

TRIBUTE TO CARDINAL JOHANNES WILLEBRANDS

„An honourable and devoted servant of the Gospel and of the cause of Christian unity, a pioneer of the ecumenical movement“, so characterized the WCC’s general secretary Dr. Samuel Kobia Johannes Cardinal Willbrands, who died in Denekamp, the Netherlands, on 2 August 2006 at the age of 96.

Born September 4, 1909 in Bovenkarspel, the Netherlands, he was ordained a priest of the diocese of Harlem on May 26, 1934. After advanced studies at the Dominican University Angelicum in Rome he got a PhD in Philosophy for a dissertation on Henry Newman’s epistemological reflections on the knowledge of God through conscience.¹ From 1937-1945 he taught philosophy at the diocesan seminary of Warmond and after the war he was its director until 1960. In this period he got involved in the national and international ecumenical movement. In 1948 he became the president of the Dutch St. Willibrord Association, originally an apologetic foundation focussing on catechetical instruction for adult protestants wanting to join the Roman Catholic Church. Willebrands managed to change the concerns of this organisation in an explicit ecumenical approach of the other churches and started to work for that goal internationally. Together with the Dutch ecumenist Frans Thijssen, Willebrands organized a series of international consultations with church leaders and theologians of various countries in Eastern and Western Europe, out of which the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions was born, one of the first organized ecumenical endeavours from the part of the Roman Catholic Church. Leading figures of this Catholic Ecumenical Movement were, besides Willebrands and Thijssen, the French theologians Yves Congar and Christophe Dumont of the Centre Istina in Paris and Charles Boyer of the Centre *Unitas* in Rome together with the Ladies of Bethany of the *Foyer Unitas* in Rome. Willebrands sought close cooperation with Willem Adolf Visser ‘t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, established in Amsterdam 1948. Together with Congar and Dumont of the Istina-Centre in Paris, Willebrands won 1950 the confidence of Pope Pius XII for participation of Roman Catholic theologians and bishops in international ecumenical conferences like those of Faith and Order and of the World Council of Churches. From its early beginnings he laid contacts with the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC at Bossey, Switzerland and with various leading figures of the ecumenical movement, like the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras and the Director of Faith and Order Lukas Vischer.

In 1960 Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Bea asked him to become the secretary of the newly erected Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. In this capacity he organized close contacts with the Churches of the East, brought an official representation of Roman Catholic delegates to the WCC’s Assembly at New Delhi in 1961 and invited official observers from all major Christian confessional traditions to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), whom he hosted and coached to find their way and have their voices heard in the conciliar deliberations.² He had an important lead in the preparation of the Council’s decrees and declarations, especially the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* and on the Eastern Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, the declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae* and on the Church’s relation to the non-Christian religions *Nostra Aetate*. He was deeply involved in the drafting process of the Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and on The Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. Together with the staff of the SPCU and the observers of the other churches he had an eye on all other

¹ J. Willebrands, *De denkleer van kardinaal Newman en haar toepassing op de kennis van God door het geweten*, unpublished dissertation, Rome 1937.

² Cf. J. Koet, L. Galema en M. Van Assendelft, *Vuurhaard van eenheid. Veertig jaar Foyer Unitas 1952-1992*, Fratelli Palombi, Rome 1996.

texts of the Council and suggested many amendments in order to bring the texts in line with the ecumenical principles set out in *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Vatican II certainly was his finest hour and he remained faithful to its spirit until the end of his life.

In 1964 he became titular bishop of Mauriana and in 1969 the Cardinal-president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity as the successor of Cardinal Bea. One of his great achievements was the encounter of Patriarch Athenagoras with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1965 and the lifting up of the mutual excommunications of the year 1054, the beginning of the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. He was the main architect of the network of bilateral dialogues of the Roman Catholic Church with the Christian World Communions and of the RCC's participation in the multilateral ecumenical dialogue of Faith and Order from 1967 onwards. Willebrands second great achievement was the Ecumenical Directory of 1967, providing rules for local ecumenism, followed by the Motu Proprio *Matrimonia Mixta*, issued by Pauls VI in 1970. It meant great relief for confessionally mixed couples that were no longer seen as potential candidates for apostasy but as pioneers of the ecumenical movement, carefully to be received and coached pastorally in both their confessional communities. He was also the co-founder of the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in 1965. Co-chairing this group, he fostered the growing collaboration of the RCC and the WCC and for a while supported plans for full Roman Catholic membership of the World Council. In 1969 he prepared the visit of Paul VI to the WCC's headquarters in Geneva, where he had to accept, that for Rome, as Paul VI expressed himself at that occasion, the Petrine role of its bishop was considered to be a too great stumbling-block to become simply a member-church among others under the conciliar structures of the WCC. Proposals to change these structures failed at the Central Committee Meeting in Utrecht 1972.

This year 1972 marks a certain stagnation in the ecumenical advance worldwide, caused by a sharp instruction on the admission of non-Catholic Christians to the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist and by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's condemnation of the *Memorandum on the Ministry*, published by a number of German Academic Institutes for Ecumenism.³ The Roman Curia started to fear the consequences of the spirit of *aggornamento* of Vatican II and the demands for further steps of renewal, like those proposed by several national pastoral synods like those of the Netherlands, Great Britain and Germany and by leading Roman Catholic theologians cooperating in the journal and consortium of *Concilium*. A certain polarisation and regression came to the fore, caused by the threat of conservative and progressive schisms and by the rather hesitating attitude of Paul VI and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of Greece, who accused the Roman Catholic Church of continuing uniatism and proselytism. The patriarch of Moscow withdraw his agreement on mutual admission to communion of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians officially declared possible by *Unitatis Redintegratio* and the *Ecumenical Directory* of 1967. It must have been a painful time for Cardinal Willebrands, but he managed to uphold the ongoing theological dialogue and the support of local ecumenism, by stimulating Roman Catholic participation in regional, national and local councils of Churches. On this topic the SCPU issued an important statement in 1975. It is still the most daring statement on the ecumenical commitment of the Roman Catholic Church as apastoral priority in the life of the faithful.

In 1975 Cardinal Willebrands was sent on a mission to the Netherlands, being appointed the archbishop of Utrecht by Pope Paul VI as the successor of Cardinal Alfrink. In the seven years that followed he had to combine his episcopal task in Utrecht with his

³ *Reform und Anerkennung kirchlicher Ämter: Ein Memorandum der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ökumenischer Universitätsinstitute*, Kaiser, Munich-Mainz, 1973.

ecumenical duties as the Preseident of the SPCU in Rome. He tried to reconcile the quarreling parties in his home country and the lack of consensus and cooperation within the bishops' conference and asked the help of Rome's new bishop John Paul II, elected 1978, for a special synod with the Dutch bishops, held in Rome in 1980. He had to admit, very soon after the synod, that he did not succeed. In 1983 he returned to his post in Rome, where he continued working for the ecumenical cause until 1989, when Cardinal Cassidy took over. In this period especially he tried hard to improve the Roman Catholic-Jewish relations, which had been foremost on his agenda since 1974, when he became the president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. The recognition of the State of Israel by the Vatican in 1993 and an intense dialogue-programme were his main achievements for which he was honoured by the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCCJ) on several occasions. Taking ecumenical dialogue very seriously, he had a certain ecumenical strategy in mind, that gave priority to the restoration of Christian unity with the Eastern Churches, to be followed by communion with the Churches of the Anglican Communion and after that with the Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed Church Communities, meanwhile not neglecting dialogue with the upcoming Pentecostal churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Seventh Day Adventists and many others. He remained faithful to the model, proclaimed by Lambert Beaudoin and the Belgian Cardinal Mercier before World War II already, for Roman-Catholic-Anglican communion to be restored: *Reunited, not Absorbed* and defended, on several occasions, the idea of a "communion of communions", considering the existing historical Christian Confessions as in principle legitimate "types" (*tupoi, ritus*) or expressions of the Christian faith, provided they were ready to accept the Petrine ministry of the bishop of Rome as the Servant of the visible unity of the Church of Christ.

In his late days, when the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was itself promoted into the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, he witnessed both successes and failures of his lifework. The generally positive reception of the Lima-text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry issued by Faith and Order in 1982 to which he had committed John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Bishopsconferences all over the world, must have given him hope of rapid progress in ecumenical relations worldwide. So did the growing agreement on the understanding of the Doctrine of Justification with proleptic agreements of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Consultation and of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic International Dialogue, finalized in 1993 and 1999 respectively. The encyclical *Ut unum sint*, promulgated by John Paul II in 1997, may be considered the summary of Willebrands' ecumenical hopes and policy, in fact his ecumenical heritage, a pontifical seal on a lifetime's work.

Negative experiences and frustrations he must have felt through the adjournment of the Roman-Catholic Orthodox Dialogue Commission's deliberations in 1991 after the Turnover in Eastern Europe, due to Orthodox suspicion with regard to the Vatican policy regarding Uniatism and the re-installation of Roman Catholic dioceses on so-called canonical territory of the Orthodox Churches. Perhaps even more he was worried about the decisions of the Reformed, the Lutheran, the Anglican and most other Protestant member-churches of the World Council to accept the ordination of women, still considered unnegotiable by both the Orthodox Churches and the Vatican. Not unlike Moses, Willebrands could only look at the promised land of visible unity of the one Church of Christ from a far distance, but he never lost his confidence in the final goal, because it was based on what he called "a spiritual ecumenism", a movement inspired by the Holy Spirit and to be achieved in prayer, love and truth according to his episcopal device: "doing the truth in love" (Eph. 4,15).

Some would say, however, that he perhaps has been too patient and too much giving in to conservative parts of the Roman Curia and its Eastern Orthodox counterparts to really further promote the Ecumenical Advance he had initiated at the Second Vatican Council and during the first Years of his Assignment as the SPCU's President. He himself was always

convinced, that not human endeavours, but only the work of the Holy Spirit could fulfill the goal and dream of one Lord, one faith, one baptism in the visible unity of all in each place which governed his life of study, diplomacy and prayer.

In 1997 he left Rome and lived in retirement in the Convent of the Franciscan Sisters of Denekamp, the Netherlands, where he spent his old age, still very much interested in the ecumenical movement and the relations with Judaism and where he died 1996. A solemn funeral liturgy was celebrated at Utrecht Cathedral, presided by Cardinal Kasper and Cardinal Simonis at August 7, representatives of all main Christian traditions and of the World Council of Churches present: a praying tribute to a spiritual man of great standing in the Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century. To end with Sam Kobia's tribute to Cardinal Willebrands: "The World Council of Churches, remembering with deep gratitude its close relationship to this pioneer of the ecumenical movement, gives thanks to God for the witness of Johannes Gerardus Maria Cardinal Willebrands, faithful servant of Christ and of Christ's will for the unity of the Church."

Anton Houtepen