**Sándor Fazakas: There should be a place for open dialogue**

*Fifty years ago, the signing of the Leuenberg Agreement was the beginning of an ecumenical process that is still going on today, and which made it possible for the Christian community to embrace the world together without giving up on itself.*

*On this anniversary, the Reformed University of Debrecen will host the international conference "Being Church Together" from 9 to 11 March. In preparation for the scientific meeting, we asked Sándor Fazakas, Reformed pastor, head of the department and main organiser of the conference, about the significance of the Leuenberg Agreement, the responsibility and socio-political effects of this document.*

**- Why is this agreement important in ecumenical dialogue?**

- The drafting and signing of the Leuenberg Agreement was an event that opened a new era in the visible unity of the Christian churches and in the history of ecumenism. On the one hand, a long cherished ecumenical dream became a reality, and, on the other hand, it brought new emphases to the level of ecumenical endeavour. It changed and continues to change the way we think about ecumenism. For it has become clear that it is possible for Christian churches to enter communion with one another without giving up our own confessional-theological specificities and historical heritage, based on what binds us together: a common understanding of the Gospel, agreement on the pure teaching of the Gospel and the proper ministry of the sacraments, and the knowledge that the Church is founded on Jesus Christ alone.

**It was a long road to the signing of the Leuenberg Agreement, for the Reformation was not only a success story:** although it radically transformed the face of contemporary Europe, its drawbacks were already evident from the 16th century onwards. These were mainly due to different theological and philosophical understandings, but the introduction of the 'new faith' also had social and political consequences. There were also differences between the Reformation churches on the interpretation of Scripture and on how Jesus Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. But there was no unanimity on the issue of infant and/or adult baptism, or on the question of how the voice of conscience and one's own faith-confession might relate to the authority of Scripture, or on the form of government of the Christian church, the autonomy of a congregation, and the role of non-clergy in the church order. **These are questions that still need to be clarified.**

**- What questions has the agreement answered?**

- The Leuenberg Agreement is a theological statement. It was preceded by decades of theological dialogue and joint work, precisely with the need to bridge the differences I have just mentioned, in search of a common ground and a common understanding that unites and does not divide. 9 and 17 March 1973. representatives and theologians of the so-called 'united' churches, which were formed by Lutheran and Reformed congregations, meeting at the Leuenberg conference centre near Basel, committed themselves together to 'common witness and common service' based on a common understanding of the gospel, a common confession of the saving work of Jesus Christ alone, and thus to 'pulpit and table fellowship with one another. The Methodist churches, the Italian Protestants –the Waldensians, and the Church of the Czech Brethren have joined the agreement.

**- What is the main outcome of the document?**

- The fact that not only theological dialogue and consensus building preceded the signing of the agreement, but that it was and is followed by 50 years of further theological work. The Leuenberg Agreement is not a sign of a static state, but of a dynamic process. **It is not a milestone of ecumenism that we can be satisfied with, but a basis for moving forward:** the churches that have committed themselves to this path have also committed themselves to continue to work on the remaining differences of interpretation, to continue to seek doctrinal consensus, to seek possibilities for common theological understanding. To this end, so-called doctrinal conversations working groups (Lehrgespräche) were convened in order to overcome any remaining differences in understanding, to enable the churches to better understand each other's doctrine and practice and to seek common forms of witness in a changing world, in the context of a community of koinonia and the unity of believers in Christ that this demonstrates.

**- How does this text affect the daily lives of Christians in the member churches?**

- A breakthrough was achieved in Leuenberg because the "signatory fathers" went back to the use of biblical concepts and a common understanding of the Gospel, especially in the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. This, among other things, is the enduring value of the agreement: to understand the presence of Christ and the sacraments of Holy Communion and the sacrament, we cannot do without a thorough and in-depth study of Scripture. And if we succeed in interpreting it together and learning from each other's evangelical insights, there is no organisational, traditional or cultural specificity that can separate Christians who wish to share together in the reality of the Body of Christ.

**- What is the balance of the last five decades, has this common understanding been achieved?**

- In Leuenberg, the signatory theologians also expressed the demand that, as a gift of this common recognition, the previous distancing between the Reformation Churches, the statements condemning each other's doctrines, should no longer be maintained. In other words, doctrinal dissociations do not apply to the other church that has signed the agreement, its recognitions and teachings. This is also a model, since we saw a similar claim a good 25 years later, in 1999, with the signing of the joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement on the doctrine of justification between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation.

**The common understanding, acceptance and evaluation of each other's evangelical insights and theological teachings necessarily lead to the expression and living of church communion.**

In other words, ecumenical dialogue is not only about theological debates, consensus-building and doctrinal reconciliation. All this would be insufficient in itself if it were not combined with the need for our churches to grow together. This is not easy: it is always easier to declare unity than to actually live it or to take concrete steps towards it. Living out church communion is about more than overcoming contemporary doctrinal-theological differences. Communion, in the biblical sense of koinonia, is about the consensus given in the Gospel, the common faith recognition that the church is the assembly of the called (saints) and that our unity in Christ is unaffected by differences in ritual, that differences are reconciled by the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, the fellowship of the Reformation churches is the "unity of reconciled differences" - even more "unity in reconciled diversity” - which is best represented in the worshiping community.

**Along this tradition, the CPCE represents the voice of European Protestantism for the congregations and in public life** - but not in the form of a teaching office. Our studies and resources are not a recipe for the right Christian life and choices for every situation - because every situation is different. Reformed theology holds that every person stands before God personally and is personally responsible for his or her actions. Accordingly, he or she must form moral judgments and make decisions in accordance with his or her faith, conscience and the teaching of Scripture. The CPCE's resources help in this by introducing the reader to the particularities of biblical thinking, introduce him to the Protestant moral tradition, providing methodological help in analysing his own situation, how to make a decision that he can live with and accept the consequences of - in short, helping him to reason, but also freeing him to make a free and responsible decision before God.

**- On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary, CPCE is planning a series of jubilee events, one of which will be a scientific conference entitled "Being Church Together" at the Reformed Theological University of Debrecen.**

- It is an honour for Debrecen and the Reformed Theological University to host this prestigious conference, the real scientific event of the 50th anniversary series. I myself have been a member of the CPCE's various working groups for 20 years, for example in the ethics committee, I have participated in the community's General Assemblies on several occasions as a delegate of the Reformed Church of Hungary, and other colleagues are also active members of the working committees. In addition, the most appropriate venue for an academic conference is a university where Leuenberg's spirit is known, and the CPCE is an ecumenical organisation open to the historical experience and theological heritage of the churches and societies of Central and Eastern Europe. So it was only natural for the organisation to ask us to organise the conference.

The organisation of the conference, the choice of venue and the opportunity for dialogue also serve to counteract the anti-Westernism that is rampant in public discourse today, which also affects ecumenism.

It is a pity, because in the name of this propagandistic anti-Westernism, the legacy of Luther, Calvin and Bullinger should be thrown out of the window. Yet, reading Calvin today, we see how incredibly topical he is, whether in the way he addresses public issues or the form of the Church's organisation and church government. Calvin could even be a contemporary of ours.

**- What could be the reason for this antipathy today?**

- Well, I think it is due to a lack of ecumenical experience and theological shallowness. The spirit of Leuenberg has always been those involved in the search for consensus demanded dialogue, were curious about each other's experience, insights, biblical insights - and at the same time did not force each other to adopt their own position.

I think we still have some catching up to do in terms of learning this spirituality.

**- Based on the experience of the past decades, what is the socio-political significance of the Leuenberg Agreement?**

- First of all, the Leuenberg Agreement and its ecclesial vision can be a model for the wider ecumenical movement - where not only internal Protestant encounter and communion are at stake. Few people know it today, but once upon a time, Professor Joseph Ratzinger, Archbishop, later Pope Benedict XVI, was very complimentary of the process that began in 1973. He said, while still a theology teacher, that "the journey begun with the Leuenberg Agreement must find a fitting continuation between the Roman Catholic and Reformation Churches". It is true that the visible unity of Christians is expressed in common worship, and more specifically in the common celebration of the Eucharist and Communion - but what kind of unity is there where sharing this sacrament is not possible, where sharing the sacrament in the absence of intercommunion is a sign of further division? **So, there is still a task and a question to be solved in the field of ecumenism.** Incidentally, there is a joint committee between the CPCE and the Pontifical Dicasterium for Promoting Christian Unity, precisely for the purpose of a common understanding of the Church and church communion. We await the results of this dialogue. At the same time, I am sure that CPCE member churches and theologians will be open to what Protestantism can learn from the theological and spiritual heritage of other churches, for example in dialogue with Orthodox theologians or with the churches of the Pentecostal movement.

**In a public sense, theological work has a need for publicity.** Both the history of the CPCE's development and the results, ethical orientation materials and statements that have come to light in the meantime show that this study and common ecclesial service has a significance in the life of society. If the political authorities of the day want to serve the artificially imposed unity of Christians, or to work out some kind of communal identity based on Christian slogans, the best antidote is serious, in-depth theological work. Theological reflections, i.e. attention to the teaching of the Gospel, can keep the Church and society on the ground of sanity.

Yes, the biblical and Christian understanding of reality has something to do with the life issues of today's man - not only in the church but also in the civil sphere.

**- The most common place for the civil sector to encounter the teachings of the Church is in churches. How can preaching help personal Christian responsibility?**

-The Leuenberg Agreement also testifies to the fact that evangelisation is only credible if those who hear it do something for society.

The message of the Gospel frees believers to see the poverty and deprivation in the world, to hear the cries of those in need, and to take more responsibility for justice, peacekeeping and reconciliation in society.

In the Reformation century, great emphasis was placed on preaching and public debate - through preaching it became clear that God's Word had something to say for individual and community-political life, that the reformation of faith and doctrine must be followed by a renewal of life. And through the debates it was discussed how to discern God's will in the here and now and to express that the truth discerned in the light of the Gospel cannot be silenced or muted. Truth needs to be public - the role of faith, the relationship between church and society, must be freely discussed. This in turn can lead to community building, to growth in the knowledge of God and in responsibility before God and man. I expect (also) an awareness of this from the nurturing of the Reformation and Leuenberg's legacy, and something from this conference.

Text: Zsuzsanna Farkas