



A Reading of the 9th Assembly: *God, in Your Grace, Transform the World*

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There were people who arrived in their cassocks, strolling through the modern airports of Brazil to reach the southern city of Porto Alegre. There were women who carried their stories from their communities. Young people enthusiastically camped themselves into various locations amongst the local population. There were indigenous people teaching the Assembly the traditions of respect for the land, particularly striking in a land known as *Awaya Ayala* before being “covered-up” by Columbus and Americus. There were persons with disabilities guiding us through worship. There were people of all faiths and none in around the Assembly, made more visible with the *mutirão* programme.

And then there were the expectations. Denominational expectations in the form of Lutheran, Anglican and Reformed traditions. How do the confessions relate to the reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement? National expectations through National Council of Churches. Regional expectations with the various Regional Ecumenical Organizations. What is their role in relation to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in each region? Member church expectations. Would the “Special Commission on Orthodox Participation”¹ redress some of the issues raised at the first Assembly since it was approved by the WCC Central Committee? Individual expectations ...

Porto Alegre in Brazil saw the peoples of humanity, and more theologically the people of God come together as the “supreme legislative body of the WCC, which meets (roughly) every seven years. The formal purpose of the Assembly is to review programmes and determine the overall policies of the WCC, as well as to elect presidents and appoint a Central Committee which serves as the chief governing body of the WCC until the next assembly.”² But the WCC is also (and most importantly) a movement. It is the communities of faith around the world, witnessing and in solidarity in their local situations.

An assembly is therefore also a pilgrimage of these communities, converging to celebrate the faith together, praying together: *God, in your grace, transform the world.*

In Porto Alegre (a city in the southern region of Brazil, approaching the border with Argentina and home to the World Social Forum with its “another world is possible” theme in our globalised era) the 9th Assembly offered the prayer: *God, in your grace, transform the world.* The Christian tradition in Latin America, particularly amongst those who are member churches of the WCC, has a rich reflection and witness to the world of the God who transforms. In more recent times, the people of God have come to express this reality as the God who liberates, attempting to be faithful to the biblical tradition and the memory of the Christian community. The Protestant tradition³ in Latin America, despite its minority status, has contributed richly to this experience of the God who liberates and transforms. In a joint theological reflection published to coincide with the WCC 9th Assembly, Latin American theologians gave testimony to this form of experiencing the grace of God:

Precisely, this is the ‘Kairos of grace’ in Latin America. Facing a dehumanizing market, political schemes without credibility, a systematic corruption that affects everybody and everything on all levels, growing poverty and exclusion, men and women losing hope, violence that corrodes our safety [...] ‘God is able to make all grace abound to you [...]’⁴

And in his report to the 9th Assembly, Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia reminded those present in Porto Alegre of this lived reality:

... in Buenos Aires, Argentina [...] The leadership of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo told me that under the dictatorships of the mid-1970s churches and ecumenical organizations provided the “safe place” where the relatives of those who disappeared could meet to share their sorrow and

*hope. One of them could not hold back her tears as she narrated what the support of WCC had meant to them. She said if it had not been for such accompaniment, most likely she would not be there to tell her story [...] For over thirty years they have lifted up the flame of hope seeking truth and justice. The crucible of their spirit is matched only by their incredible resilience.*⁵

The experience of the 9th Assembly of the WCC alongside the Latin American perspective of the God who liberates (or transforms) deepened the movement's pilgrimage of commitment to the poor of our world. Since the 5th Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 with its theme "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites", the WCC has made more explicit its "preferential option for the poor". It accompanied the decades of liberation struggles in Africa ("from the 1950s through 1994 when the last colony, South Africa, became free"⁶), it has sought to overcome violence in the Middle East and against women through the Decade to Overcome Violence, "building a culture of peace [which] impl[ies] spiritual, theological and practical challenges for our churches which touch us in the centre of what it means to be church."⁷ and it has insisted that "a world without poverty is not only possible but is in keeping with the grace of God for the world"⁸ and developed (in wide consultation) the AGAPE Document.

At the same time, the WCC has since the 8th Assembly in Harare (*Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*) experienced a changing world and more specifically a changing ecumenical context. In the words of the 9th Assembly Moderator, Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia:

The last seven years in the life of the Council was a period of upheaval and yet tenacity. The Council experienced the strong impact of global developments. In spite of the negative repercussions of these developments, the in-house mood of restlessness, due to a significant fall in income and the necessity of reducing programme and staff and, in spite of the emergence of multiple concerns pertaining to Council-member churches relations, the

Council largely realised the recommendations made and the programmatic priorities set by the Harare Assembly.⁹

The 9th Assembly took seriously these new challenges and one of the more permanent phrases heard in the plenary hall (and indeed other forums of the Assembly) was “to do less, and to do it well”. In these times of upheaval and tenacity the WCC, like the Latin American Christian tradition, chose to value the memory of the journey of faith as lived by the communities: “Throughout its history the World Council of Churches has been a privileged instrument by which churches have been able to listen to one another and speak to one another, engaging issues that challenge the churches and imperil humankind”.¹⁰ Amidst these signs of the times, this memory will underpin the programmatic priorities for the coming years.

By drawing on the Latin American experience, there is much in resonance with the option for the poor that could offer the continuation of the *fešta da vida*, to use the words of the General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia. The *fešta da vida* is the celebration of the life-giving presence of God. It is a “Eucharistic vision of the world, reconciled and united with God in Christ, [This] is at the heart of the visible unity of the church which we seek. This vision is rooted in faith.”¹¹ The Moderator of the 9th Assembly, and indeed the wider Orthodox participation in the Assembly echoed this sentiment in their theological expression of the ecumenical vision:

I dreamed that mutual recognition of baptism, the seal of our Christian identity and foundation of our Christian unity would soon be realised. I dreamed that all the churches of the world would celebrate the Resurrection of our common Lord together on the same day, as one of the visible expressions of Christian unity. I dreamed that an Ecumenical Assembly – if not an Ecumenical Council at this point in time – would be convened with the participation of all churches to celebrate their fellowship in Christ and address common

*challenges facing the church and humanity. Dreaming is an essential dimension of “being ecumenical”. I am confident that new generations, sustained by renewed faith and hope, vision and commitment, will continue dreaming.*¹²

In his greeting to the 9th Assembly, the President of the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias* (Latin American Council of Churches) Bishop Julio C. Holguin also drew attention to the theological basis of the ecumenical movement:

*Our only sadness is that in this Assembly in our continent we are not able to unite around the Lord’s Table. We believe that the ecumenical movement ought to be able to celebrate and worship in the liberty of the Spirit, and to share the gift of grace of the Eucharist. This gives salt and light.*¹³

Theological reflection permeated all dimensions of the 9th Assembly. The WCC is seeking “to do less, and do it well” without sacrificing its continued search for the visible unity of the church. We have cited the reflections on the Eucharist and baptism as interpreted by ecclesiastical leaders on this journey. But the signs of the times also call for a conversion of the WCC to live the faith from “the underside of history”, to use a theological category from the Latin American tradition elaborated by Gustavo Gutierrez. The new programmatic dimension, courageously grasped by the delegates at the Assembly, will require tough decisions in the practical implementation and a new way to live the ecumenical journey.

Let us think about the possibility of the grace of the Eucharist in lived experiences of the ecumenical family. This is the reality of the underside of history. Northern Uganda, the Assembly heard, is the worst place in the world to be a child:

For over 10 years, a population of almost 2 million people, of whom 80 percent are children and women,

*have been herded like animals into concentration camps, some 200 camps in all in abominable living conditions, defined by staggering levels of squalor; disease and death, humiliation and despair; appalling sanitation and hygiene, and massive overcrowding and malnutrition. As a relief official in Gulu stated, “People are living like animals. They do not have the bare minimum.”*¹⁴

Is the Eucharist possible?

The Indigenous peoples present delivered a statement to the 9th Assembly in which the relationship to the earth was highlighted:

*On the other hand, as caretakers of the earth our mother, we Indigenous peoples have observed and experienced the degradation of creation. We have experienced the highest levels of environmental racism. Despite pretenses, all of humankind lives in absolute reliance upon nature. [...] The stealing of our land, as well as the destruction of our homelands and forests, has left us where we are today. The world owes a lot to Indigenous peoples, as does the church.*¹⁵

Is the Eucharist possible?

And the prophetic voice of the poor was heard during the Economic Justice plenary in which Brazilian theologian Nancy Cardoso expressed the cry of the poor:

This god [who whispers sweet messages of forgiveness and reconciliation, without the critical courage that makes the violent bow their heads in shame] is no longer able to hold a conversation with the ground. This god now does not hear the cry of the blood of people and beings who are being downtrodden by an economic

model that knows no limits, accepts no regulation and brooks no opposition.

On the periphery of world Christianity there are minorities who stress the need for a theology that liberates: that liberates God, and the earth, and the men and women whose humanity is being denied every day by capitalism. This World Council of Churches has been a privileged and sensitive space where voices can be raised that are not heard in our countries, in national churches or in regional councils.¹⁶

Is the Eucharist possible?

In the book, *A Esperança dos Pobres Vive* (The Hope of the Poor Lives), a collection of articles were produced to celebrate the eightieth birthday of José Comblin, a Belgian theologian based in the northeast of Brazil, amongst the articles were the words of Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, Bishop of São Félix de Araguaia (in the State of Matto Grosso), which reminded the theological community of its first option:

... the option for the poor ought to be more provocatively up to date, because poverty is greater and more globally structured. Because the poor are poor as individuals and peoples, they live in poverty without power and are constantly made poorer and robbed. Nowadays they are not only poor, they are also excluded, they do not exist for the system ...¹⁷

The WCC, at this juncture, celebrated in Porto Alegre the transforming grace of God from the midst of the poor. The ecumenical movement looked to the lived memory of the journey of ecumenical faith in the places of exclusion and with the victims of our world. And the churches present were called to renew themselves in this world in the continued search for visible unity at the *feita da vida*.

- ¹ *Final report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC*, Document Number PB-3.
- ² World Council of Churches 9th Assembly: “*God, in your Grace, transform the world*”. 14th-23rd February 2006, Porto Alegre, Brazil. Highlights CD-ROM, 1.
- ³ We recognize the difficulties in defining the religious landscape in Latin America. We use the term Protestant because in our understanding it has wider resonance amongst European readers than the term Evangelical (the preferred term in Spanish and Portuguese). For a full discussion of this issue see José Míguez Bonino, *The Faces of Latin American Protestantism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).
- ⁴ Israel Batista, ed., *Grace, Cross and Hope in Latin America* (Sao Leopoldo-Quito: Sinodal-CLAI, 2006), 7.
- ⁵ *Report of the General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia*, Document Number A 02.
- ⁶ Nicholas Otieno and Hugh McCullum, *Journey of Hope: Towards a new Ecumenical Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 7.
- ⁷ *Programa de la Asamblea: Novena Asamblea. Llamamiento a renovar el compromiso en la mitad del Decenio para Superar la Violencia 2001-2010: Iglesias que buscan la reconciliación y la paz*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), 127.
- ⁸ *Programa de la Asamblea: Novena Asamblea. Globalización alternativa para las personas y la tierra-AGAPE*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), 121.
- ⁹ *Report of the Moderator His Holiness Aram I*, Document Number A 01.
- ¹⁰ *Programa de la Asamblea: Novena Asamblea. Llamadas a ser una sola Iglesia*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), 120.
- ¹¹ *Report of the General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia*, Document Number A 02.
- ¹² *Report of the Moderator His Holiness Aram I*, Document Number A 01.
- ¹³ Opening Ceremony, Message from CLAI President Julio C. Holguin.
- ¹⁴ *Plenary on Youth Overcoming Violence*, Address by Olara Otunnu, Document PLEN 0.32.

- ¹⁵ *‘Transformation From Within’, Indigenous Voices and the Life of the Church: a Statement to the 9th Assembly.*
- ¹⁶ *Plenary on Economic Justice*, Address by Nancy Cardoso, Document PLEN 01.1.
- ¹⁷ Pedro Casaldaliga, “Optar pelo pobre e pela pobreza também,” in *A Esperança dos Pobres Vive: Coletânea em Homenagem aos 80 Anos de José Comblin* (ed. Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho. Sao Paulo: Paulus, 2003), 400.