

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference 2014

‘Fear Not Little Flock’ The Vocation of Minority Churches Today

Session Five : Ecumenism

Majority and Minority Churches and the Necessity of Unity in Mission

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Introduction

I would like to show my gratitude for the invitation extended to me, to take part in this conference, and for the joy I feel in being able to share my time and reflections with you all and also to introduce you to the Lusitanian Church. The time spent in preparing this message was important, as it enabled me to delve deeper into the reflection regarding the Church’s calling and mission. Within the context of international church-related meetings, it is not common to make time and space for reflecting on the calling of minority Churches. In general, the agenda is set by larger Churches, as these are in public view and they have the material and human resources for conducting their activities. Thus, I wish to congratulate the organizers of this meeting for their awareness in choosing its theme and which assumes the understanding that a Church may be short on human and material resources but rich in its vision, spirituality and commitment with God’s Mission.

The Church that God has called me to pastor as Bishop and in which I was born has been a minority Church in Portugal since its founding. The Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Evangelical Church was not created with formal and monetary support from any Church or foreign missionary agency. This Church stems from action taken by members of the Portuguese clergy and laity who, under the influence of Anglican spirituality, Protestant tradition and the “Old-Catholic” movement, wished to establish a national catholic Church. Hence the name “Lusitanian,” as it professes to be the restoration of the Church, which was in existence in Lusitania, a Roman province located in part of present-day Portugal even before its founding as a kingdom. This Church was autonomous and independent of Rome.

I am always moved as I read that, in the Synod that established the Lusitanian Church on March 8th, 1880, there were only six (!) people present, under the leadership of Episcopal

Bishop Henrique Riley. I am thrilled by their courage, since they lived in a time of religious intolerance in Portugal, and I am always encouraged by their vision when they stated, and as expressed in the preface to the first book of the Lusitanian Church's liturgy, that (and I quote): *“over three months have elapsed since Germany, England, Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and Norway, after having been subject to Rome for more or less long periods of time, shook off the yoke of the foreign spiritual despotism, and they regained their previous freedoms as national Churches, reformed and independent. Such is our purpose as Portuguese Christians. We do not seek to establish a new religion. We simply wish to cleanse the Christian Religion of secular corruptions, claim the freedoms of the early Lusitanian Church – which has been subject to Rome's foreign yoke for so long – and spread throughout this nation a doctrine that is catholic and apostolic, in a Portuguese church, not in a Roman one.”*

That is, its grand vision was sustained in the knowledge of the Church's history and doctrine and in a great love and spirit of service to a culturally and religiously backward society and country. The vision gave them strength and courage to carry out a new religious undertaking they believed in and which naturally could only be sustained by the action of the Holy Spirit. Given their very nature, minorities are a fertile ground for grand visions and projects, though the necessary resources and the path to follow are sometimes not easily grasped. I am certain that such is part of the calling of minority churches.

I - A presentation

Since its founding in 1880, the Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Evangelical Church has been a minority church with Portugal's religious and cultural context which is heavily marked by the Roman Catholic Church. The Lusitanian Church comprises one diocese with 14 parishes scattered in northern and southern Portugal. It is a minority within the minority consisting of a small number of members. It has formally been part of the Anglican Communion since 1980 as an extra-provincial diocese under the metropolitan authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Therefore, it is a Portuguese church that prays and worships in Portuguese, with its own common prayer book in Portuguese. It is the Portuguese expression of Anglicanism understood as the fraternal communion of churches. There were four main reasons that led the Lusitanian Church to apply for membership in the Anglican Communion:

- 1 – the catholic expression of the Christian faith, found in Anglicanism;
- 2 – the sense of worshipping God, as expressed in the liturgies;

3 – respect for the cultural traditions of every nation;

4 – actual canonical autonomy of national and regional Churches.

Throughout its history, the Lusitanian Church has always expressed an ecumenical openness as a natural result of its respect for Unity, which is an attribute of the Church of Christ, as proclaimed in the apostolic creeds. Its motto is, “Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order,” and, as its very name states, it always sought to combine catholic faith with the evangelical spirit. This constitutive openness to all the good brought by both catholic tradition and the tradition of the Protestant Reformation created a natural willingness to accept the difference and to discern what is essential.

Even before it formally joined the Anglican Communion in 1980, the Lusitanian Church was part of a group of churches of the same Faith and Order, designated as “Wider Episcopal Fellowship.” In the 1960s, it forged full-fellowship concordats with a few national Anglican churches (such as the Church of England, the Church of Ireland, the Episcopal Church of the United States of America and the Church of Scotland) as well as with the Old Catholic Communion at the Seat of Utrecht and naturally with the Spanish Episcopal Reformed Church.

In ecumenical terms, the Lusitanian Church was present at preparatory meetings establishing the World Council of Churches in Switzerland, which it joined in 1961 following the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in New Delhi, Indian Union. It also became a member of the Conference of European Churches and of the Conference of the Protestant Churches in Latin Countries in Europe. During a diocesan Synod, it decided to join the Communion of Porvoo in 1999, as it is represented in the contact group of this Communion and takes part in the various initiatives that are undertaken.

This way, and within the international context, the Lusitanian Church has always engaged in dialogue and ecumenical cooperation. While a Church may be a minority in its own country, its membership in international ecumenical organizations enables it, on one hand, to broaden its understanding and experience of the Church’s Catholicism, while, on the other hand, providing it with greater representativeness as well as expanding its vision and understanding of the Mission, which, as a Church, it is called to develop.

In the Portuguese religious landscape, the Lusitanian Church has a statute that exceeds its numeric dimension which comes from the respect that the Mission's age-old work has garnered since its creation. At the Lusitanian Church, the proclamation of the Gospel has always been linked to educational and social work by opening primary schools linked to Churches. Over the years, many generations and thousands of people have enjoyed this work, which made the Church known and respected among the populace. A minority church is more than the sum of its parishes and members, and today the Lusitanian Church possesses remarkable social and educational work in the communities where it is found.

As a non-Roman Catholic Church and with an Episcopal and Synodal structure, the Lusitanian Church is often presented by the Portuguese media as a counterpoint to the Roman Catholic Church, specifically in more controversial church issues such as priests getting married, the ordination of women, the participation of the laity in Church life, as well as the divorced getting married. Likewise, as the expression of Anglicanism in Portugal, the Lusitanian Church is sometimes asked to be the spokesman for contemporary developments in the Church of England and in Anglicanism in general in areas such as human sexuality and the ordination of women to the episcopate. We mustn't forget that Portuguese society has strong historic and cultural links to English society, stemming from the oldest existing diplomatic alliance between nations, dating back to 1386 (Treaty of Windsor).

2 - The religious context in Portugal

One of the particularities of the Ecumenical movement is that the same happens in very different social and religious contexts in themselves. Every country experiences a reality all its own, strongly marked by the religious, social and cultural legacies of the past and by today's events. Ecumenical developments and advances that occur in a given country are not always transferred to another country. Any minority church wanting to delve deeper in its ecumenical calling has to necessarily understand the social, cultural and religious reality surrounding it. That is, the ecumenical dynamics shouldering the progress of the international ecumenical movement must always integrate creativity and the specificity of every national context. This way, we feel that, in every national church context, the "challenge of commitment" between what is ideal and the reality and between what is desirable and what is possible must be experienced.

Forty years after the democratic revolution in Portugal, which took place on April 25th, 1974, Portuguese society has changed greatly, as Portugal today shows enormous cultural and religious diversity. It is significant that, even though it has been in existence since the 19th century, it was only in the early 21st century, in the year 2001, that the Lusitanian Church was legally recognized as an established Church with enshrined rights and obligations. Until then, it was a “cultural association.” Indeed, it was only in the year 2001 (just 13 years ago!) that Portugal approved the Religious Freedom Act, which granted Church status to minority Churches. The new law states the principle of the separation of Churches and the State. This way, the Portuguese government asserts itself as being non-confessional and impartial relative to the various Churches and religions currently existing in Portuguese society.

It should be pointed out that the relation between the Portuguese Government and the Roman Catholic Church is not comprised in this new religious freedom act, but, rather, in the existing concordat between Portuguese Government and the Holy See since 1940. This bilateral treaty granted a significant set of privileges and benefits to the Catholic Church, the traditional church in Portugal. Such benefits and privileges extend to several areas, such as health, properties, education and tax exemptions.

According to a recent statistical study (Religious identities in Portugal : Representations, values and practices: Lisbon – Alfredo Teixeira, 2012) prepared by the Portuguese Catholic Church, there is a relative decrease in the number of Catholics in Portuguese society, along with a slight increase in the representativeness of other religious identities. The growth of Evangelicals is most marked, especially Pentecostal Churches. However, while 80% of the population consider themselves Roman Catholic, we point out that there is a disarticulation between “believing and belonging,” since 44% of those who consider themselves Roman Catholics call themselves non-practicing. The reasons given for being a non-practicing Catholic have to do, on one hand, with a “lack of time” for religious practice and, on the other hand, with the “individualization of faith;” that is, faith remains, but with no religious involvement.

What matters here is that the most representative growth in this study is that of “non-believers” (10%) and of “believers with no religion” (5%): despite keeping the faith, these people renounce any sense of institutional belonging, as they purposely place themselves on the fringes of the Church. As a function of this reality, the Roman Catholic Church in

Portugal has sought new pastoral practices, as well as other forms of church organization. This is a church marked, on one hand, by the weight of its institutional past and, on the other hand, by the will to take on new forms of evangelization and of responding to the growing secularization of Portuguese society. It also wrestles with strong popular religiousness that expresses itself in many displays more marked by local cultures and traditions than by an evangelical spirit and with a strong Mary-centred sentiment fuelled annually by pilgrimages to the shrine in Fátima, which is devoted to Mary, and considered the “altar of the world.”

We are faced with a complex and cumbersome Catholic Church reality that is wrestling with its own contradictions and difficulties, namely in dialogue with the spheres of culture, politics, science and particularly within the context of the current crisis with the area of the economy. Faced with several very pressing challenges, the ecumenical issue has yet to find its space and enhancement within the context of the Roman Catholic Church in Portugal. The ecumenical commitment often stems more from the personal initiatives of bishops and clergy than actual concerted programs and activity in this area. Ecumenism is still not perceived as being an integral part of the Church’s Mission, as was Jesus Christ’s wish in his prayer to the Father (“that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me” - John 17:21), but as an appendix. With regard to this purpose, it is significant that, in the faculties of Catholic theology in Portugal, Ecumenism is not presumed to be a subject all its own, as it is only addressed within the context of other subjects. In such a demanding area requiring appropriate training, most interlocutors (from the different Churches) do not have proper ecumenical training and particularly ecumenical experience capable of fostering new advances. Culture and Ecumenical training in Portugal is incipient and lacks training. Also significant is that in Portugal the Roman Catholic Church does not have an Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism, as is the case in other countries.

Furthermore, in Portugal so-called Ecumenical Churches are in the minority, as their representativeness and geographic location are somewhat reduced, thus causing many Catholic Dioceses not to have interlocutors and communities of ecumenical Churches, preventing Ecumenism from becoming a priority of pastoral action given that for many is not an «existential question». Thus, and given the Roman Catholic Church’s majority status, there is, on the one hand, a “majority complex” and, on the other, “a minority complex.” In this regard, a Portuguese ecumenical theologian (Borges de Pinho – Ecclesia Agency, January 25th, 2014) points out: *“Catholics convinced of the truth of faith lack sensitivity to look at reality*

and value the difference. Non-Catholic Christians, who were victims of unjust situations in the past, take on a more controversial attitude and easily get into descriptions of the Pope or regarding devotion to Mary, in a minority complex". We notice, therefore, that both the majority Church and also the minority Churches are still lacking a more conscious understanding of the sense of the ecumenical movement and of the importance of unity for the Church's Mission in today's world. Therefore, a constant challenge and opportunity opens up here to ecumenical churches (despite being in the minority) to help delve deeper into understanding and the Ecumenical experience. Regarding this purpose, and in order to dispel fears and suspicions, it is always important to point out that *"the ecumenical movement seeks to forge deeper cooperation and sharing, common testimony and common action among Churches, while asserting itself as a movement for renewal in and for Churches. This movement aims to achieve visible unity, not as an end in itself, but so as to give a credible testimony 'so that the world might believe' and to serve the renewal of the human community and all of God's creation."* ("Towards a common understanding and vision of the World Council of Churches," p. 13, September 1997.)

Only from the year 1992, and only after the V European Ecumenical Meeting (bringing together Roman Catholics and the Conference of European Churches) held in Santiago de Compostela, did the Roman Catholic Church open up at an official national level to regular dialogue with Ecumenical Churches in Portugal. Here, I would like to point out how it has been important for minority and ecumenical Churches in Portugal, within a context of the Roman Catholic majority, to hold European Ecumenical meetings promoted by the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe and Conference of European Churches (KEK). I am specifically referring to the 1st European Ecumenical Assembly (Basel) in May 1989, the 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz (Austria) in June 1997 and the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu (Romania) in September 2007. These meetings are important insofar as they mobilize Christians and the structures of the Roman Catholic Church in the various countries, providing them with a commitment and an ecumenical experience which they would otherwise not have and which bring them closer to their brethren from other churches.

Since 1992, dialogue and regular meetings have fostered among the leaders of the Churches a spirit of trust and a mutual knowledge that are vital in the ecumenical experience. Indeed, the fact that Ecumenism is made by and for people is sometimes neglected. That is, the personal contact and the sharing of that which each individual is as a believer are very

important. Historical and cultural prejudices among the Churches are overcome only through a personal knowledge and a mutual experience making it possible to understand that we are all brethren in Christ.

Such ecumenical meetings have been regularly held, enabling us to hold various national ecumenical initiatives, such as:

- the translation, to Portuguese, of significant ecumenical documents (e.g. the Ecumenical Letter to Europe and prayer material for the Week of Prayer for Unity);
- an annual celebration of prayer for unity involving hierarchs from the various Churches;
- joint participation by Churches in cultural initiatives;
- holding colloquia on Ecumenical topics.

However, I am of the opinion that, in Portugal, Ecumenism with the Roman Catholic Church takes on greater significance at the local level than even at the national level. That is, it is more alive and consistent in relations that Church parishes and communities forge among themselves. Despite this context, a very positive sign has been given by the youth of various Churches which, since the European Ecumenical Assembly held in 1997 in Graz, have been meeting regularly to pray and work together. There is, therefore, a new generation that takes on the ecumenical ideal.

3 - Ecumenism in Portugal

Together with the Portuguese Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church of Portugal, the Lusitanian Church founded the Portuguese Council of Christian Churches in 1971. The only existing ecumenical body in the religious landscape in Portugal, this Council aims to foster greater unity and cooperation among Churches, keeping in mind the Mission of the United Church of Christ.

These three Churches in Portugal are historical (created in the 19th century), they are synodal (their structure rests on Synods) and they are committed to the ecumenical movement in Portugal and in the world through their belonging to both the Conference of European Churches and to the World Council of Churches. They are minority Churches similarly sized among themselves. Each one should have around 750 practicing members. These churches, which lack human and financial resources, are faced with various kinds of problems that call into question their sustainability and ability to act.

In spite of their organizational frailty, their ecumenical commitment still persists and has ensured the existence of the ecumenical council, which is the only official ecumenical interlocutor with the Roman Catholic Church in Portugal. Despite invitations, the other Evangelical Churches do not agree with the Council's ecumenical objectives, as they prefer so-called "Interdenominational" meetings. There is, on the Evangelicals part, a certain suspicion as to the goals of the ecumenical movement, which is often accused of being too liberal and of weakening the evangelistic zeal that Churches should preserve. Evangelicals are also wary of the Catholic Church's ecumenical involvement. Many suspect that the church in the majority merely seeks to absorb minority churches, thereby mistaking unity in diversity with uniformity of thought and action. The weight of religious history in Portugal, namely the periods of religious intolerance and persecution against minorities are still consciously or unconsciously present in the thoughts of many Christians.

Despite this fragile situation, the ecumenical path in Portugal has been followed. One of the fruits of this process of holding regular meetings among the three minority churches of the COPIC and the Catholic Church, occurred this year. Indeed, last January five Portuguese Churches met at the Cathedral of the Lusitanian Church in Lisbon to sign the mutual recognition of baptism practiced among the Churches; the churches that were present were the Lusitanian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic Churches and the Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. With this as a symbolic public sign of unity between the Churches and baptized Christians, this event could serve to enhance the sense of the joint Mission to which the Churches are called. The people of God who were gathered at that ecumenical ceremony in the diversity of their church traditions emerged further enriched both in their experience and in the understanding of the Unity to which Christ calls us. In the text of the joint statement (Statement of Mutual Recognition of Baptism among Churches, item 2, January 25th, 2014.) that was signed, the Churches state that they *"teach that the Holy Spirit, Who descended upon Jesus at His Baptism, also descends upon the Church today, making it a community of the Holy Spirit which, as a testimony, service and communion, proclaims His Kingdom."* They also state that *"they hope this recognition constitutes a step forward on the path of the visible unity of the single Body of Christ, so that the world might believe."*

It appears to us, therefore, that, naturally assuming the reality of the ecumenical movement in Portugal, we are offered a new stage of relationship, at least among the Churches

signatories of the document. A single surrounding reality unites us all, resulting in a highly demanding social, economic and cultural context. One single joint Christian thought regarding society and its challenges and opportunities and the resulting sharing of spiritual gifts, and human and material resources, will make churches relevant in their Mission when faced with the great demands of our time. Churches need one another for their own identity and Mission. Only walking together the churches will realize that «Ecumenism is not as an end in itself», but serves the most authentic Christian witness of the Gospel.

The issue is not exactly what to do, but, rather, how to do it together; and, so that this can occur, from the outset of any project and achievement, it is important to show humility and courage to invite other churches to be present. The complexity of the challenges facing society today, namely the social effects of the economic and financial crisis, require Churches capable of facing different readings of reality and of jointly discovering new paths for pastoral action. If we proceed thus, the unity of the Church will then be experienced in the unity of the Mission shouldered together by the churches. This is the understanding of the World Council of Churches, when it states: *“The Church is a gift from God to the world, in its transformation to the Kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and proclaim the presence of God’s love in our world. We need to take part in God’s mission in unity, overcoming existing divisions and tensions between/among us, so that the world might believe and everyone may be one (John 17:21).”* (Together Towards Life, WCC, 2013, p.7)

Back in the day, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that “apartheid was too strong for a divided Church.” And, to this end, the current secretary-general of the World Council of Churches, Reverend Dr. Olav Tveit, in a letter sent to the Synod of the Lusitanian Church (Letter sent to the Synod of the Lusitanian, April 25th, 2014.), states: *“the threats to life caused by climate changes linked to extreme poverty, violence and war are too strong for a divided Church. As Churches, we need to move in a common testimony for life, justice and peace, and in today’s times, we have the unique opportunity to work together and we have no excuse to forge ahead together with one another, by following God on a pilgrimage of justice and peace.”*

Conclusion

I thank God that I am part of a generation which, in Portugal, grew up in a time and within a Church context open to the dimension and ecumenical experience in a Portuguese society currently living in democracy and more open to respect for difference. Thus, my youth and my growth to faith in Jesus Christ occurred in knowledge and in contact with the wealth of

church diversity on both the Protestant and Catholic sides. I have had the chance and the grace to travel to various youth ecumenical meetings held throughout Europe, as I took part in youth ecumenical assemblies in Portugal. The sensitivity and the ecumenical spirit have been acquired and formed through multiple experiences; I have learned to respect the love and dedication of Evangelical Churches to reading and studying the Bible as well as the beauty of the liturgical and sacramental experience of the Catholic Church. To such end, a huge contribution came from being part of a Church seeking to incorporate diversity in its way of being.

And so the fact of belonging to a religious minority was, for me, never cause for suffering and persecution but forced me to gauge the history, identity and doctrine of my Church. I am proud of the history of the Lusitanian Church, not with a vain pride, but a pride sustained in the testimony of often sacrificial faith which, throughout history, many, many people managed to bring about. This is a history still in the making today.

When minority churches are faced with their vulnerability, their scarce human and material resources and often the indifference to which they are destined, they often experience moments of tension, hopelessness and frequent conflict and defeat. Paradoxically, these are times of grace, given that, in their weakness and frailty, God has manifested Himself and revealed to them the power of the cross of Christ. In their weakness, they have experienced God's strength and understood that that which is considered small and negligible in the eyes of the world, it is great and noteworthy before God (I Cor. 1:19-30). Many minority Churches have developed a "faith tempered in the fire of crisis," making them more resistant and able to discern the wood from the trees.

It seems to me, therefore, that in a time where Christianity and Churches throughout Europe increasingly become minorities in society as a whole, this centuries-old minority church experience becomes rich in lessons and experiences. I am certain that the way they have assumed the cross of Christ will increasingly become a reference and an example for others.

I believe that, in Portugal today, as in the rest of Western Europe, (majority and minority) Churches are faced with a demanding cultural context. Without falling into an attitude of permanent criticism relative to the world, or in a ghetto-like position, they should opt for a realistic attitude of hope stemming from faith in Jesus Christ. The hope of faith that

encourages them leads them to reinterpret what is not going well, thereby turning today's reality into an opportunity. To sustain this realistic hope, it is also important to carefully and clearly interpret both the church reality and the social reality. It is from this joint interpretation that the ecumenical agenda will be outlined, as the Church's action will be credible and relevant to people's lives.

This renewed commitment to dialogue must not water down the ecclesial and doctrinal identity of the Church, while being sustained in a shared quest for the truth that is Jesus Christ. If we proceed thus in such a disconnected society and where confrontation has become a habit, a joint testimony will provide a sign of hope and trust that many people long for.

The future of Ecumenism and the relationship between the minority and majority churches requires an loyalty to the creative action of the Holy Spirit and it's signs.

May God help us in this regard!

+ Jorge Pina Cabral

Vila Nova de Gaia, September 2014.

Questions for dialogue

- How do we develop a realistic hope in different ecumenical contexts?

- Ecumenism and Mission; why are they inseparable?