The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches A General Presentation and Some Preliminary Remarks

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This article strives to make a general presentation on the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches which took place in Busan, Republic of South Korea, from the 30th October to the 8th November 2013, underlining the most important points of the agenda of this global ecumenical event. It also reviews two documents issued by the Assembly and published after this presentation: The Message of the WCC Assembly, entitled "Join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" and the so-called "Unity Statement" entitled "God's Gift and Call to Unity - and Our Commitment".

Keywords: 10th WCC Assembly; Final message of Busan Assembly; Unity statement.

Introduction

The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) took place in Busan, Republic of South Korea, from the 30th October to the 8th November 2013 under the theme "God of Life lead us to justice and peace." Having written several articles on the preparations for the Assembly in Busan¹, it is now

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¹ See God of Life lead us to Justice and Peace. An Orthodox Interpretation of the 10th World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly Theme from Biblical Perspective, in *Teologia*, vol. XVII, nr. 1 (54), 2013, p. 11-20 - provides some reflection on the Assembly theme using mainly, but not exclusively, Biblical references; Das Motto der 10. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen im Vergleich zu vorangegangenen Versammlungsthemen und seine Aktualität innerhalb des gegenwärtigen ökumenischen Kontextes in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 62 (2/2013), p. 158-167. This article in German offers a comparison of the Busan Assembly theme with previous WCC Assembly themes; Orthodoxie und Ökumene im Blick auf die 10. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen (ÖRK) in Busan, Südkorea in *Revista teologică S.N.*, anul XXIII (95), 3, 2013, p. 179-188 - Presents the process of the election of Busan as an Assembly venue and the implications of this decision for the Orthodox Churches. It reflects also on the way in which the Orthodox Churches could play a role in the Busan Assembly, and formulated some expectations related with the Orthodox participation in it; "God of Life" by St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine in *Teologia*, XVII, nr. 3 (56), 2013, p. 108-122 - This article is the attempt of a research of the Patristic perspectives that the Assembly theme might provide, using as starting points some of the writings of St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine.

time for an initial presentation and evaluation of the Busan Assembly². I have already proposed an evaluation and presentation of this kind from an Orthodox perspective³.

This article will attempt to make a general presentation of the Assembly in Busan and to briefly review the two documents which are proposed for publication as an appendix of the article: The Message of the WCC Assembly, entitled “Join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace” and the so-called “Unity Statement” entitled “God’s Gift and Call to Unity - and Our Commitment.” This presentation is based on Assembly documents, on first reviews suggested by different participants, and also on my personal perceptions as a participant in the Assembly as a member of the staff of the world Council of Churches.

Program of the Assembly⁴

The Assembly started on Wednesday 30th October with a gathering prayer⁵ followed by an Opening Plenary. Then followed a session dedicated to the presentations of the reports of the WCC General Secretary⁶ and of the Moderator of the Central Committee⁷. After a first business plenary, an evening prayer followed. Each of the following days of the Assembly commenced by a prayer

² An official report of WCC Assembly in Busan is in process of preparation. The major documents of the Assembly will be published by WCC Publications by mid-2014. Many of the texts presented in Busan are available in internet (<http://www.oikoumene.org>) and at the official website of the Assembly (<http://wcc2013.info/en>) (See Theodore A. Gill Jr., *Editorial* in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 65, issue 4, 2013. The same issue of *The Ecumenical Review* published a good number of the most important documents presented in Busan Assembly.

³ See my article entitled “The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches -an Orthodox evaluation” which is going to be published, with a Romanian translation, in *Revista Teologica* S.N. XXIII (95), nr. 4, 2013. It contents a detailed review of the most important presentations conducted by Orthodox delegates, highlighting also the most important Orthodox contribution also in Liturgical life and in other dimensions of the Assembly. It contents also a detailed presentation of the Orthodox confessional meeting, as well as some remarks at the Assembly from an Orthodox perspective.

⁴ For more details see *Program Book WCC 10th Assembly, Busan, 2013*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013 which was distributed to all delegates participating in the Assembly.

⁵ For more details regarding the prayer life of the Busan Assembly see *Hallelujah! Resources for Prayer and Praise*, WCC Publication, Geneva, 2013.

⁶ Published in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 65, issue 4, 2013, p. 429-452.

⁷ Published in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 65, issue 4, 2013, p. 417-428.

succeeded by a Bible study⁸ and ended with an evening prayer. The Assembly had the following plenaries: Theme Plenary (31 October), Asia Plenary (1 November), Mission Plenary (4 November), Unity Plenary (5 November), Justice Plenary (6 November) Peace Plenary (7 November) and several Business plenaries. Ecumenical conversations on a large variety of themes were organized on the afternoon of 31 of October, 1 November and 4-5 November. A Madang - which is the Korean word for “market” or “courtyard” - was organized on the afternoons of 4-7 November. The Madang included several exhibitions, workshops and presentations serving as a space for encounter and sharing, celebration and fellowship, greetings and welcoming. Regional meetings took place on the evening of 31 October. Confessional meetings took place on the evenings of 1 November and 7 November. The Assembly ended with a “Sending Prayer” at noon on Friday 8 November. During the week-end ((2-3 November) an Ecumenical Pilgrimage for Peace with Korean Churches brought the Assembly to Seoul. A visit to the de-militarized zone was organized, as well as worships and encounters with Korean churches.

Committees of the Assembly⁹

The Assembly in Busan had the following Committees: Policy Reference Committee, Public Issues Statement Committee, Finance Committee, Programme Guidelines Committee, Nominations Committee and Message Committee. Memberships in the Committees were formed by Assembly delegates assisted by advisors representing other ecumenical organization, Christian World Communions or non-member churches. The Committees worked during lunch times and while the other delegates of the Assembly were on the Ecumenical Pilgrimage. The reports of the Committees were presented in the plenaries on the 5th, 6th and 7th of November.

The Policy Reference Committee presented recommendations for Assembly action on the reports of the moderator and general secretary of WCC, on membership matters, reviewed amendments to the Constitution and Rules of the WCC. A subcommittee of the Assembly Policy Reference Committee reviewed, amended and brought approval of the so-called “Unity Statement.” One of the most important points in the report of this Committee was the approval of a more pro-active policy for the WCC in the future for taking new member churches.

⁸ For more details regarding the bible studies in the 10th WCC Assembly, see Jooseop Keum (ed.), *God of Life. Bible Studies for Peace and Justice*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013.

⁹ For more details regarding the mandates of the Committees see *Handbook. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly, Busan, 2013*, WCC Publication, 2013, p. 33-46.

The mandate of the Public Issues Statement Committee was to prepare public statements for adoption by the Assembly. The Public Issues Statement Committee adopted a series of statements on public issues, “setting the policy for the WCC and communicating its positions to the churches, international community and world at large”. The adopted statements were: 1) Statement on the politicization of religion and rights of religious minorities; 2) Statement on the human rights of stateless people; 3) Statement on peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula; 4) Statement on the way to just peace; 5) Minute on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo; 6) Statement affirming the presence and witness of Christians in the Middle East; 7) Minute on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide; 8) Statement on the current critical situation of Abeyi in South Sudan; 9) Statement on moving towards a nuclear-free world; 10) Resolution on urging improved United States- Cuba relations and the lifting of economic sanctions; 11) Minute on Indigenous Peoples; 12) Minute on climate change.¹⁰

The Finance Committee reviewed the development in WCC’s finances over the last seven years and, in consultation with the Programme Guidelines Committee, reviewed the incoming perspectives of WCC and proposed general guidelines for a coherent financial strategy.

The Programme Guidelines Committee’s mandate was to review the programmatic activities of WCC over the last seven years and to propose general guidelines for it in the next period, until the next WCC Assembly.

The Nominations Committee’s task was to consider recommendations from member churches, regional and confessional meetings of delegates, and to make proposals for the election of presidents and members of the central committee from among the delegates.

The Message Committee was responsible for listening to what happened in the Assembly and to draft a message that reflects in the best way the spirit of the Assembly.

Decisions of the Busan Assembly

As in every WCC Assembly, the Busan Assembly elected a new Central Committee of WCC for the seven-year period.¹¹ As moderator of the Central

¹⁰ A complete list of Public Issues Committee statements is published in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 65, issue 4, 2013, p. 413–416. A brochure with the text of all these statements was published immediately after the Assembly: *International Affairs at the Tenth Assembly. Statements, Minutes and Resolution*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013.

¹¹ For a complete list of the Central Committee members see <http://oikomenen.org/en/about-us/organizational-structure/central-committee/NC032FINALMembersoftheCentralCommittee>

Committee Dr. Agnes Aboum, from the Anglican Church of Kenya was elected, the first African and first woman moderating a WCC Central Committee. As vice-moderators were elected HE Metropolitan Prof. Dr. Gennadios of Sassa, Ecumenical Patriarchate, and Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, United Methodist Church from the USA. Regional and confessional presidents of WCC were also elected as following: Rev. Dr. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as African President, Rev. Prof. Dr. Sang Chang, Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, as Asian President; Archbishop Anders Wejryd, Church of Sweden as European President; Rev. Gloria Nohemy Ulloa Alvarado, Presbyterian Church in Colombia as Latin American President; Bishop Mark MacDonald, Anglican Church of Canada as North American President; Rev. Dr. Mele'ana Puloka, Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga as President for Pacific; His Beatitude John X, Patriarch of the Greek (Rum) Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East as President for the Eastern Orthodox family (elected *in absentia*); and His Holiness Karekin II, the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians as President for the Oriental Orthodox family.

Other aspects

1. *The Moral Values as a challenging issue within WCC.* The speech of His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate entitled *The Voice of the Church Must be Prophetic*¹² was delivered on the 1st of November 2013 in a business session of the Assembly. It put on the table an issue which, in many ways, dominated the entire Assembly: the moral values of Christianity and the way in which WCC member churches refer to them. This issue was also indirectly touched upon by other presenters and speakers of the Assembly.¹³ It was the wish of some members of the sub-Committee on Unity Statement to

teeasElectedbYthe1QthAssemlY.pdf The Romanian Orthodox Church is represented in the Central Committee by HE Metropolitan Prof. Dr. Nifon of Targoviste.

¹² Published in *The Ecumenical Review* 65 :4 (2013), p. 489-496.

¹³ For instance His Eminence Metropolitan Nifon of Targovište, Patriarchal Exarch and head of the delegation of the Romanian Orthodox in his paper entitled *Challenges and hopes from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (which was not yet published), delivered in the plenary on Unity which took place on 5th of November 2013 stated that: "We (i. e. the Orthodox) always remind them (i. e. to the ecumenical partners within the ecumenical movement) and we should remind us too, that we should defend our traditional moral values, particularly the value of the Christian family."

include this moral issue in the Unity Statement. This was not possible, because of strong opposition of some other members of the Sub-Committee. The compromise was that the Program Guidelines Committee clearly underlined in its report that the future programmatic work of WCC will deal in a systematic way with this delicate issue. Clearly after the Assembly in Busan: the fellowship of WCC member churches cannot avoid a systematic and coherent approach to moral values. In my opinion, they should be approached from an anthropological perspective, in an osmotic relationship with Ecclesiology, Christology and Triadology.

2. *Demonstrations against WCC Assembly.* It is well-known that some churches and Christian groups in Korea organized demonstrations against WCC Assembly in Busan. They were very well organized and came in a quite impressive number, demonstrating and praying at the same time. Some very zealous demonstrators chose to express their opinion by walking among the delegates in front of the conference Centre, showing placards with anti-WCC slogans. Together with other colleagues and delegates, I tried to open a dialogue with these people. I realized that their opposition to having a WCC Assembly in their country was based on several misunderstandings and misperceptions of this organization. It is obvious that WCC as an organization needs to do more for its own perception in the world. I dare to affirm that these demonstrations did not make the delegates feel unwelcome in Korea. Delegates were also greatly welcomed through the outstanding hospitality provided by the Host Committee and the churches involved in the preparations of the Assembly. On the country, I can quote a delegate from the Middle East who appreciated first of all that Korea is a country where people can express their opinions and demonstrate freely.

3. *Global Ecumenical Theological Education (GETI) - a forum for theological debate and inter-generational dialogue.* This special program was envisioned for ecumenical and theological formation of young ecumenists. It was linked with the Assembly and started before it in Seoul on the 25th of October.¹⁴ Initiated by the Ecumenical Theological Education Program of the WCC, and implemented in collaboration with the Korean Host Committee and several universities and theological institutions from different part of the world, GETI offered a unique opportunity for ecumenical formation and experience for 170 young theologi-

¹⁴ For more details see the resource book used by GETI: Melisandre Lorke and Dietrich Werner (eds.), *Ecumenical Vision for the 21st Century. A Reader for Theological Education*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013. For the prayer life of this program see Melisandre Lorke and Dietrich Werner (eds.), *Praying Together. With Witnesses of Faith from Global Christianity*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013.

ans representing over 60 countries. The program started in Seoul with a hearing and general presentations conducted by prominent ecumenical personalities, seminars and working in small groups. In Busan, the participants also had the opportunity to attend the open part of the Assembly which was accessible to observers and guests. Such an initiative with its results is a clear sign that the key for a stable future of ecumenism is the solid formation of young theologians in the spirit of unity.

The Message of the 10th WCC Assembly

The Message of the Busan Assembly is one of the shortest ever produced by a WCC Assembly. It starts with a Christological (no Trinitarian) greeting. The focus of this message is the “common pilgrimage” which started with the Assembly in Busan. It is a pilgrimage of transformation for all those involved and that are going to become “instruments of peace.” Those involved in it realized “how necessary is justice for peace; reconciliation for healing; and a change of heart for the world to be made whole.” Strong solidarity “with the people and the churches in the Korean peninsula, and with all who strive for justice and peace” is expressed. Other current issues mentioned briefly in the message are: the necessity to do more for the protection of the nature, the global economic crisis as well as other sociopolitical and spiritual challenges. We all are “stewards of God’s Creation and we are called to join to the vision “of the New Heaven and Earth, where Christ will <fill all in all> (Eph. 1:23). In order to overcome the challenges mentioned above, Christians are called to listen to voices coming “from the margins” and to share “lessons of hope and perseverance.”

The message ends with an invitation to all Christians “to join in pilgrimage.”

The Unity Statement “God’s Gift and Call to Unity - and Our Commitment”

It has become a tradition of the WCC Assemblies to issue a statement called “Unity Statement.” The aim of the “Unity Statement” issued in Busan was to make the message of unity comprehensible to all Christians in a simple and accessible language. The text contains sixteen paragraphs divided into four parts. After a first introductory paragraph which expresses the diversity of God’s creation, there follows the first part called “Our Experience” which contains four paragraphs. They express the following ideas:

- (1) The negative experience of all creation today is interpreted as “signs of our disordered relations with God”; however signs “for hope and new beginning” are there since many people, especially from the younger generation, are involved in work for “justice and peace.”

- (2) Similar tensions as within creation are visible within churches: there are signs of “vibrant life and creative energy” in some churches, as there are experiences of “anguish and constant fear of persecution” in other churches. The ecumenical movement launched the call for unity which grows: some Christians “work and witness together” and are also ready to increase their collaboration with people of other faiths.
- (3) There are also situations in which “diversity has turned into division”. There are not only the old divisions which separate Christians and churches, but “new issues bring sharp challenges which create new divisions within and between churches.” These “must be addressed in the fellowship of churches by the way of consensus discernment.”
- (4) Abuse of life in any form is a dishonour of God “who is the source of our life.”

There follows the second part called “Our Shared Scriptural Vision” which contains three paragraphs. They express the following ideas which emerge from the fact that we read the Scriptures together:

- (1) The Scriptures tell us that we, men and women, are created in the image and likeness of God and given the responsibility to care for life” and to embrace “God’s plan of salvation.”
- (2) The Scriptures announce us the Incarnation of the Lord and the coming Kingdom of God. Some Trinitarian and pneumatological affirmations are also highlighted.
- (3) The Scriptures reveal to us “The Church, as the Body of Christ” which “embodies Jesus’ uniting, reconciling and self-sacrificial love to the world on the cross.”

The third part, called “God’s Call to Unity Today” contains five paragraphs. They express the following ideas:

- (1) Through our common ecumenical journey, we come to understand “more about God’s call to the Church to serve the unity of all creation.”
- (2) As a foretaste of “God’s Kingdom of justice, peace and love”, God gives to the churches “gracious gifts”: the Word, the Eucharist, apostolic ministry, conciliar gatherings defined as gifts enabling the fellowship, under Spirit’s guidance, to discern the will of God, to teach together and to live sacrificially, serving one another’s needs and the world’s needs.”
- (3) The prophetic vocation of the church is “to show forth the life that God wills for the whole creation.” Ecclesial divisions make Christian’s voices less credible. Divisions and marginalization of any kind “ob-

secure the Church's witness to unity." Only "as Christians ^ reconciled and renewed by God's Spirit" are we able to bear "authentic witness."

- (4) The Church "is called to make present God's holy, loving and life affirming plan for the world revealed in Jesus Christ." The Church is by nature missionary and proclaims "in the power of the Spirit ^ the good news ^ to purpose God's justice, and to work for God's peace."
- (5) There is an "interconnection" between the unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of all Creation."

The last part contains three paragraphs and is called "Our Commitment." In its three paragraphs are expressed:

- A repentance for the divisions "among and within _ churches";
- A confession "with sorrow" that the disunity of Christians and churches undermines the "witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and makes less credible our witness to that unity God desires for all";
- A confession of Christian's failures to do justice, to work for peace and sustain creation;
- An urge to "remain committed to the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the WCC: to call one another to visible unity";
- An affirmation of the uniqueness of the WCC fellowship as well as of the conviction "to pursue the unity of the visible Church together";
- An engagement to continue seeking together "full visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church";
- In order to pursue this unity, the following engagements need to occur: openness to receive the gifts of each other's traditions; learning to commemorate together the martyrs who witnessed our common faith, continuation of theological conversations, living out the consequences of theological agreements, intensification of our work for justice, peace and healing of creation, work for more "just, participatory and inclusive ways of living together; making common use for the well-being of humanity and creation, holding each other accountable for fulfilling these commitments, and above all "pray without ceasing for the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17)".

The Unity statement ends with the text of a prayer.