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NOTES CONCERNING THE BISHOP'S CONFERENCE, GRAN NORWAY AUGUST 4-6 2017

The following is intended as a general introduction to the main issues at the gathering.

I

WHY THIS GATHERING

The erection of an Episcopal See in 2011 gave new impetus to the work of the Nordic Catholic Church inside but also outside Scandinavia leading to the establishment of administrations in Germany with Hungary, France, Italy and England. Formally, these administrations are connected to the Scandinavian See and subject to the Statutes of the Nordic Catholic Church and thereby also to the Statutes of the Union of Scranton.

At this point in time, the task is to make this construction "operational" in such away that the different areas of activity neither fall apart due to separate developments nor are constrained from developing their own cultural and ecclesial identity. In order to accomplish this, we must profit from our gathering to learn to know each other better and listen to lessons learnt and the challenges we are facing at the different locations.

We are especially pleased that Prime Bishop Anthony Mikovsky and Fr. Sr. Rob Nemkovich will come and join us at this important gathering. Moreover, we will enjoy the company of guests who in different ways are connected with the Nordic Catholic Church or considering to join us.

II

THE IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

For some time I have expressed my wish to lessen the burden on my shoulders and pointed to the fact that age is creeping up upon me. Still, as our activities for the moment are kept together to a certain degree in my person, I cannot resign without leaving a vacuum. Consequently, I have informed Prime Bishop Anthony that I am willing to continue for a transient period until things fall in place.

It seems reasonable that our considerations about the way forward must begin with a clarification of the organisational structure we want to establish in the future. Said in more bureaucratic terms, we must ask ourselves how we can erect an ecclesial structure adapted to our resources – human and economical. In the given situation it may be appropriate to develop our work on the basis of the present centres of activities, namely Scandinavia, the German speaking areas and England. Our work in France, Italy and Hungary can be pragmatically linked to these three "pillars".

Consequently, it is my suggestion that we begin by planning for the election of three auxiliary bishops to drive forward the work in these areas respectively. Meanwhile I can continue to serve as bishop coordinator internally and externally. With this flexible model the elections and subsequent

consecrations do not have to take place simultaneously but we must agree on "the road map" for a European church founded on Old Catholicism. In short, before we make elections we must have consensus on our theological platform and a corresponding ecclesial structure.

III

THE LARGER CHALLENGE

At my consecration in 2011 I took my episcopal motto "*Per timore Domini et sancti Spiritus Consolationem*". This choice was inspired by the following verse from the Acts of the Apostles – "Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers" (Acts 9:31f). Clearly, this is meant to be not only a description of the ideal state of the Church but as a reminder that the christological and charismatic sides of the Church are both necessary conditions for church growth. On account of the resurrection, the Spirit pours herself out on the Church (Acts. 2:32f). In other words, Christ is the Lord of the Church and the Holy Spirit her soul (Rev. 22:17).

The bureaucratic vacuum

Today, in Europe especially, the so-called "Christendom" model of church life is collapsing as it presupposes resources of personnel and money which will not be found in the future. Moreover, the bureaucratic approach entails a temptation to define church life in administrative and juridical terms. This approach causes a permanent danger of division between the institutional church and the spiritual life of the believer who is easily left in a vacuum in which he shapes his own religious notions. The split between public doctrine and private faith is accentuated in our present culture where religion is essentially understood as a way of providing therapeutic benefits for individuals. Consequently, we must reshape a vision of church life that encourages the believer to nourish his or her faith and to grow in holiness while interacting with the larger ecclesial community. In short, in the present situation it is a challenge of first importance to assert what it means to live in the Church as the body of Christ.

IV

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNIO ECCLESIOLOGY

In order to move away from the perception of the Church as a bureaucratic institution, *communio ecclesiology* seeks to refind social forms of ecclesial life which will take us from "going to church" to "being the church". The starting point is the biblical notion of "the people of God" (Ex. 19:5, 2 Cor. 6:16, 1 Pet. 2:9). In the pauline letters this commonality is expressed in Greek by the word "ecclesia" – assembly – which is paradoxically used to describe at the same time the universal Church (1 Cor. 10:32, Gal. 1:13) and the local church (Rom 16:4f. Cor 1:1). This use of the same word to denote the church at different levels – universal and local – is not to say that the unity of the Church is additive, the sum of local assemblies. Rather it gives us to understand that every local church manifests the same spiritual reality in Christ, as the Apostle instructs the Corinthians that he teaches his way of life in Christ Jesus "everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17, cf. 11:2, 14:36f). Since the local church is a manifestation of the universal church that is present within her, the local church is never depicted in the New Testament as an isolated reality. The local church and the universal are internal to one another; they penetrate each other and are "perichoretic" as an "imitation" of the Trinity.

Sacramental and charismatic unity in the body of Christ

Thus the Church becomes manifest as a gathering of worshippers coming together to celebrate at a given location. When the faithful in Corinth assembles as "Church" to celebrate the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:18,20), they at the same time receive and become the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). Still, the unity of the Church is not destroyed by the plurality of Eucharistic assemblies. It is the same ecclesial reality which is expressed everywhere so that the unity in Christ gives the common identity. Because the reality of the universal Church is fully realised in the Eucharistic celebration in the local church, the visible bonds of communion between the scattered churches guard the local church from becoming an isolated reality.

Likewise, the bonds between individual members of the local churches are expressed in baptism as "unity in identity", St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28, cf. Rom. 10:12, 1 Cor. 12:12). However, this "oneness" in Christ does not come at the expense of "the freedom we have in Christ" (Gal. 2:3ff).

Moreover, the Spirit appropriates the work of Christ, St. Paul explains the Corinthians: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). As the body of Christ, the Church is a commonality with respect for the individual believer: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12f). In this way the universality is the reverse side of the focus on the individual. Describing the church in Corinth as the "body of Christ", the Apostle continues: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Faith does not lead to a private relationship with Jesus but to participation in a sacramental and charismatic totality which gives freedom to the individual. Thus, the unity in identity is balanced by a unity in diversity.

V

ECUMENISM AS UNITY IN DIVERSITY

With its dynamic between unity and plurality the pauline *communio ecclesiology* can help to move forward in our present predicament. As a matter of fact, the major churches have already begun to walk along this road. *Communio ecclesiology* serves as the basis not only of the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodoxy but also is played into the talks between Rome and the PNCC. Moreover, the statutes of the Union of Scranton are explicitly based upon the understanding of "the Church as community of people gathered around a bishop with the Eucharist as its center" (Section B).

The Vatican has made this approach possible by accepting that "the experience of the first millennium" can serve as a basis for church unity. "In that period indeed, the development of different experiences of ecclesial life did not prevent ... (Christians gathered) together to celebrate the Eucharist". The question is, writes Pope John Paul II, "How can this enduring unity in diversity be restored after a thousand years?" (*Ut unum sint*, 1996, Section 61 cf. 55).

VI

THE ROAD TO UNITY

The consensus document *The Road to Unity* between Calcedonian Orthodoxy and the Old Catholic churches helps us to clarify the basis for ecumenical dialogue. Firstly, the document emphasises again and again the normative importance of "the faith of the undivided church of the first millennium" (III/3). This said, the consensus document goes on to state that the starting point for any dialogue with other churches presupposes that the parties "recognise in one another the same reality and they affirm their essential identity, above all by the unity of faith, furthermore by the unity of their sacramental life, ... as well as by the unity of the episcopate" (III/2,5).

On the other hand, to this structural delineation is added a factual observation which invites to dynamic action. As to "the church's boundaries", we read, "the unity of the church as the body of Christ is (also) understood in a wider sense, all who believe in Christ are called to seek lovingly, sincerely and patiently to enter into dialogue with another and pray unceasingly for the restoration of the Church's unity in faith and full fellowship so that the Lord God may lead all to know the truth and so to attain the fullness of unity" (III/3,3).

Additionally, the document concludes by underlining that "in order to establish fellowship it is necessary to check carefully whether we are close enough but also whether the differences are so significant that separation must continue to exist". Moreover, "this fellowship does not signify uniformity in liturgical order and practise, but rather embodies an expression of the fact that the historically legitimated development of the one faith of the ancient and undivided Church is preserved in each of the participating Churches. This fellowship does not require the subjection of one Church with its tradition to the other Church" (VII/7,8).

VII

LIVING THE FAITH IN A POST CHRISTIAN WORLD

The recognition that the Church's canonical and charismatic boundaries are not necessarily coinciding, has been accepted in Western tradition at least since St. Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, Books II:20, XV:2, XIX:22). This insight may become all the more relevant now, not only due to the approaching collapse of the Christendom model but, more importantly, with the emerging aggressive secular society, we are likely to find ourselves under conditions similar to living in France during the Revolution or in Russia under Soviet communism. In any case, "the good old times" will not come back soon and there is reason to fear that there will be palpable pressure on normal Christians in their daily lives (cf. Rev. 13:16f) .

The crisis of faith in the Western world has left all denominations bewildered. For all of us the challenge is to find a way forward in common faith and tradition. In this respect, *The Road to Unity* is a privileged starting point in the dialogue with Orthodoxy, Anglo Catholics and also Rome. Moreover, *The Road to Unity*, as mentioned in Sections III/3,3 and VII/7, invites us to reach out across church boundaries to build new relationships. This the more as the *communio ecclesiology* as such is built on a dynamic interaction of the christological and pneumatic sides of the Church.

Ecumenism of the trenches

On this basis we should also recognise another form of "unity in identity", namely the unity with Christians from other denominations "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Christ" (Rev. 12:17). In times of trouble, there is a moral obligation to accept what has been called "the ecumenism of the trenches". Foreseeing after the war *The End of the Modern World* (1950) and the implosion of the Christian patrimony, Romano Guardini encouraged all Christians to distance themselves from the cultural breakdown and unite in what he called "eschatological togetherness".

Likewise Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter on Ecumenism*, concluded that an eschatological anticipation of our common destiny may not only serve as a "meeting point" among Christians but shows, on a profound level, that God preserves communion among the baptised" (*Ut unum sint*, Sections 98, 84).

VIII

WALKING IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD

The expression "eschatological togetherness" opens a perspective away from a one-sided institutional understanding of the Church to a commonality based on decentralised christocentric and charismatic bonds among the faithful. This dynamic approach to church unity is reflected when *The Road to Unity* explicitly states that the canonical and the charismatic borders of the Church are not identical while at the same time expressing the hope "that the Lord God may lead all to know the truth and so to attain the fullness of unity" (III/3, - 4,5). This advance to ecumenism is perhaps best upheld by using the concept of pilgrimage as social model instead of a more static institutional definition of ecclesial life.

By understanding the present ecclesial situation as a point in time in our common walking together towards a future goal, the eschatological perspective is maintained. By defining the present church on the basis of salvation history, the movement given in the idea of a pilgrimage, opens for a flexible unity in plurality on every level of church life – in the parish, in the particular church and among the churches.

Confidence in God

During the exodus before coming to the promised land, the people of the Old Covenant were to remind themselves that "a wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number" (Deut. 26:5). In the New Covenant, the exodus theme is taken up in St. Peter's baptismal instructions: As "sojourners and pilgrims", he tells the newly baptised that they must "live in reverent fear during the time of your exile". Now through Christ, he motivates them further, "you have come to trust in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God" (1 Pet. 1:17ff, 2:11). In the same manner, St. Paul uses the pilgrimage theme to explain the life as a Christian to the Corinthians: "We walk by faith, not by sight" as we in this world are away from the Lord. Still, we have confidence because God has given us the Spirit as guarantee (2 Cor. 5:6ff, see Orthodox translation of 1993 following the Greek text).

As an expression of the belief in the resurrection both apostles see this pilgrimage in faith as a persuasive motivation for brotherhood with other Christians and as an inspiration for respect for others (1 Pet. 1:22, 2 Cor. 5:14). Thus, faith in Christ entails breaking with the mindset of the old world (1 Cor. 2:6ff) while at the same time encouraging mutual support among the wanderers on "the way of the Lord" (Acts. 18:25).

Ecclesial life

The understanding of the Church as a fellowship of pilgrims delineates ecclesial life both externally and internally. The metaphor of purposeful walking makes a distinction between those inside and outside the pilgrim community but also sets up a demarcation line between faith and unbelief (Mark 4:11, Cor. 5:12). With these social and spiritual boundaries in place, the new life in Christ is to be nourished from the kerygmatic, liturgical and caritative expressions of faith given in the fellowship of the faithful. Incorporated into community as a pluralism of charisms united in diversity (1 Pet. 4:10), the individual's search for meaning can draw from the spiritual resources given in the apostolic tradition of the church. This mutual dialogue among the faithful takes place as a "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit" (Acts. 9:31). The Spirit incorporates the individual into the body of Christ and fills him or her with the gifts of grace. Tasting that the Lord is good, each one and all are "living stones" built into the church as "a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:2ff) . The spiritual substance given here should in our predicament be strong enough to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the "Christendom model".

Ecumenical dialogue, some concluding considerations

The statutes of the Union of Scranton states in the Preamble that "the obligation of the Union of Scranton is to strive to overcome the divisions of the Church and, based on the faith of the Undivided Church, to restore unity and communion with other Churches" (A 3). Likewise *The Road to Unity* encourages in the conclusions "reciprocally recognized fellowship" and "organic unity" based not on a demand of uniformity in liturgical order and ecclesial basis, but rather as a recognition that each of the participating Churches embodies a historically legitimated development of the one faith of the ancient and undivided Church" (VII/8).

Clearly, this means that the ecumenical endeavour cannot be reduced to what has been called "intellectual ecumenism" where dogmas and opinions can be adopted or rejected simply by reading a text. Despite divergent wording along denominational lines, different formulas can be recognised as consonant in substance: "Fellowship does not require the subjection of one Church with its tradition to the other Church, for this would contradict the reality of fellowship" (VII:8). Consequently, "in order to re-establish fellowship it is necessary to check carefully (...) whether the differences are so significant that separation must continue to exist" (VII/7).

In short, we are "sojourners in exile" and "pilgrims" on the road (1 Pet. 2:11). Still, as we walk in the fear of the Lord we are in peace because we are comforted by the Spirit (Acts 9:31). Therefore, as an anticipation of the coming Kingdom, the sacramental and charismatic reality of the Church has been present to generation after generation of wanderers during the history of salvation (cf. *The Road to Unity* III/-1,3).

In view of the current collapse of Christianity in our culture, the borders of the fellowship of pilgrims have to be discerned anew in dialogue with those churches in which we can recognise "the same reality and essential identity" (cf. III/2 -5). The challenging questions must therefore be – How are we to distinguish "a legitimate tradition" from "a significant difference" in doctrine and what are the practical and canonical consequences of doctrinal "consonance in substance"?