

Ecumenical Conference “Parables of Communion” - 19.10.2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the letter to the Ephesians, the author develops a vision of the unity of the church, which has inspired ecumenical movement throughout the centuries.

The text culminates in the famous formula: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all.” This vision is prepared by St. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians, that may well be a spiritual guidance for our ecumenical gathering here in the Monastery of the Holy Cross. “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family (household) in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Translation: New International Version)

What an encouragement for those who seek unity. And what a wonderful example for the insight of the Ancient Church, that prayer precedes doctrine (*lex orandi – lex credendi*). And wouldn’t it be great if we could explore the endless space that this prayer creates for theological reflection?!

Indeed, we would recognize that God is the father of all and that the different households are all embedded in the one household of God. The different names we carry as individuals, as nations, churches or religious communities they are all names written in the book of life, which is in God’s hands and not in our hands.

Certainly, as our prayer reminds us, this insight is nothing we can gain by ourselves. Faith cannot be acquired it is a gift. It needs the power of the Holy Spirit to open our inner being for God’s glory. Unfortunately the word “glory” does not fully reflect the meaning of the underlying words: the Greek “doxa” and the Hebrew “kabod”. This means the effects of the full presence of God: the full “weight” and the full “radiance” of the divine.

As we know from other biblical texts: being exposed to the full weight and radiance of God would kill us. Nobody can see and meet God without mediation. We consider Christ to be that mediator who makes use of words together with elements like water, bread and wine as media of faith.

Therefore we can say: whenever the Holy Spirit opens us for the presence of Christ, then we begin to give God “full weight” in our lives. Instead of wanting to be little “stars” ourselves we let God “shine”. Christian churches and communities therefore are all “lightweight” associations and “fading lights”, unless they reflect God’s glory.

This, as Paul’s prayer reminds us, is the condition of the possibility to discover the space that the Christian faith opens up for us. It is interesting that Paul needs a spatial metaphor to express this thought. Being “One in Christ” is not the elimination of differences, is not a condensed and uniform universe of faith. Rather we are placed in a spiritual universe that cannot be limited. It is wider and longer, higher and deeper, than all our imaginations of Christ.

God's weight and radiation is without measure and surpasses all our knowledge. The divine in its fullness cannot be captured and administrated. It cannot be locked into one social form of being Church. All our liturgies and theologies, all our legal arrangements and spiritual aspirations are just explorations of the immeasurable universe of faith in Christ.

But every social form of being Church or evangelical community can contribute to the most urgent task that St. Paul's prayer calls for: "to him be glory" – "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!"

This is what we are called to do: giving God weight and let God shine. In praying these words, we may have very different imaginations what that means. And they may also differ from imaginations that the generations before us had.

But in praying together "to him be glory", we express that we are "one in Christ". Whatever ecumenical agreements we may find, whatever form our unity may take on, this prayer will still be ahead of us – "throughout all generations, for ever and ever". Amen