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FROM THE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES TO THE FORUM OF CHRISTIANS: A RECENT DEVELOPMENT IN ECUMENISM

Abstract: Bishop Andrzej Siemieniewski, is a delegate of the Polish Bishops' Conference for maintaining contacts with the Polish Christian Forum and has been an active participant in the meetings for 8 years. The following reflections are based on this long experience enriched by participation in the Fourth Global Assembly of the Christian Global Forum (GG4) in Accra, Ghana (April 16-19, 2024). The text develops first the communication problems between the "old (historical) churches" and "new (Evangelical / Independent / Pentecostal / African Instituted churches) in the global (Christian) village". Then a development of the Global Christian Forum out of the World Council of Churches is presented, after which a Polish institution is introduced, the Polish Christian Forum – as a new Ecumenical Opening. To help our understanding of this new vision a traditional idea is proposed, of the "three streams".

Keywords: Polish Christian Forum, Interchurch Partnership, Ecumenism, Global Christian Forum, World Council of Churches.

1. FROM THE DENOMINATIONAL REGIONS TO THE GLOBAL (CHRISTIAN) VILLAGE

Christians coming from different denominational traditions were customarily identified with their assigned regions. Thus, Orthodox Christians were associated with "the East", with Russia and Ukraine; Anglicans – of course – with England, "the West" with northern Germany and Scandinavia was associated with

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Lutheranism, whereas Italy, Spain and Poland were considered to be Catholic countries. It was somehow more difficult to define “spheres of influence” outside Europe so clearly. But even so, everyone knew that Latin America was a Catholic continent, and Brazil was the largest Catholic country in the world; North America was generally “Protestant” territory (whatever one thought of the precision of the term “Protestant”). All this has undergone a radical change in recent times, and the process is accelerating more and more. Members of various churches, Christian communities and interfaith organizations are taking joint action to solve social problems, the challenges of secularization, the crises of national minorities and even persecution. Thus they meet together over the borders, between continents and through different denominations.

Globalization, as a result of new mass-media, mobility of people, and mass tourism, has brought about geographic and cultural proximity of various Christian denominations. Disciples of Jesus from different historical traditions, who previously lived in separate worlds, today meet on a daily basis, and their worlds interpenetrate each other¹. Yes, there has been a formal platform for Christian unity for nearly a century now in the form of the World Council of Churches (WCC, founded in 1948). However, as the name suggests, the basic logic of agreement here is the common understanding on the significance of ecclesiality: after all, the Council is a Council of Churches starting by finding such partners that can be mutually recognized as “churches”. They were sought where the history of recent centuries indicated, in the post-Reformation current, not shying away from dialogue with the Orthodox sector and Catholicism. For those who had less confidence in denominations steeped in centuries of history, the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Pentecostal Community were formed, but those remained outside the WCC. So, there was no suitable place where representatives of all major Christian churches and communities, denominational currents and traditions, and international Christian organizations could meet and sit down for discussions around one table².

2. FROM THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES TO THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM

Meanwhile, however, another sector with its own specificity, tradition and spiritual dynamics has unexpectedly arrived:

¹ Cfr. M. WILKINSON. *Globalization*. In: M. WILKINSON, C. AU, J. HAUSTEIN, T.M. JOHNSON. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*. Boston: Brill Leiden 2021.

² Cfr. A. PERZYŃSKI. *O Idei Polskiego Forum Chrześcijańskiego*. “Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne” 25 (2016) no 4 p. 7-12. <<https://www.academia.edu/31784084/>> [access: 01.04.2024]; cfr. M. ROBRA. *The World Council of Churches and Pentecostals*. “The Ecumenical Review” 71 (2019) no 1-2 p. 161-174. <<https://www.academia.edu/85473244/>> [access: 01.04.2024].

Pentecostalism has grown, from its beginnings at the dawn of the twentieth century, to become the second largest segment of world Christianity, right after the Roman Catholic Church³.

One of the reasons for the widespread lack of awareness of the scale and pace of Pentecostal transformation is the movement's lack of universal leaders. The 16th century Reformation was associated with great theological leaders: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli. By contrast, the "Pentecostal Reformation" of our time, of no small scale, has a million anonymous leaders: pastors from the villages and from the suburbs, evangelizers from the neighbourhoods. Thus, it is not clearly associated with any recognizable names. Along with the (probably) 800 million Christians with Pentecostal spirituality, new ecclesial challenges came about⁴. Their faith communities rather often cannot be described using categories drawn from either the Catholic-Orthodox debates over the 11th century schism or the 16th century polemics over the Catholic-Protestant discussions⁵.

On the part of the World Council of Churches, there was a response to the changing religious landscape in the world. It was a ground-breaking initiative to create an expanded meeting space for dialogue and spiritual exchange. It was proposed to create a forum beyond the institutional structures of the Council. This is how the Global Christian Forum (GCF) came about, established in 1998 at the initiative of the then secretary general of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser⁶. This forum creates new opportunities for dialogue: from the name itself it is clear that the difficult theological issues related to the debate over who is "the church" and to what extent, while important, have been sent elsewhere, to be taken up by relevant committees of theologians, experts and ecclesial authorities on other occasions. The efficiency of such a formula has been confirmed by successive GCF general assemblies, the first in Limuru (Kenya in 2007), the second in Manado (Indonesia in 2011), the third in Bogota (Columbia in 2018) and the fourth in Accra (Ghana in 2024)⁷. With such a meeting format, it is also easier for Catholic institutions to participate: the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (DPCU) was involved in organizing the Ghana meeting, as well as the previous

³ J.P. STRAUB. *The Pentecostalization of global Christianity and the Challenge for Cessationism*. "Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal" 21(2016).

⁴ Cfr. T.M. JOHNSON. *Pentecostals/Charismatics by Country, Region, Continent and Globe*. In: M. WILKINSON [ET AL.]. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*; cfr. A. STEWART. *Statistics*. In: M. WILKINSON [ET AL.]. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*.

⁵ Cfr. M. WILKINSON. *Introduction*. In: IDEM [ET AL.]. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*.

⁶ Cfr. A. PERZYŃSKI. *O idei Polskiego Forum Chrześcijańskiego* p. 8.

⁷ Cfr. *Third Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum, Bogota, April*. "The Ecumenical Review" vol. 70 (2018) no 2 p. 380-383; cfr. S. ROWLAND JONES. *The Global Christian Forum, a narrative history: Limuru, Manado and onwards*. "Transformation" 30 (2013) no 4 p. 226-242.; cfr. A. TAYLOR. *A Gathering of the Global Church*. "Sojourners Magazine" 53 (2024) no 2 p 9-10.

ones. Participants were catalogued according to a geographical and cultural keys, and not necessarily according to traditional ecclesiological concepts. The Accra gathering, according to the organizers' description, brought together

Leaders from all the major streams of world Christianity. Half of them from the «older» Churches (Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) and half from the «younger» Churches (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Independent).

Note the new categories of ecclesiological description: “leaders” are gathered, “streams” are represented, churches can be “older” or “younger”, the category of “Independent Churches”, unknown in earlier theological tradition, appears. And the primary method of communication is “Faith Story sharing”⁸.

3. POLISH CHRISTIAN FORUM: A NEW ECUMENICAL OPENING

The ecumenical movement, after years of post-conciliar euphoria, has reached a phase of stagnation: a number of discussion bodies have met, quite a few important documents have been signed – and it is not really clear what to do next. One way of continuation seems to be doctrinal indifference on the part of liberal representatives of the various Christian denominations: since the articles of faith are a conventional and relative thing anyway, what is the difference between us, after all?

In this context, the emergence of the Pentecostal movement can be welcomed as the first spiritual movement that is truly all-Christian. The charismatic renewal in its manifold manifestations included a large percentage of members of all Christian denominations. The unity they feel is not formalized and imposed from above, it is a fellowship lived from below as a brotherhood in faith – to the extent that this is possible with the divisions existing among the disciples of Jesus Christ.

As Fr. A. Kobylinski rightly pointed out, the dialogue between historic churches and communities (Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Orthodox) is no longer a problem today. Rather, it is an accomplished result. The real challenge is to establish and sustain relationships with the whole group or “galaxy” of these charismatic, Pentecostal and Evangelical communities⁹.

This challenge has lived to see one more attempted response in the form of the Global Christian Forum. The value thereof is referred to by Raimundo César Barreto¹⁰ as one of the signs of hope, reporting the following facts: The Global Christian Forum is an ecumenical initiative derived from the World Council

⁸ Cfr. P.D. NEUMANN. *Experience*. In: M. WILKINSON [ET AL.]. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*.

⁹ Cfr. A. KOBYLINSKI. *The Global Pentecostalization of Christianity and its Ethical Consequences* p. 103. <<https://www.academia.edu/30076534/>> [access: 01.04.2024].

¹⁰ R.C. BARRETO. *Evangélicos e pobreza no Brasil: Encontros e respostas éticas* (Portuguese Edition). Editora Recriar, March 4, 2020. Kindle Edition 3824-3827, 3834-3840.

of Churches, but in a less institutionalized format, it is more organic and independent, instead. The Forum was conceived as a place to include the voices of the “emerging” Christianity – including the many Pentecostal and independent churches whose explosion is changing the face of faith in the world. The Forum’s methodology emphasizes personal experience through “storytelling”, which supports interpersonal connections on a less formalized, more profound level. The relational nature of interaction in this scenario is certainly one of the valuable innovations the Forum has to offer to the ecumenical movement in the context of radical changes in the face of Christianity. The Global Christian Forum treats ecumenism as a common way of life and less as a common discussion room. Each time leaders of different traditions meet, they feel, above all, called to learn from one another¹¹.

The Forum’s history to-date has attracted little attention from researchers and (professional) ecumenists, including from the wider public. The media, after all, are more interested in stories of conflict and violence than in stories of understanding and mutual cooperation, as in the Forum meetings. Certainly, it will be a great challenge to make a description of such (positive) initiatives on a global scale, but they are easier to be spotted in local and regional experiences.

It is worth mentioning that the Global Christian Forum has also lived to see a Polish version – it is the Polish Christian Forum (PFCh, Polskie Forum Chrześcijańskie). For several years, I have personally had the opportunity to meet regularly on this level with representatives of the Polish Ecumenical Council, the Evangelical Alliance, the Roman Catholic Church structures and academic environment.

The reasons of the Forum’s existence were very aptly formulated by Fr. Andrzej Perzynski who started this initiative on Polish soil in this way:

In the spirit of John 17:21: «That they may all be one [...] so that the world may believe that you have sent me», and on the basis of our faith in a unifying God (2 Corinthians 5:18-21), the Forum has the following goals:

1. To build a spiritual community based on practical cooperation, prayer and implementation of joint projects. Forum participants can get to know each other better, eliminate or minimize mutual prejudices and stereotypes, broaden their faith horizons and deepen themselves spiritually.
2. The Forum focuses more on establishing ties and deepening relations between churches than on conducting theological dialogue and developing texts of theological consensus. The Forum’s working method is to create mutual relationships and emphasize the importance of worship in joint activities.
3. The participants of the Forum wish to create an open space where representatives of a broad spectrum of Christian churches, theological colleges and inter-church organizations, confessing the Triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect

¹¹ *Revisoning Christian Unity: The Global Christian Forum*. Ed. H. van Beek. Regnum Books 2009.

in his divinity and humanity, can gather to promote mutual understanding and address common challenges¹².

On such a basis the initiators of the PFCh, who constitute its Standing Committee, started their cooperation. The local expression of the Forum is formed according to the global model. Globally, the present form of the Forum is structured by the cooperation of the four pillars: 1) World Council of Churches, 2) Evangelical Alliance, 3) Pontifical Dicastery for Promoting the Christian Unity, 4) Pentecostal World Fellowship. An so, in the local Polish version, the cooperation is among the Polish Ecumenical Council, Evangelical Alliance (in Poland), and the Roman-Catholic Church (a delegate of the Polish Bishops' Conference); the cooperation platform is enriched by the participation of representatives of three Polish academic institutions: Christian Theological Academy (ChAT – interdenominational); Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (UKSW – Catholic); School of Theology and Social Sciences (WSTS – Pentecostal). As the secretary of the Forum Rev. Andrzej Perzynski was elected, a Roman Catholic theologian and priest.

4. A NEW INSTITUTION REQUIRES A NEW VISION

It seems that the Global Christian Forum initiative is an implementation of intuitions that have been present in theology for some time. Many years earlier, a text was written by Richard Lovelace: *The Three Streams, One River?*¹³ Inspired by a passage from Psalm 46 (“The branches of the river cheer up the city of God”, Psalm 46:5), the author postulated some way of integrating the spiritual riches of the three streams: Catholicism/Orthodoxy – Protestantism – Pentecostalism. It was based on the earlier intuitions of Lesslie Newbigin, who in 1953 divided the great historical heritage of Christianity into forms running side by side from the very beginning: the “Catholic” view (salvation mediated sacramentally through ecclesiastical institutions); the “Protestant” view (salvation mediated by the Word) and the “Pentecostal” view (salvation mediated prophetically)¹⁴.

The spiritual heritage of Christianity would thus be an intertwining of three historical “streams”: Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal. Although typically expressed in denominational divisions, they are not identical with them: for example, the Pentecostal stream manifests itself in the Catholic (and Protestant) Charismatic Renewal. It is worth noting that St. Augustine interpreted this verse of Psalm 45

¹² A. PERZYŃSKI. *O idei Polskiego Forum Chrześcijańskiego* p. 10.

¹³ Cfr. R. LOVELACE. *The Three Streams, One River?* “Charisma” 8 (1984). <<https://www.academia.edu/38664355/>> [access: 01.04.2024].

¹⁴ Cfr. L. NEWBIGIN. *The household of God. Lectures on the nature of the church*. London 1953 p. 198.

in an analogous way: “What are these currents of the river?” he asked. “Well, such streams of water flowed from within Paul, Peter, John and the other Apostles”, he answered. And

[...] since such waters flowed from a single river, then numerous currents cheer up the city of God (*multi impetus fluminis laetificant civitatem Dei*)¹⁵.

There is no shortage of further impulses developing this line of thought and action, such as the important recent ecumenical address by Mgr. Emilio Alvarez, who combines in his ministry the Orthodox tradition with the Pentecostal revival of recent decades¹⁶. Some even envisage the future of ecumenism in the form of such a “Forum”¹⁷.

The “three-streams idea” is expressed somewhat differently by D. Koukoura:

[...] three major streams of modern Christianity, firstly, the ecumenical movement as represented by the WCC, the Pentecostals and the Evangelicals, secondly, the African Independent Churches and then various Regional Ecumenical Organizations and, finally, Christian Associations¹⁸.

The stress is laid obviously on the Anglo-American Protestant tradition of the last three centuries. Which interpretation will prevail in the future, only God can tell.

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¹⁵ AUGUSTINE. *Opere*. <http://www.augustinus.it/italiano/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm> (Ps 45,8; v. 5). [access: 25.04.2024]; cfr. R. SLY, W. BOOSAHD. *Convergence Worship Movement*. In: *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*. Vol. II. Ed. R.E. Webber. Nashville, TN: Star Song 1994 p. 139.

¹⁶ Cfr. E. ALVAREZ. *Pentecostal Orthodoxy: Toward an Ecumenism of the Spirit*. IVP Academic. Imprint of: InterVarsity Press. Illinois: Downers Grove 2022. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ Cfr. S. HÖSCHELE. *Das Global Christian Forum: ‘Forum’ als Paradigma für die Zukunft der Ökumene?* In: *Ökumene der Zukunft: Hermeneutische Perspektiven und die Suche nach Identität [Future Ecumenism: Hermeneutical Perspectives and the Search for Identity]*. Beihefte zur *Ökumenischen Rundschau* 81. Eds. S. Lakkis, S. Höschele, S. Schardien. Frankfurt a. M.: Lembeck 2008 p. 1. <<https://www.academia.edu/1752775/>> [access: 01.04.2024].

¹⁸ D. KOUKOURA. *Global Christian Forum – Its Contribution to the Ecumenical Movement*. 2018 p. 1. <<https://www.academia.edu/37816275/>> [access: 01.04.2024].

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OD RADY KOŚCIOŁÓW DO FORUM CHRZEŚCIJAN: NAJNOWSZY ROZWÓJ EKUMENIZMU

Streszczenie: Bp Andrzej Siemieniewski jest delegatem Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. utrzymywania kontaktów z Polskim Forum Chrześcijańskim i od ośmiu lat aktywnie uczestniczy w spotkaniach. Poniższe refleksje opierają się na tym długim doświadczeniu, wzbogaconym udziałem w IV Światowym Zgromadzeniu Chrześcijańskiego Globalnego Forum (GG4) w Akrze w Ghanie (16-19 kwietnia 2024). Tekst rozwija najpierw problemy komunikacyjne pomiędzy „starymi (historycznymi) kościołami” i „nowymi (ewangelickimi / niezależnymi / zielonoświątkowymi / afrykańskimi kościołami) w globalnej (chrześcijańskiej) wiosce”. Następnie przedstawia rozwój Światowego Forum Chrześcijańskiego ze Światowej Rady Kościołów, po czym wprowadza polską instytucję, Polskie Forum Chrześcijańskie – jako nowe otwarcie ekumeniczne. Aby pomóc nam zrozumieć tę nową wizję, zaproponowano tradycyjną koncepcję „trzech strumieni”.

Słowa kluczowe: Polskie Forum Chrześcijańskie, partnerstwo międzykościelne, ekumenizm, Globalne Forum Chrześcijańskie, Światowa Rada Kościołów.