point of view, however, it may also be said that the World Council of Churches has its origin in the *unity* of the Church. For the churches affiliated in the World Council of Churches take their stand on the conviction that God himself is the creator of unity. Unity is not a human achievement which must now be perfected — after centuries of division. It already exists in Christ, and the task of the churches is to give visible expression to God's gift. In this sense it may be said that the World Council of Churches owes its origin not to the division of the churches, but to their unity.

This statement, however, does not cancel the first one. For this unity is still concealed amid the division. Its reality is only just becoming apparent through isolated signs. Some churches are convinced that unity has never been destroyed, but that it has remained a historically tangible reality throughout the centuries. Other churches cannot share this view. All the churches, however, are convinced that the unity given by God is not, or is not yet, fully manifest in the World Council of Churches. And if they have decided not only to stay together, but to grow together, their togetherness is not only characterized by the fact of division, but determined by it. On the other hand the first signs of the unity on which the churches take their stand in their common faith are beginning to break through. Their consciousness of their common heritage is growing; their co-operation is becoming more and more extensive. On the other hand, however, the division still continues as before.

The World Council of Churches, therefore, is not a church. It is the institution which enables the churches to give expression to the unity which they have attained, and to continue their common quest for unity. As it was expressed at New Delhi, the World Council is "the churches in continuing council." It is not something wholly other than the member churches. It bears something of the nature of the churches of which it is formed. But it has no authority over the individual churches. Ever since the World Council of Churches was formed, it has been emphasized again and again that membership of the World Council does not in any way affect the integrity and the identity of the separate churches. The resolutions adopted by the World Council therefore have no authority apart from their inherent power of conviction. They are nothing more than findings reached by the churches in joint council. They have validity for the individual churches only in so far as, and as long as, those churches accept them. Of course resolutions are adopted, especially on practical questions, from which the individual churches can hardly dissociate themselves. This means that in reality the World Council is becoming an independent factor, distinct from the churches. In principle, however, the World Council is not an authority superimposed upon the churches.

The nature of the World Council of Churches is also shown by the fact that in the conversation between the churches account must be taken of every point of view expressed for conscience' sake. The World Council is not in a position to take a decision between two opposite

views. It can note the amount of agreement between the churches and endeavour to increase it. But it is obliged to respect cases of disagreement between the churches. It has therefore no authority to solve the problem of division. It is no more than a means of promoting the growth of unity. This explains why the statements of the World Council are usually somewhat vague and indefinite. The fact that the members are divided is bound to impose a certain reserve. The statements must be based on the broadest possible degree of agreement. It would be senseless not to take due account of minorities, at any rate in the case of important decisions. That would only make further conversation impossible. And because the most important questions are the most controversial, the united voice of the churches is weak just where it should be strongest.

What is true of the World Council of Churches as a whole is particularly true of the Assembly. The Assembly can be understood only by understanding the nature and purpose of the World Council as a whole. In the permanent conversation between the churches, the Assembly is an outstanding opportunity. It enables the churches to announce their unity in a special way. It enables them to confirm the unity they have attained, and at the same time stimulates afresh their awareness of the task ahead. It may be described as the halting-place where previous advances are consolidated, and plans are drawn up for new efforts. It is therefore understandable that the Assemblies are held at regular, and comparatively short, intervals. The function of an Assembly is to promote the growth of unity, and this process requires regular consolidation and re-orientation, if it is to go on living. Assemblies cannot be convened only when exceptional circumstances demand it. Just because the individual churches retain the power of decision, a representative gathering must meet at regular intervals to decide on the future work.

The tension between unity and division is expressed at an Assembly primarily by the fact that the participants can only worship together to a limited extent. The fellowship is strong enough to permit all the delegates to worship God at a joint service. And this common act of divine worship undoubtedly contains something which urges the participants to greater unity. On the other hand, however, division at the Holy Communion reminds them that the Assembly is not a single body which can speak with one voice. The anomalous character both of the World Council of Churches and of the Assembly is brought out

here more than anywhere else. If the existing institutions were not seen to be in dynamic movement from division towards unity, they would have to be regarded as completely senseless on account of the obvious tensions within them.

b) *A Council of the Roman Catholic Church* is something entirely different. It is the representative gathering of *one* self-contained Church. It is rooted in the unity of the Church, and draws its life from that unity. The participants are representatives of churches which agree both on doctrine and on concepts of ecclesiastical law. It is on that basis of agreement that they carry on their discussions. Their unity is expressed primarily by the fact that they are bound together in complete fellowship of worship. They can therefore devote their efforts, from the very outset, to proclaiming the unity in which they are joined. It is possible that the unity and inner cohesion of the Church may be threatened. But at least the Council does not have to begin its deliberations by seeking for unity. The Church, which is *one*, is manifested as one; when it meets in Council it is maintaining and confirming its unity while it confronts the questions of the contemporary world.

Furthermore, the Council possesses far greater authority over the Church which it represents. In this connection it is not of decisive importance to what extent this authority resides in the Pope and to what extent in the Council. In any case a Council convened by the Pope and presided over by him is entitled to exercise authority¹. Definite decisions can be taken on the matters discussed there. Of course the voice of the Church as a whole is heard in arriving at these decisions. The decisions must reflect the insights bestowed upon the Church. But the Council counts on the promise that it will be guided to take the right decision. And if the Pope publicly promulgates the decisions, they then become valid for the Church. The Council is free to venture on decisions in quite a different way from the Assembly of the World Council of Churches. It does not have to reckon in the same way with the objections of a minority. And it does not have to ask, to the same extent, whether the churches are prepared to accept

¹ *Codex iuris canonici*, Can. 222 : Dari nequit Oecumenicum Concilium quod a Romano Pontifice non fuerit convocatum. Can. 227 : Concilii decreta vim definitivam obligandi non habent, nisi a Romano Pontifice fuerint confirmata et eius iussu promulgata. Can. 228 : Concilium oecumenicum suprema pollet in universam Ecclesiam potestate. A sententia Romani Pontificis non datur ad Concilium oecumenicum appellatio.

These sentences show the supremacy of the Pope over the Council.

its decisions. The ultimate validity of the decision does not depend on that, either spiritually or legally. Under these circumstances it is clear that the Vatican Council can speak and act more decisively and with more binding force.

The Council has a definite place in Roman Catholic ecclesiology. It is regarded as a continuation of the Ecumenical Councils. The World Council of Churches makes no such claim — either for the World Council or for the Assembly. The term “World Council” does indeed give rise to this thought, but the similarity in terminology must not be pressed. When translating it into other languages it becomes clear that the term is used with a different connotation¹. At the most, the World Council of Churches could be described as a prelude to a Council — a permanent consultation in preparation for an ecumenical council. But the Roman Catholic Council claims to be the Ecumenical Council already. It claims to be the mouth-piece of *the one Church* of Christ. The Ecumenical Council expresses the truth for the whole of Christendom. Consequently it meets only at long intervals — in exceptional situations — when the truth of the Christian faith is in special danger, or when other circumstances make it essential to take decisions of far-reaching importance.

2. The comparison

We could go on describing the special nature of the two gatherings. But what we have already said suffices to show how difficult it is to compare them. If we take the self-understanding of the World Council of Churches as our starting-point, we have to say that the Roman Council is the representative gathering of a single church. It is not on the same level as the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches. It is not an ecumenical council but a confessional synod of the Roman Church. It should rather be compared with the representative gatherings of other confessions, such as the pan-Orthodox Synod or the World Methodist Conference. Of course the Roman Council is of greater importance, corresponding to the importance of the Roman Church. In principle, however, the Roman Council is just as limited as any other confessional world assembly. This is not altered by the fact that

¹ Werner Elert spoke of the Faith and Order Conference held in Lausanne in 1927 as a “Kirchenkonzil,” but this expression never gained ground.

the problem of promoting Christian unity may be discussed in connection with the Roman Council. That does not make it any more ecumenical — from the point of view of the World Council of Churches.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the Vatican Council the World Council of Churches is an indeterminate structure. It includes broad sections of Christendom, it is true. But that very fact detracts from its authority — the authority which belongs to the Church of Christ. The truth that the *one* Church on this earth is a reality, is obscured by the variety of the different doctrines (possible and impossible) held within the World Council of Churches. It is only understandable in terms of its objective. It is a movement towards unity; whereas in the Roman Church unity is already a fact. The World Council can therefore be regarded with genuine interest, especially on account of its future. But it is on a different level from the Vatican Council, since it stands outside the Church and has no real place in Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

Is this all that is to be said? Does the comparison lead merely to this distinction? Or is there not at the same time a positive connection between the two? One important positive element, in my opinion, is the fact that the Assembly and the Council take account of one another. The existence and convictions of the World Council of Churches raise disquieting questions for the Roman Catholic Church, just as the existence and convictions of the Roman Church present a permanent problem for the World Council of Churches. The Assembly, with the large number of churches represented at it, raises the question whether the Roman Church is paying sufficiently serious attention to the abnormal state of division within Christendom today, and whether it is not too apt to ignore the existence of its separated brethren. This question has undoubtedly been receiving more attention in the Roman Church during the last decades, especially during the last few years. The work of the World Council of Churches is one of the reasons for the Roman Church's growing interest in ecumenism.

On the other hand the Vatican Council, with its precise ecclesiological presuppositions, confronts the World Council of Churches with the question whether the latter is not too ready to accept the abnormal state of division; whether it sufficiently realizes the importance of the question of *truth*; and whether it takes seriously enough the commitment to preach the one truth of the Gospel as the one Church of Christ. It compels the World Council of Churches to clarify its ecclesiological bases, which are perforce weak. Attention is also being paid to this

question. This is shown by the increasing pressure to re-define the nature of the World Council of Churches. This point is constantly being discussed by Roman Catholic theologians also. Quite apart from the Roman Catholic Church, the question also arises, of course, from the development of the World Council of Churches itself. The extent to which the question has become more acute, owing to the forthcoming Vatican Council, is shown by the proposal made at New Delhi: "We are persuaded that the time is ripe for a fresh general study, among the member churches, of the conciliar process in the Church of the early centuries. This would call attention not only to the results in doctrine, discipline and liturgy, but also to the processes by which they were achieved."¹

The positive connection, however, does not merely consist in the fact that the existence of the two gatherings compels both the Assembly and the Vatican Council to re-examine themselves. It consists mainly in the work which can be done by both of them. Although there is a basic difference between the natures of the two gatherings, the fact nevertheless remains that the overwhelming majority of the churches today are represented in them. It is therefore of decisive importance for the unity of the Church that work in connection with the Assembly and with the Vatican Council should as far as possible be on parallel lines². It is essential that the divided churches be present (even if they are not seen) at all negotiations, and that due account be taken of them and of their convictions. We have seen how the World Council's understanding of itself, and the Vatican Council's understanding of itself, influence one another. This process can, of course, be repeated in the case of many questions, especially those which are less controversial. To give one example, I have in mind the question of the relation between the Jewish people and the Church. The World Council of Churches is planning really to tackle this question now, and it seems that the problem has also been discussed in preparation for the Vatican Council. It would be a tremendous achievement if agreement could be reached

¹ New Delhi, Section on Unity, II, C. cf. also Report of the Committee on Faith and Order.

A first contribution to this study is the symposium *Die oekumenischen Konzile der Christenheit*, edited by J. J. Margull, 1961.

² The Assembly is already a thing of the past, it is true. But because so much depends on the effect of its reports on the Churches, it is true to say that the Assembly goes on in the "follow-up" done by the member churches. The spirit in which this "follow-up" is carried out is of decisive importance.

on such questions. It would not directly affect the differences, but it would enlarge the field on which the confessions could adopt a common policy.

Progress will depend on the extent to which the two gatherings ask what is the will of Christ in one another's presence (visible or invisible). And the fact that both gatherings desire such progress seems to me to compel them to pray for one another. We must not place the World Council of Churches and the Vatican Council side by side and compare them as if they were static. We must realize that they are moving and dynamic. We must think of them as moving towards Christ, as a great search for the truth that was given in Christ, as a prayer that the Holy Spirit may enable us to formulate that truth afresh. If we regard the matter in this way, then everything that Paul Couturier said about prayer for unity can be especially applied to the World Council of Churches and the Vatican Council. We must pray that both institutions may express the unity which is in accordance with the will of Christ. And what Paul Couturier said about the divided, and yet convergent, movement towards Christ, what he called "*parallélaboration spirituelle*," becomes valid here. Consequently we cannot pray against one another; we must pray for one another's sanctification. The fact that the follow-up of the Assembly and the preparations for the Vatican Council are going on at the same time seems to me to present a great challenge to "*émulation spirituelle*" supported by intercession for one another.

3. The World Council of Churches in the light of the history of Church Councils

Let us now examine one special aspect. I have already mentioned that an examination of the nature of the World Council of Churches in the light of the history of the Church Councils was suggested at New Delhi. One of the reports expressly says: "The Committee suggests that the study on the self-understanding of the WCC should be accompanied by a thorough research into the nature and functions of Councils throughout the history of the Church."¹ How did this proposal come up? What questions will be important in the discussion? Some indications may be permitted at this point.

a) How did this proposal come up? As we have seen, the World Council of Churches is in a state of tension between unity and division.

¹ New Delhi: Report of the Committee on Faith and Order.

On the one hand the churches in the World Council have already attained a common fellowship ; on the other hand they are still divided by deep differences. The fellowship within the World Council, however, has undoubtedly grown considerably deeper during the few years since it was formed, and it may be asked whether even the member churches themselves really perceive the measure of community that exists today. Theologically too little attention is still given to the fact of fellowship. What does it mean, that we find ourselves in this fellowship which cuts right across the confessional barriers ? Has something been created here by the Holy Spirit, something which presents a challenge to the separate churches in their isolation ? And are they obstructing the movement of the Spirit if they do not incorporate themselves more and more completely in that fellowship ? True, the World Council of Churches is not a church. It lacks the essential marks of a church, there is no doubt about that. But can one maintain that it has none of the elements of a church at all ? For it fulfils some functions of a church which are not fulfilled by the separate churches. For instance, it expresses their universality, as none of the individual member-churches can. It bears a common witness and renders a common service in the world, as no individual church is in a position to do. And most important of all, it is regarded and understood from outside as a unit — to a far greater extent than it does so itself. Is this situation taken with sufficient seriousness ?

The same also applies to the Assembly. True, it is not in a position to answer the great questions confronting the Church. True, it has no authority over the member-churches. But that is not everything. It undertakes tasks and takes decisions from which individual churches can hardly dissociate themselves, whether they fully approve or not. The Assembly is coming more and more to carry real weight, even if this is not always perceived. This raises the important question, what position the Assembly can really claim in the self-understanding of the World Council of Churches and of the member-churches. In New Delhi discussion was mainly on technical problems and practical matters. But the question must be carried further. The fact that the Assembly is gaining increased importance for the churches compels us to ask what form the representative, decision-making gathering of the *one* Church of Christ should take. Only by answering this question can our deliberation about reorganizing and developing the Assembly — which must proceed step by step — be given the right direction. In

this question the Councils of the Early Church make an obvious starting-point. Most of the Churches recognize their importance, even if they understand it in different ways. The "conciliar experience" of the ecumenical movement can therefore best find its direction through a comparison with the history of the early Church Councils.

What problems does a study of this kind raise? It immediately becomes apparent that the conception of a Church Council is far from clear. There are differences between the views of the different confessions. They interpret the Church Councils in different ways, according to their particular type of ecclesiology. It seems to me, however, that the conception is not clear historically either. It is indeed possible to regard the Church Councils enumerated by the Roman Church as a historical continuity. One cannot ignore the fact, however, that there are deep differences between the various Councils. During the course of the centuries the concept of a Church Council has changed. In a recent article Edmund Schlink drew attention to the fact that both the Assembly and the second Vatican Council represent something quite new and different from the Councils of the Early Church¹. And the Councils of the Early Church were obviously quite different from the Synods held before Nicaea. If we wanted to take the 15th chapter of Acts as a pattern, we are faced by the difficulty that that gathering was unique in church history, because the Apostles were themselves present.

However, is it not possible to place a positive interpretation upon this difficulty? It reminds us that each Church Council is historically a unique event. It has its definite place in history, and is therefore unrepeatable. That is clear if we think of the subjects that were dealt with at the Councils. They are part of the historical situation. Each Council was historically conditioned, and even its structure was affected by the contemporary situation. Let us recall *who* convened each of the Councils down the centuries! Does not the fact of their uniqueness give us freedom to take our bearings not only from the Councils of the past but also from the facts of the situation today? Our concern is to find an instrument through which the Holy Spirit can speak *today*. Opportunity must therefore be given for the action of the Spirit, when planning the structure of a Council. I realize that this view cannot

¹ EDMUND SCHLINK: *Der kommende Christus und die kirchlichen Traditionen*, 1961, pp. 252, 257.

be shared by representatives of every ecclesiological position. But I think the question should be considered.

A second question concerns the authority of a Church Council. One of the functions of a Church Council is to venture to take decisions. It may refrain from taking one because it does not consider the time ripe. In principle, however, a Council must be prepared to take a decision on a question that needs an answer. A Church Council which took no decisions would have to be regarded as fruitless. But what about the authority of these decisions? Does "their authority consist only in the weight which they carry by their own truth and wisdom" — as the Rules of the World Community of Churches declare? Does their authority lie in their agreement with the Revelation as witnessed in the Bible? And must that authority be constantly proved afresh? Or can the authority of the decisions be derived from external features of the meeting? Is it a foregone conclusion that the decisions of an Ecumenical Council whatever they may be will be accepted? Or is it conceivable that a decision taken by a Council officially representing the whole Church may prove to be a mistake, whereas the decision of a separate synod may turn out to be the truth for the whole of Christendom? In other words: is it an open question whether or not the Holy Spirit will use an Assembly as an instrument of his truth, even if that Assembly represents the whole Christian Church? Or is it true to say of such an Assembly (even beforehand) that the Spirit will lead it to formulate truth? This question also has a historical aspect: were all the Councils of the early Church, which we describe as "Ecumenical Councils," really representative of the whole Church at that time? Did they fulfil all the conditions which would make them into Ecumenical Councils, in an external sense? Did not their pronouncements prevail owing to the weight inherent in them rather than because they were duly constituted and fully representative?

This remark brings us to an idea which might be of the greatest importance in the discussions on the World Council of Churches: the idea of reception by the Church. Is a decision valid at the moment when it is taken? Or does it require the approval of the churches? Must it be received? The Roman Catholic view stresses the finality of the decision. The need to receive it is of minor importance. The formulation of the doctrine of infallibility makes the need for reception superfluous. Of course great stress is laid on the fact that the opinion of the whole Church must be sounded before any decision is taken. But once the Pope

has promulgated the decisions of the Council, they are irrevocable.

The decision of a representative Ecumenical Council certainly carries a weight that is (in actual fact) almost final. It is difficult to imagine how one could go back on the decisions of such a Council. But must not even such a Council recognize the proviso, that its own decisions may have been due to a misleading unanimity? Must it not reckon with the possibility that its decisions may be challenged first, it may be, by the voice of a single prophet? Must it not reckon with the possibility that history may prove its decisions to have been wrong? Here again the historical question seems to me important. The Councils, which were called together as "Ecumenical Councils," did not all prove to be ecumenical. Some of the generally accepted "Ecumenical Councils" were Councils whose ecumenicity is still open to question. At the moment when a decision was taken it certainly carried great weight, but nothing final could be said about its validity. It was only when it was received by the Church (often after great struggles) that its validity was proved. In the World Council of Churches the idea of reception plays an important part. The progress of the work depends entirely on whether the churches accept the reports submitted to them. It is clear that to a large extent this reception has become an unavoidable necessity because of the state of division among the churches. This fact also determines the way in which they accept reports. It seems to me, however, at the same time, that in this respect the World Council of Churches is retaining (better than the Councils of the Roman-catholic Church) an element whose importance is brought home to us by the history of the Councils of the Early Church.

This brings us to another aspect: if the Holy Spirit can even make use of a confessional synod in order to formulate the truth of the Gospel in a way that is valid for the whole Church of Christ, the way is opened for a conception which is of great importance for the ecumenical movement. Must we then not reckon with the possibility that the Holy Spirit was at work even in the Synods and gatherings of the separated confessional churches and that they may have formulated truths in a way that was valid for the whole Church? And could not the whole ecumenical movement be interpreted as a powerful process of reception? Decisions which at first are valid only in particular churches are submitted to the churches all together; and by comparing them all together with the sources of Revelation, and through discussion, it may become clear whether these decisions can be accepted or not.

Another question which will come up in the discussions in the World Council of Churches concerns the participation of the laity. In the World Council of Churches the co-operation of the laity is an important element. The ecumenical movement owes its origin to a large extent to lay Christians. The delegates to the Assembly include a considerable number of laymen and laywomen. Do laity belong in a Church Council, not merely as advisers, but as members with the right to vote? Or is it in the nature of an Ecumenical Council that it is composed of the episcopate only? Is not the Church more fully represented if the voice of the laity is heard at the Assembly? It is difficult to find an historical answer to this question. Acts 15. 22, where reference is made to the Apostles, the elders, and the whole church, does not help to solve the question. Nor are we greatly helped by references to the presence of the emperors at the Councils of the Early Church. The question can be answered only in the light of the ecclesiology on which one's views are based.

One last consideration: any decision about truth always involves a separation. That is why there is hardly a single Council which did not produce a schism, or strengthen one that already existed. This is not a criticism of Councils. Let us disregard the tremendous spiritual and physical suffering caused by the decisions of the Councils. Let us disregard the earthly (all too earthly) methods by which the decisions were sometimes reached, and whereby the truth was compromised. But the fact remains that the truth of the Gospel requires definite decisions. The true proclamation of the Gospel is bound to lead to a division of minds. It is therefore not necessarily a sign of strength if the World Council of Churches brings together opposing views without taking any decision between them. In this way it is, indeed, possible to maintain a wide fellowship. But it is doubtful whether in such a procedure adequate account has been taken of the compelling truth of the Gospel. On the other hand, the realization that a decision about truth involves a division, compels us to exercise great care. It compels us to do our utmost to prevent division. A strong tension exists between the will to truth, and the will to maintain the wide fellowship of all who confess Christ.

And must not this tension make us extremely humble? For who are we to proclaim the truth? Who are we that the Holy Spirit should speak through us? And yet, if we call upon Christ, how could we be justified in shirking this task? If we were to ignore the promise given

to the Church — that the Spirit will lead it into all truth — we should be falling into grave error indeed. We must realize, however, what a tremendous undertaking it is. It seems to me that we cannot look at the history of the Councils — including those of the Early Church — without perceiving both God's mercy and his judgment in them. For instance, I cannot think of the Council of Ephesus without thinking at the same time of the terrible consequences connected with the condemnation of Nestorius. What a loss it was for missions at that time ! Therefore if the Assembly and the Vatican Council are held within a short time of one another, that is no reason to share the view that they are merely forms of public demonstration. A great deal of noise has been made about them outside, it is true, and a great deal more will certainly be made. But the promise really holds good that the Spirit leads into all truth, and if we rely on that promise, then we have every reason to go through this time in fear and trembling. And if we pray for the World Council of Churches and for the Vatican Council, then our prayer must be that God may show us his grace and mercifully spare us from his judgement — although we give him every reason for that judgement.