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FIFTY YEARS OF ECUMENISM IN HUNGARY

Statement of the Ecumenical Study Centre in Budapest, Hungary, on the 50th anniversary of the organized appearance of the ecumenical movement in Hungary. On behalf of the Ecumenical Study Center in October 1993, by its president, Dr. Karoly Toth.

1. The Greek word 'Ecumene' and its adjective form 'ecumenical' have become quite familiar in almost all languages during this last half century. This expression of the New Testament (Luke 2, 1-2) means the entire inhabited earth and, in a figurative sense, the whole humankind, "all nations made of one blood" (Acts 17, 26). The word has become known and accepted not only among Christians and churches--where it is understood as the Christian joining of forces for the elimination of denominational conflict,--but also in secular circles whenever the surmounting of political or other differences, the belonging together of nations and the need for union are mentioned.

2. It is useful and timely to recall all this at present when Hungarian Christendom commemorates a significant anniversary. Ecumenical endeavors began to assume an organized form in Hungary fifty years ago when, on June 26, 1943, the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in Hungary established a Hungarian Ecumenical Commission. It is a remarkable fact that this happened five years before the official foundation of the World Council of Churches, an organization of modern ecumenical movement, in 1948.

3. The past fifty years brought speedy, radical and favorable changes in the relations of the various Christian churches and denominations in this country and all over the world. The prayerful desire and aspiration to restore the unity of churches were never forgotten in the course of the almost two thousand year history of Christianity. They were always present in different forms, but the explosion-like development of technology in the twentieth century, the emergence of the means of transport overcoming wide distances, as well as the evolution of a world-wide system of speedy information created the pre-conditions for the churches reaching out to each other in a unified spirit.

4. Thus, the Christian churches realized with repentance that their division into different denominations had been brought about not only by their diversity, but also as a result of their disobedience to the will of God, i.e. human sin.

The incomprehensible wisdom and inscrutable will of God can, however, turn even human disobedience, sin and wickedness to something good. Eloquent and convincing examples of this can be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. For example, the story of Joseph and his brethren shows unequivocally that God had chosen Joseph, whom his brethren sinfully sold into slavery, for the deliverance of the people of Israel (Gen. 45). And the salvation history of the New Testament also testifies that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who "had been taken and crucified by the wicked hands" of the leaders of his own people (Acts 2:23), was raised up by God to the salvation of us all, too bring remission of sins to all whom "the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39).

5. It is, therefore, no exaggeration if we draw the conclusion that God has turned the sinful division of churches into a good ecumenical endeavor in order that the Christian denominations living in different social, political and cultural situations should preach the good news of Jesus Christ in order to obey the great missionary commandment of evangelizing all nations in order that "all nations, kindreds, people and tongues" (Rev. 7:9) may hear the Gospel.

6. The tensions between the unity and denominational division of the Church can, however, also admit another Biblical interpretation which resolves the painful contradiction between God's will of ecclesiastical unity and the sinful reality of denominational division: in Chapter 12 of I Corinthians, the apostle Paul makes a comparison between the church and the harmonious cooperation among the various parts of the human body. In the body every member has different tasks, but this diversity is the precondition of the efficient functioning of the body as a whole, of life. Paul's analogy applies not only to the local churches, the congregations, it is also true of larger church bodies, even of the Church Universal living on the whole inhabited earth, the Ecumene. In other words, the various denominations represent and emphasize certain parts of the Biblical truth, those sections of it to which they attach special importance. The many colors characteristic of the various churches represent together the body of Jesus Christ, the communion of saints and the Church Universal. It is also natural that I Cor 13, the hymn of love, speaks of knowing "in part", "for now we see through a glass, darkly." The perfect unity of our partial knowledges will come when we see "face to face", at a time beyond human chronology. We see the diversity, but we believe in, confess, and work for, the unity of the Church Universal.

7. Translated into the language of today, we have to say that Christianity, even in its present fragmentary life, has certain common features unquestionably to be found in all fragments as well as in the entirety. Let us only point out a few of them:

a.) Our faith in the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one true God, as it is laid down in the Scripture, is common to us all.

b.) The sacrament of baptism is also such a common treasure of ours to which the apostolic teaching refers: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph 4:5-6).

c.) The Christian rules of life, the Christian values are also the same in all churches. E.g. the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20) are professed by every church. The same applies to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and to the ethical precepts of the apostolic teaching (Gal. 5:16-26). These universally accepted Christian teachings give the criteria of real Christianity.

8. Therefore, the ecumenical mentality requires that we should not look at other churches disparagingly but with openness and readiness to learn, bearing witness to the truths especially emphasized by our own church. The ecumenical view demands from us that we try to recognize and appreciate, without prejudice, the peculiar values of other churches, the partial truths professed by them. We should not regard them as rivals, rather as co-workers in building up the Kingdom of God. Let us first be Christians (followers of Christ), and only after that Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists, etc. Does this mean that we want to justify the division of the Church? By no means! Much rather, we emphasize the unity of the churches even in their diversity.

9. Jesus' prayer for Christian unity, praying the Father that "they all may be one", is no end in itself, its great pity is that, in 'consequences of the Christians' unity in service "the world may believe." The ecumenical spirit of Christians is an indispensable precondition of effective missionary work. Mission and evangelism must, therefore, be carried out by the churches both locally and in world-dimensions in mutual support of one another. They have to find answers together to the great challenges of our days: the problems of military conflicts, injustice and hunger, etc. They should not hinder one another's efforts in the services rendered to suffering humanity. They should rather increase their effectiveness and complement one another's services.

10. In our days ecumenical efforts are made in a great many forms. No organization--however comprehensive and successful it may be--can lay claim to exclusiveness. Ecumenism is namely not only a question of organization, it is, an irreversible process. Ecumenism can be expressed by the spirit of Christ. The Church Universal, obedient to God's summons to unity and His missionary command, has been charged by her Lord "to preach the everlasting gospel unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6).