

A Cloud of Witnesses: a message to the churches from a symposium at the Monastery of Bose¹

1. Introduction

1.1 We, Christians from different churches and countries, gathered from the 29th October to the 2nd November 2008 at the Monastery of Bose (Italy) – as the Community celebrated the Feast of All Saints – in order to reflect on “A Cloud of Witnesses: Opportunities for Ecumenical Commemoration.”² This was a joint initiative of the Monastery of Bose and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, a continuation of a process which began with a meeting of representatives from six different confessional families who met at Bose in March, 2004.

1.2 The aims behind this project were: to recognize each other’s witnesses of faith, when this is not mutually exclusive; to find ways of commemorating witnesses from various traditions at ecumenical meetings; to develop or recover the commemoration of witnesses in churches that do not have such a practice; to work towards a common ecumenical martyrology.³

2. Who are the Witnesses?

2.1 Once again we began our conversation with our chosen biblical image of the great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:2) going more deeply into our understanding of the meaning of witness (*martys*) and the composition of the cloud. Over the centuries the word “martyr” has been understood in different ways. The most common understanding of the term came to be that a martyr was a person who suffered violent death for their faith—a death freely accepted for Christ’s sake but not sought out as an end in itself. In the course of the twentieth century, the term came to include those who died confronting injustice for the sake of the gospel. We re-affirmed that the original and wider meaning of “martyr” was simply one who, Christ-like, witnesses to the truth of the gospel to the end. Those who may be termed “heroes of the faith,” who witnessed to Christ throughout their lives but did not meet violent death, are certainly numbered among “the great cloud,” the communion of saints – whether named or unnamed. In our reflections we take these definitions into account.

2.2 We listened to and claimed again the stories of the prophets, holy men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures and the saints and martyrs of the New Testament.

2.3 Together we revisited the past as a healing of memories. We began to see that what and who we remember can keep us apart, but our common remembering draws us together. This act of remembering can serve as an act of confession that opens before us a way of reclaiming together past witnesses. Repentance and forgiveness for past acts of inter-confessional violence are more likely to occur when we reflect together on those who in dying forgave their persecutors.

2.4 We listened to stories of witnesses unto death from the twentieth century. These included the stories of those whose voices were silenced under totalitarian regimes (e.g., men and

¹ The message was drafted in English and subsequently translated.

² The papers from the conference will be published jointly by WCC Publications and Edizioni Qiqajon of the Monastery of Bose.

³ The call for an ecumenical list of saints and martyrs was made by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, meeting in Bangalore in 1978. It arose out of work on “Witness Unto Death: Martyrdom as Ultimate Hope.” Cf. Minutes of Bangalore, 1978, Faith and Order Paper 93, WCC, p. 42.

women in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Romania, and Russia); those who died resisting imperialism, colonialism, and racial injustice (e.g., in Korea and South Africa); and the Armenians who were victims of the genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century. Martyrdom continues in our own century. We heard the story of the Melanesian Brothers whose witness to the faith ended in death in 2003. These local stories transcend all boundaries by the truth and power of their witness in fidelity to Christ. We both wept and celebrated together. Within the context of grave persecution, the power of witness transcends all earthly divisions. It places us once again within the communion of saints.

2.5 There was a growing conviction among us that these witnesses to the faith do not belong only to individual confessional groups but, as in the first centuries of the Christian era, can be the joy and delight of all the churches. Similarly, significant heroes of the faith from the past no longer belong exclusively to the confessional group in which they were formed but can be claimed the common heritage of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

3. Discerning the Witnesses

3.1 Discerning witnesses together entails:

- Recognition in the witness of fidelity to baptismal faith expressed in a life conformed to the death and resurrection of Christ and a willingness to continue to the end, even to death itself. The Christ we recognize in the witnesses is the Christ who has suffered rejection, humiliation, even death on a cross. Their lives both feed the Body of Christ, the Church, and draw it back to its calling.
- All baptized Christians are called to live in the Spirit and so participate in the new life in Christ. But within this communion, we recognize those witnesses who in a distinct sense become “Orators of the Spirit,” who, open to the Spirit and in the power of the Spirit, proclaim the gospel.
- These witnesses are sources of inspiration. Their lives are authentic interpretations of the Beatitudes.
- Holiness is never solely an individual matter. Witnesses are shaped in discipleship by living in a particular community of faith. By affirming together their faithfulness, we celebrate the Church that will be but is not yet.
- Witnesses offer us a foretaste of the kingdom and its justice. They possess an eschatological hope and joy, and a beauty that reflects their love of God. They point us to the fullness of the kingdom. Thus in their lives they unite us in Christ with the past, the present, and the future. The witnesses speak as members of the Body of Christ and draw us near to the mystery of this Body.
- The central act of the Eucharist is the remembering (*anamnesis*) of the death and resurrection of Christ in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the act of remembering, we are surrounded by the Cloud of Witnesses and with angels and archangels we sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” That is why we long to celebrate the Eucharist together.

3.2 One difficult issue of discernment involves how we assess the witness of those who have felt compelled to engage in acts of violence in the pursuit of justice and peace, and in consequence have suffered torture and death.

3.3 In discerning the witnesses to Christ, we recognize that some have suffered without the support of their Christian community or its leaders. Furthermore, there are those who have

suffered torment and death at the hands of other Christian communities, including our own. Our pilgrimage of faith requires a willingness to recognize ourselves as victimisers as well as victims – as sinners as well as holy people united with the Son of God. Commemorating such witnesses together brings about a reconciliation of painful memories of the past and is a step on our pilgrimage to visible unity.

3.4 Thus, witnesses help us on our pilgrimage of faith. They invite us to cross over to where Christ is, to the place where violence is endured and overcome. In this way they draw us deeper together into the life of the crucified and risen Christ. As we contemplate those whose lives were committed to peace we understand better our call to be peace makers and peace builders. Every time we commemorate the lives of holy men and women who have witnessed to the faith, we are confronted with our own failures and therefore called to repentance and to a deeper conversion to Christ and to one another in Christ.

4. Different Ways of Commemoration

4.1 In the communion of saints, all the faithful of every age and of all places are united by the Spirit in one fellowship. While we agree about this together, differences remain as to how we give expression to that reality. These differences include questions concerning the intercession of the saints, canonisation, veneration of saintly relics, and the practice of indulgences. Disputes around these issues arose sharply in the 16th-century and led to hardened confessional positions, to persecution, and to martyrdom. Nonetheless, there is today a growing consensus that emphasis needs to be placed on the commemoration of witnesses as a source of inspiration, for all ecclesial communities.

4.2 Secondly, churches differ in the ways they commemorate the great witnesses. Many churches do so through story telling, religious instruction, publications, and artistic expression. Some also commemorate witnesses as part of their daily liturgical life. Some churches formally identify saints through a process of canonization. Some have formal processes for including witnesses of the past in their calendars. Others regard the witnesses as a legacy for building up the life of the Church, but have no formal process of recognition.

4.3 The lack of formal recognition and even more of a clear place in the liturgical life of some churches, has perhaps led them to undervalue the witnesses of the past. We have learned that some of these churches are beginning to value the commemoration of the witnesses. Other churches have had difficulty honoring those witnesses outside their own tradition. We have learned that these churches are beginning to recognize the witness of those from other traditions. This is variously expressed in ecclesiastical calendars, liturgies, books, catechetical materials, memorials, pilgrimages, and celebrations.

5. Commemorating Ecumenically Today

5.1 As well as commemorating together, churches have also broadened their commemorations of witnesses to include those of other traditions. Examples of this include the memorials in the Protestant Cathedral of Utrecht, the martyrology of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the statues of twentieth-century martyrs on the west front of Westminster Abbey.

5.2 We have heard encouraging stories of ecumenical commemoration of witnesses to Christ. There have been examples such as joint pilgrimages to sites where saints are commemorated (e.g., Nidaros Cathedral where St. Olav of Norway is commemorated) and the ecumenical

commemoration of witnesses at the Colosseum (7 May 2000). These examples encourage us to continue to search for more ways of commemorating together. The reconciliation and healing of memories that this involves is a way of making visible the degree of communion that already exists.

6. Possibilities for Future Commemorating Together

6.1 Arising out of our reflection came suggestions for the future. These are:

- build upon what is being done already;
- commemorate witnesses from different traditions annually on an appropriate occasion such as the Feast of All Saints, Reformation Day, a day in Lent or Holy Week, or in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity;
- publish and exchange ecclesiastical calendars, biographies, and martyrologies;
- identify witnesses that both are and could be shared by different traditions;
- encourage Christians at local levels to exchange stories of their witnesses;
- convene more meetings such as the one held at Bose on the Cloud of Witnesses;
- encourage the World Council of Churches to include witnesses and their biographies into the ecumenical prayer cycle;
- develop an internet website which should include links to existing sites;
- encourage production of an annotated bibliography of key resources;
- help those churches that because of their cultural and missionary context are concerned to avoid anything which might suggest ancestor worship to distinguish between that and an appropriate honouring of the witnesses of earlier generations.

6.2 We reflected on the emerging convergence in the doctrinal bilateral and multilateral conversations, particularly in understanding the Church as communion and the significance of baptism and eucharist for life in the Body of Christ. This convergence provides a firm foundation for celebrating together the witnesses to the faith of the Church. It may be the right time now to ask the multilateral conversation in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to produce a short convergence text on the communion of saints that would gather together some of the rich insights of the bilateral dialogues, deepen the reflection, and in that context consider some of the remaining areas of contention. Such a text would provide a theological and ecclesiological basis for the project begun at Bose in 2004.

7. A Step Toward the Visible Unity of the Church

7.1 The boundaries of the cloud are always expanding as God adds to our number those whom he is calling. Furthermore, new faces emerge from the cloud as different historical and cultural circumstances lead us to perceive the significance of witnesses previously unacknowledged. We invite the churches to explore together the criteria for identifying individual witnesses and groups of martyrs from specific regions, eras, or events.

7.2 This work, undertaken together, can help heal the wounds of the past as we discover in the lives of the witnesses to the faith a determination to reflect the image of Christ. To re-discover the significance and power of the cloud of witnesses and to express this in common commemoration is an important step toward the visible unity of the Church.