

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

By

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At the present time the World Council of Churches is still in process of taking up the main emphases given it by its Fifth Assembly at Nairobi in 1975 and incorporating them into its programme.

Chief among them is the concern to enable the member churches to express better the unity between them and to work more earnestly to overcome their divisions. For this reason the Fifth Assembly stressed that all of its programmes must be conceived and implemented in view of the goal of unity which was described as "a truly conciliar ecumenical fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united". In the 1976 meeting of the Central Committee the General Secretary, Dr. Phillip Potter declared that it is the calling of the World Council of Churches to enable the member churches to grow into such a fellowship and that the concern for this must be the mark of all World Council programmes.

As it seeks to continue and intensify its relation of "fraternal solidarity" with the World Council of Churches the Catholic Church, working through the Joint Working Group, which is just now taking up its new programme, is promoting a joint study on the unity of the Church. The study calls for reflection on the nature and extent of the real but imperfect bond of communion between the Catholic Church and the member churches of the World Council of Churches. Equally the study will try to envisage ways which may be taken in the future in order to overcome the divisions which still exist and to prepare for the perfection of this communion. Although all of the work of the Joint Working Group is directly concerned with unity and its completion, this will be the first time it has been possible to take up a joint study between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches on the theme of unity in such an explicit fashion. Whether this direct approach will be the most fruitful one remains of course to be seen.

The study is being organized by the World Council's Faith and Order Commission. The work of the Commission also provides a context for the study since it has Catholic membership and there is full Catholic participation in its continuing research on the nature of unity and on the authority of the Church. A significant consideration in the study will be the work done by the Commission on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry which is at present being assessed critically both by World Council member churches and by some Catholic theological faculties.

Another major topic for the Joint Working Group is that mentioned by the Holy Father in his Apostolic Exhortation, "Evangelii Nuntiandi", para. 77, namely "greater common witness to Christ before the world in the very work of evangelization". This relates immediately to the concern expressed in the World Council Report from Nairobi, "Confessing Christ Today" and to the Faith and Order Commission study, "Giving an Account of the Hope that is in us". Common witness must on the one hand still be limited because the common understanding among the churches as to its content is as yet only partial. But because such a common understanding does already exist in some significant measure, common witness becomes an obligation and indeed already takes place at various levels of Christian living and ecumenical action. The Joint Working Group will seek to help the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches become more aware of how it is happening, of what it signifies and how it can develop.

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Some of the more striking Christian responses to the ecumenical movement are to be found in the area of development and peace. Here the work of SODEPAX is of special importance. The joint committee of the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches has been mandated for a third term and has initiated a programme entitled, "The Search of a New Society". The programme to be carried out locally, is already awakening an amount of practical interest in various places. At another level it will include during 1977 a colloquium on "The Social Teaching of the Catholic Church and the Thinking on Social Concerns of the World Council of Churches."

A further concern of the World Council in this area is to be expressed in a major study "Towards a Just, Participatory and

16 BOLETIN ECLESIASTICO DE FILIPINAS

Sustainable Society" which will take place over the next three years. The possibilities of some Catholic collaboration in aspects of this are being investigated, since on both sides there is a desire to promote a vision of society that is rooted in the principles of the Christian Gospel.

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The local dimension of ecumenical action is to be the responsibility of a new sub-unit of the World Council with the title "Renewal in Congregational Life". Already in its document of last year "Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels", the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity has stated the Catholic responsibility for local ecumenism. An example of this in practice has been the increasing contact which the Secretariat has been able to have with the national councils of churches which have Catholic membership. Along with this there has been the reflection of the Council for the Laity on lay formation at all levels which has been carried out of recent times on an ecumenical basis. In this framework it should be possible to develop contacts and collaboration with the new sub-unit.

During the 1976 Central Committee meeting Dr. Potter described the World Council relation with the Catholic Church as "far more intense than with many member churches". It is envisaged that this can be fruitfully sustained and that signs of the relationship, rooted in the grace of Christ, can be multiplied between the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church in all places.