

# JESUS CHRIST - THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

## VOICES FROM VANCOUVER

At the Assembly's opening service of worship Pauline Webb used as her text 1 John 1:1 : "It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the Word of Life."

She pointed out that at the time these words were written some Christians of Asia Minor had begun to doubt that Jesus could have taken on corrupt human flesh and they were tempted to follow Gnostic teaching, which claimed through enlightenment to find God in the spirit world. The writer, reflecting John's Gospel, claims that Jesus, the Son of God, came to live in the real world of our flesh and blood, that he suffered and died and rose again in victory over sin and death. "Therefore to choose Christ is to choose real life, and to abide in him is to come fully alive with a life that begins here and now and is saved for all eternity."

The opening worship, which was held in a large, yellow and white tent seating 3500 people, was a joyous event as delegates and others gathered from all parts of the globe to celebrate together - in their many languages, varied liturgical and cultural dress, and rich musical expressions - their faith in Jesus Christ, the Life of the World. At one point participants from different parts of the world carried symbols of life to the altar; among them was a young African mother who placed her tiny baby in the large, strong hands of WCC General Secretary Philip Potter, who held it high for all to see. Few eyes were dry as all sensed in that moment the depth of our common faith and the seriousness of our common calling.

Following are brief but powerful passages from just a few of the many voices that gave their witness at Vancouver during the first week of the Assembly. Under the four sub-themes, they challenge all Christians to face the prices of sin and death with an unequivocal affirmation of life. They challenge theologians and theological students to lead their churches to new and urgently needed understanding of the Gospel, repentance and faith, Christian vocation, and the mission of the church.

### LIFE AS GIFT OF GOD

*Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him.*  
(John 1:1-3)

Nishga Chief Roderick Robinson gave his testimony quietly and with great dignity:

*Our history begins in the spirit world before the light of day. Our humanness derives from the act of our creation and placement upon our traditional lands by God. Our land is indeed a holy land. Our identity is inseparable from our land. By definition, a Nishga does not exist in the fullness of his "being" without a complete "melding of his land, language, laws, tribal system and spiritual values."*

*The fundamental integrating force for this holistic existence has always been our belief in God. Since the time the missionaries brought the Gospel to us, Christianity has been the integrating and central element in our society. It is the continuing demand of God for unity within the Body of Christ which calls our community together and which gives our culture and tribal system its power and its strength.*

He went on to describe the struggle of his people and other Native Canadian peoples for their land, their cultural survival, and their social and spiritual way of life through hundreds of years of racism, oppression, and injustice. Citing a papal bull from 1537 which affirmed that Indians are human beings and should enjoy rights to liberty and property, Chief Robinson observed wryly that his ancestors, astounded at the arrogance and avarice of the White people who claimed their right to all they surveyed, were uncertain whether those strange bearded beings were indeed human. Finally he appealed to the Assembly and to all people of good will to support their land claims, which are now before the courts, noting that "40% of the land mass of the Canadian nation has never been formally ceded to Canada by the aboriginal owners nor purchased from them by the Crown of either Britain, Canada, or the provinces."

Later at a small workshop a theologian from Vancouver School of Theology and the Principal of the Atlantic School of Theology spoke about the theological and spiritual significance of the Canadian churches' response to these claims through Project North. First, the churches, recognizing that they have not always understood or supported Native rights and values, are called to be advocates and interpreters for justice. Second, the churches have discovered that Native perspectives on life, community, and nature can serve as a much needed mirror for modern Canadian perspectives and as a challenge for the shaping of a more wholesome future life-style. Finally, the churches find in their own biblical roots an affirmation of these same values - justice, harmony, wholeness (shalom) - for all of life is created, given by God.

The contexts for ministerial formation and doing theology vary enormously, but the building of a holistic world and life view on the premise that life is a gift from God is a fundamental task for all Christians and a particular challenge to theological educators and students. The challenge to the church is not only to affirm but to live life as a gift of God.

## LIFE CONFRONTING AND OVERCOMING DEATH

*The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out. (John 1:4-5)*

Helen Caldicott, the founder of the movement for nuclear disarmament called Physicians for Social Responsibility, spoke very briefly and very sharply on the second sub-theme:

*Nuclear war is the single most urgent problem facing the human family today. Even before it happens, the global armaments of large and small countries are preparing the world as a tinder box for the final conflagration, depriving two-thirds of the world's children of food, adequate clothing and shelter. Seven hundred billion dollars are spent per year on the conventional and nuclear arms race, and the wealthy Western nations and the Soviet Union are peddlers of death and armaments to Third World countries. Unless we can break the cycle of corporate greed manifested by the role of armaments of death, the future of the planet is in gross jeopardy.*

Mrs. Caldicott noted that the US and the USSR have reached a new level of dangerous confrontation and that many scientists and statemen now predict that we will be lucky to survive to 1990 without a nuclear war:

*Such a war, if fought with only half the nuclear arsenals accumulated by the superpowers in 1985 could kill, from blast alone within the first hour, 750 million people and seriously injure another 350 million people out of a total urban population of 1.3 billion people in the northern hemisphere. Many hundreds of millions more would die from burns, radiation illness, starvation and uncontrolled epidemics of disease - black plague, rabies, poliomyelitis, hepatitis, encephalitis, and tuberculosis. It is possible that most people in the northern hemisphere would die within several years and many millions more in the southern hemisphere from fallout, direct nuclear attack, and destruction of the global ozone layer inducing famine, blindness of humans and animals alike, and severe lethal sunburn to humans exposed to the sun for one or two hours. Other global ecological effects might be cooling of the earth by one or two degrees Fahrenheit, thereby inducing another ice-age, and darkening of the planet for several months. All these effects and many more unknown effects could well induce destruction of most life on earth.*

Sombre and frightening though this message was, several speakers on the floor of the Assembly noted that it must be balanced with other realities. Not only does the world stand on the brink of destruction; hundreds of millions have already gone over the brink - in Central America, the Middle East, and parts of Africa and Asia - through the misuse of the world's resources, injustice and exploitation, wars and dislocation.

On the other hand the Gospel does not allow God's people to despair but rather claims that life has overcome death through the cross of Christ. Faced with daily reports of massive mobilization of US military force in Central America, Assembly participants from that region and the US met together and signed a covenant to work together for peace and reconciliation against the powers of oppression - one small sign of the churches' calling to affirm life in the midst of death.

The calling to be peacemakers and agents of social justice requires deeper understanding of the Gospel and greater comprehension of the forces that are creating so much suffering and death in the world at large and in every local context. Theologians and theological students must seek new understanding of the relationship between peace and justice and new spiritual resources for the struggles of our time.

### LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

One of the speakers on the third sub-theme was Dorothee Sölle, a West German theologian who teaches at Union Seminary in New York. She used another Johannine text, John 10:9-10:

*Christ came into the world so that all might have life "in all its fullness", but absolute impoverishment, which is a crime in a technologically developed world, is destroying people physically, spiritually, mentally, and also religiously because it poisons hope and makes a mockery of faith by turning it into helpless apathy. What comes between Christ and the world's impoverished peoples is exploitation, the sin of the rich who are seeking to destroy Christ's promise. Christ says: "I am the door; anyone who comes into the fold through me shall be safe. He shall go in and out and find pasturage. The thief comes only to steal, to kill, to destroy; I have come that human beings may have life and have it in all its fullness."*

*Christ and "the thief" stand at opposite extremes from one another. The thief comes to plunder the poor so they will die. Christ came to bring fullness of life. Either we participate in Christ's mission, or we participate in the thief's plans for the world. As long as we remain merely victims or merely spectators in this struggle for justice, we are supporting the thief and his crimes. By joining in the struggle for a world of greater justice, on the other hand, we are taking part in the plan for creation of the God who has given us this earth in trust that all may have life in fullness.*

Not only are millions forced into absolute poverty in the Third World. Those who live in the so-called First World are expressing "an ever-growing inner emptiness". "Life is seen as self-achieved and not as a gift from the Creator; it is life without a soul lived in a world which calculates everything in terms of what it's worth; nothing is beautiful and a source of happiness for its own sake; the only thing that counts is what you can get for it. We are empty and at the same time surfeited with superfluous goods and products."

In contrast, Mother Euphrasia, the Mother Superior of a monastic community and a seminary teacher of the Romanian Orthodox Church, spoke of those who

choose to empty themselves in the ascetic life withdrawn from the world. They find fullness of life in Christ in fellowship with others and in prayer and love for others.

The pursuit of fullness of life for all provides an enormous agenda for the churches over against racism, sexism, nationalism, caste, class, and other spiritual, social, and economic barriers. Theological schools must ask themselves whether their courses, curriculum design, institutional structures, and ethos all contribute effectively to this Gospel mandate.

## LIFE IN UNITY

Professor Vitaly Borovoy gave an address on the fourth sub-theme with a central focus on the Eucharist and many references to the Orthodox tradition and the early church fathers. He drew upon passages from John 13-17: the way of love, the vine and the branches, the prayer for unity:

*The fullness of the Church is revealed in the Eucharist. Every Eucharist is celebrated in connection with the whole Church, as if on behalf of it, of all her unity, oneness, and fullness. In every Eucharist we see the God-Man, Christ, as the founder and the head of the Church, and with Him we see His Body - the one Church as the united and whole Body of Christ. The Eucharist is the sign of victory, the sign of achieved salvation - the salvation from decay, the victory over death. This is the Mystery of reconciliation - of love, not sorrow, of forgiveness, not judgement.*

In recent years this great ecumenical theme is expressed in terms of "the unity of the church and its relation to the unity of humankind." Both dimensions of the quest for unity are expressed in the Eucharist:

*If we are called to live out this unity in the Church and if we witness by our unity with Christ and with each other in the Holy Eucharist, then any hostility, discrimination, and division of people due to racial, national, ethnic, language, or cultural characteristics, because of sex differences, age, social status, or educational background, any discrimination and oppression because of religious, confessional, or ideological convictions, any non-fraternal relations, enmity, and alienation are incompatible with Christian faith and with our membership in the Church.*

*If the Church is one and is called to be a "sign" of unity and renewal for the rest of humanity and if we partake of the Chalice of peace, then it is a direct responsibility of every Christian and of all our churches to take part in peacemaking, to struggle against militarism, this arms race, all threats of war and nuclear annihilation, and to struggle for salvation of the sacred gift of Life - in the name of Jesus Christ about whom we testify as the Life of the World - to struggle for complete and general disarmament, for detente and cooperation among nations.*

In the face of repeated accusations that the World Council of Churches is abandoning its primary task of unity and concerning itself inordinately with social, economic, and political issues, Professor Borovoy and many other voices at Vancouver made it abundantly clear that there can be no separation of one from the other, for God's Spirit draws all members of the church into one Eucharistic body and through them brings liberation and unity to all humanity. The WCC can no more renounce its Programme to Combat Racism than it can give up religious liberty or personal evangelism if it is to be faithful to the Gospel.

One of the on-going tasks of theologians and theological students is to forge solid links between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, spirituality and human struggles, theology and life, the unity of the church and the renewal of human community. Jesus Christ is the life of the church and the life of the world.

F. Ross Kinsler  
October, 1983  
Ministerial Formation

#### P.T.E. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETS

The Executive Committee of the P.T.E. Commission met at the site of the Vancouver Assembly 19-20 July 1983 in order to consider requests for funding for theological education in Third World regions, to attend to various administrative matters, and to review P.T.E.'s final report to the Assembly. The following two days, 21-22 July, they met with directors of nine associations of theological education from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America to discuss their concerns and priorities for ecumenical cooperation after Vancouver. The following day the WCC Executive Committee approved the names of Professor John Pobee of the University of Ghana and Ms. Joann Nash Eakin of San Francisco Theological Seminary to become the new Assistant Directors of the P.T.E.