

Ecumenical Dialogue in our Time

Few years ago the Waldensian Board asked the Consultative Committee for Ecumenical Relations (CCRE in Italian) to draft a text offering general guidelines on ecumenical dialogue in Italy and Europe to be debated in Synod. The previous document on the subject was approved by Synod in 1998: it included also our complex remarks on our dialogue with Judaism and among religions. Nearly twenty years later, the three dimensions of the dialogue, that is intra-Christian exchange, relations with Judaism and inter-religious relations, appear still strongly connected, but also seem to have developed paths of their own. This is why the CCRE suggested focusing on an ecumenical debate among Christian Churches, with special attention on the Roman Catholic Church. In the course of our work, the Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian (BMV in Italian, hereafter BMW) executive boards debated and acknowledged the need to draft a common document. A very first draft was sent to Waldensian and Methodist Churches and the version below takes into account the – relatively few – remarks fed back. The discussion has only just begun in the Baptist Church. The BMW executive boards reserved the right to decide how their respective decision making assemblies will approve the text.

Introduction

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches now: this is the ground for ecumenical work for Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian Churches in Italy. As we have been involved in the Ecumenical debate ever since its inception, we consider Ecumenism to be a way of life based on dialogue. Nearly twenty years after the approval of the Synod's document *L'ecumenismo e il dialogo interreligioso* (1998- Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue), Waldensian, Methodist and Baptist Churches feel the need to dwell on the topic again, aiming to reaching a joint understanding on Ecumenism with their partners. The social, cultural, political and ecclesial scenarios have changed to the point that a new insight on the context is needed in order to address the new challenges Ecumenism is called to face. The Ecumenical vision underlying that text and the ones that preceded it¹, focuses on the communion among different churches: this is the framework we move within, which we inherited from the Reformation and that we believe is strongly based in the testimony of the Gospel.

Two opposite trends seem to mark the life of Christian Churches: a push towards identity on the one hand and a sort of liquid belonging on the other. The former leads to a so-called 'ecumenical winter', that is Churches turning inwards. Specifically, generations of believers who did not share the hope which drove the Ecumenical movement in its early days, tend to experience their Faith within the sole confines of their denomination, or even of their local churches. A sectarian closure is a choice of great concern to many. To judge, not to listen: this approach seems not consistent with the Gospel that calls us to open ourselves up to our neighbours, always and in any case.

Secondly, we are increasingly coming into contact with men and women who no longer feel the need to belong to a specific church: it is the paradox of the 'Churchless Christians', a liquid identity which requires churches rooted in the Reformation to find a new definition of their vocation for dialogue. Another issue raises questions: the downgrading of Faith reduced to a mere emotional experience, not necessarily leading to a radical change in our lives. This is an inherent risk in postmodern segmentations: the believer may become a 'religious fast food' consumer, lacking a wider horizons.

In this complex scenario are also framed the difficulties of Ecumenism, which are a source of disappointment for many believers and which must be overcome by recapturing the deeper

¹ In particular: Document on Ecumenism (1982 Synod) and *Il papato e l'ecumenismo* (1995 Synod).

meanings of dialogue, so that our churches may meet current challenges with determination and responsibility, in the light of Jesus's Gospel.

Dialogue with the other is a spiritual experience which emancipates Christians from a self-referential faith. The Church's visible unity cannot be achieved through a diplomatic strategy, but rather through a shared experience of conversion. In case the other part avoids a debate, ecumenical openness may also be unilateral.

This is why we cannot give into pessimism in considering the present season: as a matter of fact, the many meetings among believers of various Christian denominations in Italy, that have taken place over the past few years, are of great importance as the spiritual ecumenical experience. Brothers and sisters who experience their own faiths in other churches have taught us a lot. At the same time, we have listened to their unease due to the difficulties they have come across in their churches. Since we wish other churches help us to be faithful to Gospel, we feel great solidarity with them, given we are aware we are one body in Christ.

Dialogue does not negate one's confessional identity, but questions it in a positive manner. In fact our minority churches at times express their identity awareness by juxtaposition with Roman Catholicism. It is important not to fall in the trap of a faith reacting to the statements and the actions of others, to define one's self by denying. Ecumenism invites us to speak in a proactive manner, looking for an account of the hope that is in us, leaving behind stereotypes which make it impossible to listen to the other and welcome their witness.

We feel the need to increase the knowledge of the Scriptures inside our churches also in view of a fruitful ecumenical exchange.

The belief that in the churches of the Reformation the Bible is well known does not always hold true: the exchange with members of other denominations who are uneasy about not knowing the Bible may encourage us to lovingly follow the Word.

Lastly, Ecumenism calls churches to the common vocation in the service of the world. In fact the Church does not only live for itself, but to be like yeast for the Kingdom of God in our society, a Church which exists in service of the world. In a world of conflict, churches must become credible tools for reconciliation. This is why they must be able to deal with conflict among and within themselves encouraging listening and welcoming processes.

1. The Landscape

1.1 The international landscape - The World Council of Churches experiencing difficulty. The two causal factors which stand out

After 1989, Orthodox Churches experienced a widespread feeling of unease: first of all there a strong estrangement from what is defined 'a Western approach' in dealing both with theological themes, especially ethical ones, and pastoral activities.

As for the estrangement, many Orthodox Churches are open in displaying their disagreement with what they feel is the subjection of Western Churches, especially the Protestant ones, to a secularized culture. As for the second aspect, pastoral activity, they bemoan a degree of 'proselytizing' by some sectors of the Roman Catholic and of Protestant Churches that, in their view, are trying to attract members of the church using what they consider inappropriate means and disregarding the canonical importance Orthodoxy places in the areas where it has been traditionally rooted.

Furthermore, Orthodox churches also feel under-represented in WCC bodies and that their influence is less than what it should be given their actual numbers.

As many other Ecumenical organizations, and possibly more than most, the WCC is dealing with a comparison among and between cultures, a fact which has become more prominent in the past decades within each confession. The Council has experienced a major financial crisis also due to the smaller contribution of churches such as the German ones that had previously generously supported it. This notwithstanding WCC has continued to carry out major activities especially on topics such as peace, justice and the safeguard of the creation. The Faith and Constitution Committee which also includes the Roman Catholic Church, continues to offer its doctrinal contribution.

However, one might wonder whether WCC is still the main driving force of ecumenical dialogue: some believe that currently the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity is *de facto* playing the key role and thus is determining the prevalent nature of the debate, which is not the same as the one the WCC privileged in the past.

In the context of Western Churches, the discussion tends to concentrate on the Roman thesis which denies that the churches of the Reformation are actual churches which depends on the obstinate Roman Catholic refusal to have an inter-confessional sharing of the Lord's supper, that is the Eucharist. The reasons for this refusal are well known and basically concern the doctrine of the church, specifically what the idea of *apostolic* succession implies. The overwhelming weight of this issue has favoured a virtually total focus of the ecumenical debate on ecclesiological issues. The nature of the dialogue enhances its specialist nature and on the whole keeps it quite distant from the sensitivity of the communities. In fact, communities experience a stalemate in their daily lives which increases a degree of alienation from ecumenical matters.

To use the definition by the Roman Church, a 'two speed ecumenism' appears to be taking shape, that is to say strongly prioritising a Roman Catholic- Orthodox debate, which both partners consider more promising than the one with the Protestant side. The latter is seen as theologically fragile, morally unreliable and sociologically weakened if not eroded by secularization. Clearly, judgements of this type and the resulting approach to ecumenism strongly damage the quality of dialogue and threaten to impair development.

In the past decades there have been very relevant ecumenical documents such as the 1999 Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutherans and Roman Catholics later also signed by the World Methodist Council, or on a different plane the 2001 Carta Oecumenica. However, these documents have not had any major consequence on the lives of the churches.

From another point of view one can rightly note that ever since the Second Vatican Council, relationships between Roman Catholics and Protestant Churches have become more intense at grass root level, as far as basic research and theological research are concerned, and the process is still underway. This speaks of the need for communion, considered possible and partly implemented in several situations.

Francis's Pontificate seems to be introducing several meaningful changes in Roman Catholicism which may be of ecumenical interest; his direct, communicative pastoral style along with a number of very effective symbolic acts could impart a new life to dialogue. As for Ecumenism, the current Pope has a preference for gestures and direct meetings rather than doctrinal statements: his visit to the *Chiesa evangelica della Riconciliazione* (The Evangelical Church of the Reconciliation) in Caserta, the Waldensian Church in Turin and the Lutheran Church in Rome have certainly generated an atmosphere of renewed trust and will have positive consequences. In the mid to long

period it is not easy to predict what the result of Francis's ministry on the inter-church dialogue will be. A lot will depend on the success of his attempt to renew the Roman church and on whether this means overcoming the hurdles that Rome has so far established in the dialogue with Protestantism.

In this framework, the unification processes of many Protestant Churches should also be indicated: first of all the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) which is a fellowship of Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist Churches. A series of agreements between Protestant and Anglican Churches – the Porvoo Community for the Northern European and Baltic Regions; Meissen for Germany and Reully for France albeit considering their major difficulties hold hope for the enlargement of the communion.

However, also in the Protestant field there are critical situations: CPCE has contributed greatly in favouring processes of comprehensive unification between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in France, Holland and Belgium. Dialogue between CPCE and the European Baptist Federation concluded that ecclesial communion is still premature due to the disagreement on baptism. Inter-church dialogue between the Churches of the Reformation and the Pentecostal Church in Europe which in practice has not yet begun in spite of them sharing common roots in the 16th century Reformation and in the Awakenings that followed. Given the weight of these Evangelical expressions of Protestant faith, such a debate would be especially welcome.

1.2 The Italian landscape

In 1990 Waldensian, Methodist, and Baptist Churches belonging to the *Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d'Italia* (UCEBI) signed an agreement of mutual recognition which was intended to increase area cooperation and lead to further common initiatives. Some came to fruition such as the joint teaching and training of Ministers at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology (*Facoltà Valdese di Teologia*), the paper "Riforma", the books by the Claudiana Publishing House and a number of joint ecclesiastical committees.

The Waldensian and Methodist Churches received and accepted criticisms, mainly from CPCE, on an incompatibility between the model of unity enshrined in the Leuenberg Agreement and the Common Italian Text: the former referred to a fellowship based on the preaching of the Gospel and celebration of the sacraments, while the latter does not include an agreement on baptisms. Later, attempts to reach a differentiated agreement failed. Currently, the situation is that cooperation in the communion is lagging behind; debate on baptism is still open, as is on ecumenism with some Pentecostal Churches is led by Methodists and Waldensian Churches on one side, and by Baptist Churches on the other, on independent paths. In general the drive is not comparable to the strength that led to the 1990 document.

The Waldensian and Methodist churches and the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Italy (CELI) are members of the CPCE and in September 2012 they hosted the General Assembly in Florence. They could be termed 'good neighbours' but we cannot refer to it as an actual common witness. Joint initiatives such as the Claudiana Publishing House and the Melantone Ecumenical Centre in Rome have so far not led to a comprehensive cooperation. It is not overstating to say that relationship between Waldensians and Methodists on the side and the Lutherans on the other has not fulfilled the potential which the Leuenberg Agreement held as a promise.

Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian Churches have been developing meaningful relationships with the Italian Union of Adventist Churches also through the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy. The fact that the Adventist Union has not deemed it appropriate to fully join the Federation has in no way undermined cooperation: topics such as the freedom of religion have historically been

addressed together but dialogue also involves bearing witness of one's faith in society and in many local situations this means developing many joint initiatives.

Since 1998 there has been an ongoing dialogue between Methodists, Waldensian Churches and some Pentecostal Churches that formed the Federation of Pentecostal Churches (FPC) in the year 2000. Results include a number of documents underwritten jointly by the two Committees and published in two books entitled *Waldensians, Methodists and Pentecostals in Dialogue (Valdesi, Metodisti e Pentecostali in dialogo, I and II)* Claudiana 2002 and 2010). The ongoing debate was abruptly interrupted when the Waldensian Synod decided to authorize the blessing of same sex couples, and then resumed in 2013. Furthermore, in 2008 a new dialogue started with other Pentecostal Churches members of the Italian Evangelical Christian Church: as well as the theological debate, there are meetings between local Pentecostal and Waldensian congregations, which have had a positive outcome. The stronger the relationship between mainline Protestants and Pentecostal Evangelicals, the stronger the witness of Reformation understanding of the Gospel in Italy. Hopefully cooperation and communion will develop following the Protestant paradigm of 'united in diversity'. It is our duty to start laying the foundations for this process to take off.

UCEBI has also started dialoguing with the FPC, leading to two documents jointly signed by both Commissions on Dialogue: the first document (2006) deals with the notion of experience in the Baptist and Pentecostal spirituality, and how such experience relates to faith. The second document (2008) are draft guidelines for a frank and respectful dialogue, focusing on topics where there are different forms of sensitivity such as sexuality, ethics of the beginning and end of life and so on.

2. Critical issues of the current Ecumenical landscape

Recent debates over the past few years have highlighted that the difficulties and struggles of Ecumenical dialogue may be ascribed to at least three critical issues. The first issue concerns the unity of the church, meaning the models of ecclesial communion. The remaining critical issues are quite recent and mainly concern ethical matters and the meeting of different cultures (so called "cultural ecumenism").

2.1 – Ecclesial Communion

The Churches of the Reformation confess Christ as the only Head of the Church. He is the One to call on believers making them brothers and sisters.

In the New Testament, and therefore also in the understanding of the Protestant Churches, the visible unity of the Church takes on different forms of expression, the main ones being the organic unity and the full communion among different churches.

Organic unity means that previously distinct churches set up a shared ministerial and organisational structure and therefore a single ecclesial body. Examples such as these are: the Union of Methodist and Waldensian Churches in Italy and the already mentioned unions between Reformed and Lutheran Churches in some European countries.

The model of ecclesial communion among different churches means that every church involved fully recognises the others as expression of the One Church in Christ. In practice, this means sharing the preaching and the Lord's Supper, by mutually recognising ministries and by seeking further shared forms of ecclesiastical practices. While such model of unity clearly requires a compatibility of the remaining ecclesial particularities of each church, both in terms of doctrine and in terms of the ministerial organisation, it does not require a shared ecclesial structure. On this model the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) was established. Against all widespread misunderstandings, ecclesial communion is not a qualitatively poorer kind of unity

compared to organic unity. Even if it does not require the adoption of identical ecclesial structures, it shares the same theological contents, meaning a fully shared Christian Faith.

In the framework of the ecclesial communion between and among different churches, our Churches can jointly state as follows: The Christian Baptist Churches in Italy (UCEBI) recognise the Church of Christ where the following are present:

- a) Listening to the Word of God that calls the congregation;
- b) sharing the the Lord's Supper;
- c) pursuing the bond of mutual love;
- d) committing to make disciples and baptise them (UCEBI Confession of Faith, art. 8).

Methodist and Waldensian Churches share the Leuenberg Agreement (whose art. 2 resumes art.7 of the Augsburg Confession, and art 17 of Second Helvetic Confession): the Church is found wherever the Gospel is announced in purity and the sacraments are correctly administered.

The two above described understandings of the church are structurally compatible: in fact the Baptist includes a shared understanding of the Gospel (a) and of the sacraments (a and d). Brotherly love and mission (c and d) are not explicitly mentioned in the Leuenberg Agreement, but are obviously part the CPCE's ecclesiological vision. Brotherly love is a 'distinctive sign of Christian life' (the Church of Jesus Christ, I, 2.4.2) and mission 'determines the existence of the church' (ibid, II, 2.5).

In terms of contents there has to be a full agreement on the understanding of the Gospel and of the Supper. Any differences on these points are not among churches but are cross cutting and are not such to determine a split. Whether the understandings of baptism of Waldensian and Methodist Churches on one side and Baptist Churches on the other are compatible requires further evaluation at this stage.

In particular, thanks to model of communion of the Leuenberg Agreement, most of Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist Churches of Europe reached a complete unity, while dialogue with the Baptist Churches in the same area has not yet reached a full ecclesial communion, due to the disagreement on Baptism.

The model of ecclesial communion among different churches could not be applied when seeking communion between the Protestant churches on the one hand and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox on the other. In fact the latter considers the Episcopal ministry (according to what is often termed a 'historical' apostolic succession) as foundational of the Church. Their ecumenical vision tends towards a model of 'organic' unit: that is to say that compatible differences are only within their vision of the Episcopal ministry.

2.2 Ethical matters

Ever since ancient times, doctrinal matters and at times also their political implications are the ones to have led to the deepest splits among churches. The ecumenical movement, especially in the past fifty years, determined that doctrinal disputes among various churches and confessions has been revisited and debated through a large number of dialogues. Disagreement on the main theological key points are still there, although on many issues they are not considered divisive. However, while tension on doctrinal matters seems to be partly, or maybe only temporarily dropped, the last decades have seen deep differences on several ethical matters, such as inter-ethnic and inter-sexual relationships, commitment for peace and non violence, which position a church should have in society and what its role should be in the political arena. Churches are first and foremost split on some of the afore mentioned issues within. On other matters they are split not just because of

cultural differences but also because of a different understanding of the Scriptures and of the Christian message.

The Ecumenical movement which refers to the WCC sees racism as incompatible with the Christian doctrine of the human person and the nature of the Christ's Church. As a result, in 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) did not hesitate to exclude the South African Reformed Church – the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk – from its communion by declaring it heretic for having supplied biblical and theological legitimacy to apartheid in a 1974 Report. It suspended it from communion until repentance. To our knowledge this is the first time in Christian history, or at least in recent Christian history that a church has been declared heretic on the basis of an ethical matter.

Major differences regard also the man-woman relationship and on the role of women and family in the church and society. In most Christian churches, women are barred from Pastoral Ministry. Such an exclusion has no serious theological motivations but is still accepted as normal by most Christians: for our Churches this is a scandal.

Another even more controversial ethical issue concerns the ecclesial position towards people with a homosexual orientation. Churches do not agree on the understanding of the phenomenon nor on how it should be experienced within the Christian community. There are specific disagreements as to whether an openly homosexual person can become a minister of the church and the legitimacy of blessing single sex unions.

Other ethical issues which divide the churches, concern beginning and end-of-life matters: procreation and contraception; marriage, family and its current models; divorce, and abortion.

There are a range of positions on the presence of churches in the public sphere and on the relationship between Christians' ethical choices and legislation: the key feature is the consideration given to political secularization, how the *laïcité* of state and the institutions, and pluralism are to be seen in a democratic society. There are those who believe the state should legislate on the basis of universal and binding ethical values, given they are the 'truth' of human nature; on the other hand there are Christians who see the ethical and ideological neutrality of the state as the only guarantee of an pluralism which respects conscience.

As for topics such as peace and non violence the big unresolved issues of social justice, the world economic order and the safeguard of the Creation, the WCC has played an important role in bringing them to the attention of churches, kindling a growing ecumenical interest for such topics.

After this brief overview, one can conclude that ethical divisions within and among churches are as deep or even deeper than the doctrinal ones. This is why the ecumenical movement as a whole will have to address some of these issues. While the confessions of faith in the ancient Church did not thematize ethics, nowadays ethics appear to be one the main players of the movement towards unity.

Can different views on matters of ethical importance bear the same weight as doctrinal or ecclesiological issues? What type of ethical pluralism is compatible with a closer communion? The answer has been neither offered nor even drafted and it could not be easily founded.

2.3 Impact of cultural diversity in the dialogue among Christian Churches

The relationships between different cultures and dialogue among Christian confessions has not been explored comprehensively in ecumenical documents. The problem is not new as it was present already among the first Christians as is described in the Gospel. In fact while Christianity grew

from a number of diverse Jewish roots, it was also raising questions as to how it would relate to new situations, piecing together creativity and fidelity. The same is true today as we have to come to terms with cultural differences, as the Christian Faith expresses itself always and in any case in specific contexts. Christian faith is an incarnate reality, which is experienced by peoples and cultures which struggle to follow Jesus in their context and who pray for the coming of the Kingdom.

Globalisation, massive migration flows, and the new means of communication favoured the encounter between and among individuals and peoples which were unthinkable only a few decades ago. The meeting between various cultures and languages is certainly enriching but also leads to strong rejections, misunderstandings, entrenchments and splits.

In our day and age being ecumenical includes dialogue among several cultures: since Italy has become the destination of many migrants including thousands of Christians especially from the South of the world, who increasingly meet in our churches, too, it has become necessary to address the cultural aspects of each understanding of faith. The cohabitation among Christians of the same confession or belonging to the same world communion, but coming from different cultures requires the same sort of commitment required to develop an ecumenical dialogue.

The significant experience of "*Essere chiesa insieme*" (Being Church Together), which for years has seen the involvement of FCEI member churches, has tried to take on board the cultural differences which exist between local Protestant church members and new arrivals which at times hold different, even disagreeing, theological positions. Examples can be found in how the Scriptures and ethics are interpreted, but also topics linked to the relationship between the state and church, or to the way in which ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue are understood. There is no point denying it: the challenge is complex and demanding and requires both determination and boldness, as well as time and being open to cope with the inevitable crises and setbacks. In this initial phase it seems important to develop a consensus on the methods and the basic objectives. The former is being experimented in several places and consists in developing the knowledge, in listening and identifying common working environments and separate (autonomous) spaces, in a frank dialogue on matters, even the deeply controversial ones. The aim was to develop a multi-faceted model of integration, appreciating the differences in an actual communion, that is a path of faith and witness, which is really shared and not only formally stated.

All this without forgetting the daily tragedy of thousands of people escaping inhuman conditions, seeking the never reached promised land. Unquestionably this tragedy reminds us how urgent are common actions and strategies by all our churches.

3. Prospectives

3.1 Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church

In dialoguing with the Church of Rome, our task can be summarized as follows:

- a) being determined in appreciating what has developed over the past sixty years, in terms of getting to know each other, sharing, and the will to find a common path;
- b) dealing in a peaceful and constructive manner with the obstacles that remain.

a) In the past, dialogue has often been driven especially bottom up by open and strongly motivated minorities. Recently, its popularity has increased and it has attracted more attention as Francis, the Bishop of Rome, promoted the vision of a synodal and dialogical church that also led to a number

of important ecumenical events, shedding light on other Christian situations, such as our minority churches.

This approach also raised issues of reform within the Roman Catholic Church. The opening of the celebrations for 500 years since the Reformation held in Lund is the symbol of a new ecumenical season. The best results can be seen in common prayers and Biblical studies. Co-operation in the Diaconia are less common but meaningful. Several cities have established a Council of Christian Churches that can help establish an institutionally more solid and stable frame to dialogue.

The Ecumenical Activities Secretariat (SAE in Italian) has been and is offering a great service: it is an experiment driven by lay people, in certain regards the only one in the world, not known well enough, which is appreciated and supported by our churches. SAE used to promote grassroots activity in the past and now is persevering in times that are not ecumenically easy: it has become an important workshop for theological meetings and a place where often mutual invitations among theologians belonging to different confessions in their respective academic institutions. Our churches welcome the promises borne by this phase hopefully and favourably, without denying the issues that still need to be unravelled.

b) the 16th century Reformation proposed a different way of understanding Christian lives and a church, distancing itself from the Mediaeval paradigm. The 5th Centenary of the Reformation maybe a blessed opportunity to deal with a topic other than specific doctrinal differences in an ecumenical perspective, as it concerns a system of relations, with God, with the Biblical witness and the tradition of the Church, among the charismata in the community and that together make up the experience of Faith. One could see the currently controversial topics of discussion in that context.

We are aware that the controversy on the ordained ministry is a central issue: for Rome requires the acceptance of its model of episcopacy, shared also by the Orthodox churches, in order for another church to be recognized as such. In fact Rome believes that only such Episcopal model 'guarantees' apostolic continuity. For Protestant Churches instead apostolic succession lives in the message of the Apostles, born by the Scriptures. The authenticity of the announcement cannot be 'guaranteed' by an institution, but relies on the presence of Christ in the Word and in sacrament, thanks to the Spirit. 'The Promise' is not a more unreliable, indistinct or poorer theological category as opposed to 'the Guarantee': rather it is what Scriptures offer Faith. The most obvious consequence of the disagreement on ministries, that is not sharing the Lord's Supper, will not easily be overcome in short nor in the medium term.

Some people express their disappointment regarding the prohibitions by the churches, by staging a so called 'Eucharistic disobedience' that they consider as a form of obedience to the Lord's commandment rather than to the hierarchies of the churches. Others express their protest by practicing the so called 'Eucharistic fasting' in an ecumenical perspective. Both actions have to be welcomed by all churches with respect and gratitude; at the same time it has to be said they do not involve the majority of the church members.

The situation must be faced with sobriety and determination. Sobriety: there is no point in developing a rhetoric of lamentation, which is not productive and can even become sickening. One should accept co-operation to the extent and on what is considered to be possible and take stock of what is considered to be vetoed or forbidden. Determination: without fuelling argument nor showing pretence, our churches are asking the Roman Church if it does not risk slowing things down by giving more importance to the dissent on the ecclesial ministry than to the strong communion around the core of Christian Faith.

As for dissent on ethical matters – specially bioethics, sexual ethics and the family – they do not only concern our dialogue with Rome, but also with other Evangelical Churches, we would like to stress that the decisions our Synods and assemblies have taken to date and the reflexions currently underway are not to be seen as an obsequious following of present day thinking. Quite the contrary, we are trying to obey God's commandment in Jesus as we understand it nowadays in listening to the Scriptures. We are aware that criticisms focus on the above and we receive it both with respect and with painful gratitude. In our eyes this means that we undertake to constantly verify our praxis and theology on the basis of the Scriptures and in dialoguing with other positions. We ought to ask ourselves if and to what degree our praxis and theology help to proclaim not only rights and freedom which are fundamental, and which others long for too, but also the message specifically entrusted to the Church of Jesus Christ, the freedom God's gives us so that it may be used in serving the world and in announcing the Kingdom. The climate of trust which Francis's Pontificate seems to have restored is contributing to the re-launching of collaboration between some of our churches and Italian Roman Catholicism. FCEI has promoted an important project on migratory flows, in cooperation with the Community of St Egidio; the FCEI and the Italian Episcopal Council (CEI in Italian) Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue have started a debate whose beginnings hold great promise.

3.2 Dialogue between Baptist, Methodist, Waldensian and Lutheran Churches

In the past few years there has been a slow but steady progress on the relationships among churches which belong to the Federation of Protestant Churches of Italy. Below there are some of the promising elements, which could require more in depth approaches.

3.2.1 The dialogue on baptisms has resumed among Italian Protestant Churches belonging to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe - Lutheran, Methodists and Waldensians – and the UCEBI member churches. There are three key points:

- a) the disagreement which still exists between churches that come from a paedobaptist tradition and the Baptist churches is not such to question consolidated cooperation especially that among Baptist, Methodists and Waldensians (BMW);
- b) the Churches are determined to deal with the disagreement and look for agreements which respect all traditions and beliefs, but also make it possible to overcome remaining difficulties also identified in the national and international debates on the 1990 BMW Document on mutual recognition. In this sense we are hoping to develop a renewed debate on the theology of baptism also within the single churches; and
- c) the ecumenical perspectives suggested so far in this area, also at an international level, have not elicited a unanimous agreement in spite of having indicated important paths. We have to accept debate is still ongoing.

3.2.2 The CPCE General Assembly held in Florence in September 2012 was a milestone for the cooperation between the Waldensian and Methodist Churches and the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Italy (CELI in Italian). Such a cooperation has continued for the preparation of the 5th Centenary of the Reformation in 2017, that clearly fully included Baptist Churches too.

Further developing the communion among the afore mentioned churches is one of the main aims for the next few years, both in Italy and internationally.

In the Italian context, the small Protestant churches urgently need to unite and coordinate. In the past decades the BMW process has laid a trail which is still current and holds promise in spite of moments of weariness. On the other hand, at long time CELI considers itself as an Italian church which enriches our Protestant landscape with the charismata of a great tradition and a particular, even institutional, relationship with German Protestantism.

In an international prospective Italian churches have been able to fulfil a modest but useful role which has promoted cooperation between CPCP and the Baptist tradition, an area European Protestants are still lacking behind in a problematic manner.

3.3 Dialogue with Pentecostal Churches

The document on baptisms was completed on the autumn of 2013 and sent to the executive boards of the relevant Churches to be examined and assessed. In the mean time, the document on the ministries was started: dialogue could be then considered complete unless a final document is drafted as some hope, discussing Christian ethics in general and specifically bioethics, homosexuality, divorce, abortion and others, well knowing that there are disagreements within and among churches.

The outlook for dialogue is promising in that all suggests it will be completed: the open questions concern the actual circulation of the documents resulting from the dialogue: two were published, one in 2002 and one in 2010. A third is expected in a more or less close future. The issue is how will they impact on the conscience of the Waldensians, Methodists and Pentecostals, will they make them more aware of their common belonging to the same protestant family.

Shared documents are undoubtedly useful, in fact necessary and must be circulated among the so called church *grassroots*. Clearly they are not enough in themselves: community meetings are needed, regional, national conferences are also called for as are exchanges of information and experiences, for instance on the press each one prints, joint services and possibly other shared initiatives.

This is the only way churches will start feeling they belong to each other and are called to answer the same vocation, in spite of their differences: we must bear witness of the Gospel as faithfully as possible to our people, while offering community spaces of Christian fraternity and freedom in both in God's service and in the service of others. So far it has not been possible to establish an official theological dialogue with the Assemblies of God in Italy, the most numerous and oldest Pentecostal Church in Italy.

4. Towards the Future

4.1 The celebrations of the 5th Centenary of the Reformation

The 2017 celebrations are a further encouragement first of all to deal with the major topic, that is to say the unity of Protestant churches. A definite commitment for a shared reflexion on the challenges which await the protestant rediscovery of the Gospel can contribute to the path leading to the unity of churches so that we may jointly bear witness.

We would like to put some forward proposals in this perspective: we are aware of their limits and they are to be seen as a contribution to the seriousness of the debate. We will be considering the difficulties we have come across so far, the various sensitivities of the churches and how fragile the ecumenical movement is in the current phase. At the same time, we intend to find new paths to create the conditions for a more promising future.

The Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian Churches warmly invite the Lutheran Church in Italy to join the path of a ecumenical reflexion at all levels. Not only Luther's message and his work, but the Lutheran tradition and especially the German one, have always played an important role in the development of Protestant conscience in Italy, especially through the

links the Waldensian Church had with the German protestant world. CELI's growing presence in Italy highlights the fact that it is time for a more comprehensive process of communion-building between Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and Waldensians. We believe the Jubilee of the Reformation could be a starting point for this process.

As for the discussion on baptism between Methodist and Waldensian Churches on the one side and Baptists (UCEBI) on the other, realistically international documents do not seem able to further develop the issues still left unanswered by the 1990 Italian text of mutual recognition. Even the dialogue resumed during a study seminar organised by the executive boards in March 2014 only gave preliminary results. We believe progress is hindered by the lingering of concerns and uncertainties which go beyond the exclusively theological plane. This is why a rigorous study of the theological issues can help identify the path and direction: the BMW conference held in March 2014 was a step forward in the right direction.

If other important dialogues, starting with the one with the Pentecostals, were carried out on a BMW basis and in future also included Lutherans this would make a common path much easier. Ecumenical projects developed in a Protestant framework have a yet untapped potential of a shared actual and operational communion among different churches.

The difficulties encountered so far in translating this into practical organisational results could feed into those from other churches who say the project is too abstract: the time has come to overcome the inertia which has encumbered us so far.

More united churches, concentrated on the witness of the Gospel and less on their specific identities could possibly deal with the great multicultural challenge in our country. Such a challenge redefines borders and changes priorities which does not mean it can be invoked as a means to shy from one's responsibilities which the past had handed down, but it does suggest we reconsider it with a new gaze.

It would be catastrophic from all points of view if we were to reproduce traditional splits in this field too: luckily our joint efforts and work bears witness to the fact it has been clearly understood.

By a happy coincidence, the present Document of Ecumenism is being discussed by churches throughout 2017, while celebrating the 500 years of the Protestant Reformation. The question then flows naturally: what is the relationship between Reformation, Ecumenism and the unity of the Church? The Reformation is often accused of having split the Western Church. In fact it is not so: the Reformation was the occasion and not the cause of the division. The Reformation did not divide the Church but revive it. Even the Roman Catholic Reformation which was of a very different nature and inspiration – and in many ways antithetic – would never have happened had it not been for the Protestant Reformation. This is why it is best to close the present remarks with an authoritative opinion on the matter.

'There can only be one church on earth. And this one church is alone the true church constituted by Jesus Christ. Church schism means church apostasy, unfaithfulness against the true church of Christ. The division of the church that came about in the Reformation can only be understood as a struggle for the true unity of the church. For this reason, the churches of the Reformation understand themselves as One Church on earth, not as splinter groups of individual Christians driven from the one church by personal conscience, nor are they individual manifestations of the one church. The Reformation was about the one, universal, holy church of Jesus Christ on earth'.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

In this spirit we offer the text for a shared reflection.