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**Protect the Earth that God Loves –
in the context of different church traditions**

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In 2013 the Christian Council of Sweden (CCS) published a booklet as a response to the challenge of climate changes. The booklet was written by a small working group with representatives from the four church traditions that are parts in the CCS: Orthodox/Eastern, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist/Free Churches. Writing the text was a learning experience for the group, trying to unite around a common text in the understanding that differences could either be part of a wider and fuller picture or parts of theological reasoning that must be left unreconciled. This paper presents the text and describes the process of discussion of alternative wordings.

1 Introduction

Can churches speak with a common voice when addressing important issues in society? What could happen if churches try to formulate a united position on the issue of care of creation? This paper describes a process in context of the Christian Council of Sweden.

1.1 A new booklet from the Christian Council of Sweden

The Christian Council of Sweden (CCS) is a fellowship of 26 member churches organized in four church families. The Roman Catholic Church works together with the 15 members of the Orthodox/Eastern family, the four members of Lutheran family and the six churches included in what is called the Free Church family. The council was organized in this form in 1992, and from 2006 all the churches are full members (in 2006 the Pentecostals and two more denominations changed from being associated members to being full members). Almost all Christian denominations in Sweden belong to the CCS.¹

During the last decade the CCS has published a number of booklets of different kinds. Some are translations of ecumenical documents, some are statements on contemporary issues, and some are collections of articles where representatives from the churches have written about a specific subject from the perspective of his/her church tradition. Just before I started as

Director of Ecumenical Diaconia/Church and Society, a booklet on Peace had been produced, closely connected to the process in the World Council of Churches that was developing the theme of Justice and Peace for the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Jamaica in 2011.²

In the first meeting in 2011 of The Working group for Climate and Sustainable Development,³ I was introduced to the task of writing a booklet on the challenge of climate change. The board of the CCS had recently published a statement on the issue, and wanted a more carefully-argued position to support further discussions in the field.

A small group of three persons was organised to start the process of writing. When a first draft had been written, two more people/contributors were added in order to have representation from all four church families. After a number of meetings, a final text was accepted and presented, first to the working group and then to the board of the CCS which approved the text in its meeting of 6 December 2012. The text was released at a press conference and a public seminar on 11 February 2013. (Even Swedish TV was present, unfortunately not to cover our event but to interview the Catholic bishop of Sweden about the resignation of Pope Benedict XV that was made public at the time our seminar was taking place.) In May 2015 an English version of the booklet *Protect the Earth that God Loves* was printed and published in connection with a new public statement made by the annual meeting of the CCS.⁴

1.2 Protect the Earth that God Loves – a presentation

The booklet of 24 pages has five chapters. In the Introduction, *The Cry of the Earth*, some basic facts are given about changes in the climate and the challenges that face humanity. Chapter 2, *Theology: God's Beloved Creation*, develops a theology that undergirds and supports the Christian reflection. Subtitles are: God's continuing work, Creation salvation and consummation in Jesus Christ, Some other relevant theological themes, God's beloved creation and the role of mankind, and A Christian holistic vision. Chapter 3 *Climate and Global Development* discusses issues of sustainable development, and Chapter 4 addresses the issue of *Climate Justice*. The concluding chapter, *An Enduring Hope*, tries to describe and motivate why Christians still can have hope in the context of so much threat.

The first four chapters all end with challenges to both the churches and the political sphere. Under the headings *Therefore we want*, *Therefore we oppose*

and *Therefore we encourage each other*, a number of tasks, convictions and challenges are mentioned.

2 Unity and tensions

The two chapters on Climate and Development and Climate Justice were fairly easy to agree on. We decided that facts and good and fair presentations are important. We consulted experts in the field and asked them for comments on the preliminary texts. We wanted the text to be informed by science.

For the first and last chapters the discussions focused on how alarmist the presentation should be. We agreed on a text that referred to statements from the reports of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and to discussions of Planetary Boundaries from the Stockholm Environmental Institute (SEI). We developed the theme of Christian hope speaking in the context of despair. We wanted the text to be hope-inspired.

The most extensive discussions on the text were made for the second chapter, on the theological basis for work on climate. We wanted the text to be faith-motivated.

2.1 Phase 1

The first draft was written by two Lutherans. Their text started with God the creator, and developed the themes of creation as God's gift and man as steward and caretaker of the earth. Man has been entrusted the huge responsibility of taking care of this earth, a task he has fulfilled with both good and bad results. The situation of the climate is one sign that he has followed his own more selfish agenda, rather than looking for the welfare of all. The two Lutherans described a holistic view of salvation where God's salvation includes not only human beings; salvation of human beings is part of the salvation of the whole creation. Chapter 1 of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae was quoted to support this idea, that salvation of mankind is part of the salvation of the whole universe. Biblical references were given as support for theological statements.

The small group of three discussed their texts and made a number of revisions. Some quotations from *An Ecumenical Call for Just Peace*⁵ and

from a statement from the British organisation Operation Noah⁶ were added. A revised first draft was ready.

The initial reaction from the Orthodox representative on this revised first draft was quite negative. He found it difficult to “add to a text which is so dominated by the Western Reformation theology based on sola scriptura”. Compared to the usual Orthodox theological reasoning, the text was not enough based in Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology, and he found the eschatological perspective to be too weak. In his understanding, salvation should be more closely related to the Church and to the transformation of the human being in the Holy Spirit. He also noted the absence of references to relevant texts from the Church Fathers. He suggested that it might be a better alternative to present the traditions as separate visions, for the sake of being able to develop the theology of each tradition in its own traditional way.

We discussed his proposal and agreed that we wanted to continue in the vision of producing a united text rather than a number of texts. The Orthodox representative was asked to write a text from his perspective, focusing on perspectives and areas that seemed to be less well developed in the first draft.

And so he did, developing the aspects mentioned above. A special focus was the place of the Church which—living by the consequences of the life, death and resurrection of the second Adam—is pictured as the instrument of transforming this world into its final goal, God’s eternal kingdom. As a part of this history, the human being is on his way to transformation and fulfilment. Man is a microcosmos of the whole universe. This process is liturgically manifested in the life of the Church. A key concept is ontology rather than ethics, being rather than doing. The healing of creation starts with the transformation of man, the microcosmos, into being what he is planned to become. The Orthodox representative also suggested that the concept of man as king, priest and prophet should be used.

The representative from the Roman Catholic tradition was a Swedish-speaking theologian living in Germany. He gave his reactions via email, but unfortunately it was not possible to arrange a meeting in which we all took part. He was happy with most of the text, and gave a few comments and suggestions, and some of them were included in later versions of the text.

2.2 Phase 2

Following the decision to try to write a text that all of us could “find satisfying and recognisable from my perspective”, one of us wrote a second draft that incorporated the ideas and reasoning from the first draft and the statement from the Orthodox theologian. The second draft was a shortened, edited version of draft 1 and included a few paragraphs starting “From an Orthodox point of view...” or “According to Orthodox tradition...”.

When this draft was circulated in the small writing group, and among the members of the climate group, most of the reactions were positive. However, one person wondered why there were specific paragraphs presenting the Orthodox view, which might imply that the rest of the text is stating a common Christian theology. Are not some of the statements in fact typical of Protestant or Roman-Catholic reasoning and should be introduced as such? This was an important reminder to the Lutherans in the writing group that some of their reasoning was also coming out of a specific theological tradition.

The Orthodox representative proposed some more additions and changes in order that a reader from the Orthodox tradition should feel at home with the text. He wanted to stress that the protestant Sola Scriptura should be balanced by the Orthodox and Roman-Catholic start in the Tradition of the Church (“do not forget the teaching of the Fathers!”). He also wanted the Orthodox understanding of salvation as an ontological healing of man to be more clearly stated.

A third draft was produced out of these comments.

2.3 Phase 3

The third draft was presented in a meeting with representatives from the churches. They were asked to react on the text.

A new problem was introduced when the representatives from the churches discovered that the writing group consisted of five men and no women. (The plan was that the Roman Catholic should be a woman, but it did not work out as planned.) They also noticed the absence of quotations from women and references to the situation for women and children, as well as lack of feminist theological perspectives.

A consequence of this was that a woman theologian with expert knowledge in feminist theology was asked to read the text with the eyes of that perspective. This resulted in a number of additions and changes. We also searched for and found a few quotations that could be used parallel to the ones already present in the text (where we already had been sure to include quotations representing the four church families).

2.4 Phase 4

A fourth and final draft was prepared, taking into consideration the suggestions from the discussions in and after the meeting with the church representatives. The board of the Christian Council of Sweden approved a final version in December 2012. The board also decided that all the members of the Working Group for Climate and Sustainable Development should be mentioned in the beginning of the booklet, showing that the text is written not only by men, which appeared to be the case when only the small writing group was mentioned.

3 Some reflections

Having described this process, we can conclude with a few reflections.

3.1 Consensus or convergence?

In the ecumenical context people are used to receiving documents that are either consensus documents or documents of convergence. In the first case, the text is the final product in a long process of writing drafts which have been discussed and revised until the authors, the committee, or the policy-making board feel that this is a text on which they can all agree. A document of convergence is a more preliminary document still under discussion. It presents statements that some or most of the participants consider satisfactory, but also alternative versions where the authors say: what do you think about this? Can we find a way to express ourselves that will unite us?⁷

In all situations, it is important that all participants feel that they and their theological convictions are presented in a way that is fair and respectful.

In preparing the statement on climate change, we had to decide if we should work for a consensus document or not. In some other reports from the CCS, theologically-reflected texts from different church traditions have been presented for further reflection and learning. In our process the Orthodox

representative expressed his concern that a united text could be too vague. He thought that it would be hard to write a text that would be faithful to the basic theological approach of the four church families. There would be too much divergence. However, we decided to continue to see if we could succeed. Through adding text and a thorough and respectful editorial work, we finally reached a text that was acceptable to all. We decided that it should be okay if the different traditions “on an acceptable level” could find themselves represented in the final text.

Of course a common text has advantages. We can say: “This is what the churches of Sweden say on climate changes.” It makes it much easier to argue when we make public statements or enter into public debates in the media.

3.2 Listening well to see our own position more clearly

Another reflection concerns theological knowledge and the importance of listening to one another. When it was pointed out that a certain way of reasoning on stewardship was typical of western Protestantism, we realized that what we say is often more tradition-based than we initially think. Ecumenical conversations not only deepen our knowledge on other traditions. They also help us to see how rooted we are in our own tradition, its starting points and its way of reasoning.

3.3 A fuller understanding of God

A third reflection concerns the nature of theological convictions. Participating in ecumenical conversations makes one realize that reality can be described in different ways. Not all of them are mutually contradictory. Sometimes different descriptions can open new aspects on a certain issue, indicating that our understanding of this world has been too narrow and needs to be widened in order to truthfully describe the essence and the work of the almighty God of the universe. In the same way as science helps us to understand more of the universe, we can more fully understand the depth and breath of the love of God when we in ecumenical conversations listen to experiences and thinking from representatives from other churches. Therefore it is so important to have ongoing dialogues between the churches on all levels—local, national and international.

References:

Books (printed and as pdf-files on the web)

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<http://www.skr.org/shop/varna-den-jord-gud-alskar-18/>

A Bishops' letter about the climate. (Church of Sweden, 2014).
<http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/omoss/biskoparnas-brev-om-klimatet>

Protect the Earth that God Loves – The Churches of Sweden on Climate and Sustainable Development. (Christian Council of Sweden, 2015).
<http://www.skr.org/shop/varna-den-jord-gud-alskar-18/>

The Church, Towards a Common Vision, Faith and Order Paper No. 214, (World Council of Churches, 2013)

¹ <http://en.skr.org>. The Adventist denomination is still an associate member.

² <http://www.skr.org/shop/fred-detta-vill-kyrkorna-i-sverige/>, printed only in Swedish but available as pdf in Swedish, English and Spanish.

³ The CCS has 24 working groups for different subjects/areas. In the working groups the churches and associate organisations get together to follow a specific issue and develop responses from the Christian perspective.

⁴ *Protect the Earth that God Loves – The Churches of Sweden on Climate and Sustainable Development. Booklets from the Christian Council of Sweden #18B* (2015). It is possible to download the Swedish and the English versions from the web of the CCS: <http://www.skr.org/shop/varna-den-jord-gud-alskar-18/>. In a parallel process during 2014 the bishops of the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) wrote and published a book on the climate challenge (published in Swedish and English). It can be found on the web as pdf in English and Swedish: <http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/omoss/biskoparnas-brev-om-klimatet>.

⁵ http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/ECJustPeace_English.pdf

⁶ <http://operationnoah.org>

⁷ Or, in the words from a recent document from the WCC: “Our aim is to offer a convergence text, that is, a text which, while not expressing full consensus on all the issues considered, is much more than simply an instrument to stimulate further study.” *The Church, Towards a Common Vision*, page 1.