

TEN YEARS TOGETHER

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A brief history

This year is the tenth anniversary of the founding of the *Apostolic Fellowship International*. We met at Positano from the 9th to the 11th May and there were twelve of us. The only condition for the invitation was a recognised apostolic ministry. Among those present were: Abilio Chagas, Jorge Himitian, Ernest Komanapalli, Phitsanunart Sritawong (PN), Cristian Romo, Pierre Trushel, Giovanni Traettino and, acting as secretary, Ernest D. Bretscher. There were other brothers with an apostolic ministry who for one reason or another were unable to get there. Pierre Trushel, who the previous year had taken the initiative of calling together a large convention on apostolic ministry in his home town of Grenoble, and who to the end was one of the most determined promoters of this initiative, has since gone to be with the Lord.

In a climate of warm brotherly fellowship, soon to become friendship, the foundations were laid for what from the start we intended to be an international fellowship of apostolic ministries: the *Apostolic Fellowship International*! It was on that occasion that we came to agreement on the "nature of apostolic ministry", on the fact that we were and would continue to be "a group of apostles in mutual relationship with shared values and vision for the reconciliation and building up of the Body of Christ", on the *Mission Statement* which has inspired and guided us to this day; on our shared values¹, and on the simple co-ordinating structure which has supported us until now. In the following years we concentrated mainly on the development of committed relationships as the vitally necessary context for a healthy and balanced functioning of the apostolic ministry.

Our past experience

"On our part, we come to this appointment with a humble awareness of having opened up a new path that offers rich possibilities for the future of the church. We have sought to offer a crucial answer to a strategic need in our generation" (PN), at a significant crossroads in church history (AN). Ten years is not a long time. History progresses only slowly! But what has been born in our midst is, if not unique, certainly precious of its kind and is undoubtedly of great value in the lives of all of us who have walked together over these last years.

Our hearts' desire has started to become a reality. We have witnessed the birth and growth of a meeting-place for fellowship, a network of "covenant brothers" and friends, a network of networks, a spiritual workshop which, as we have prayed and discussed together, has given rise, *together*, to an increasing understanding and sharing of God's plan for the church; of the nature, importance and relevance of the Gospel of the Kingdom, and of the vision in God's heart for the unity and reconciliation of all Christians in order to promote the healing and salvation of the world.²

Our burden has been to call together proven apostolic ministries (*1. with a clear revelation of the mystery of Christ and the body of Christ; 2. leading movements of churches and/or ministries; and 3. recognised by other apostles*³) with the same heart and mind, willing to serve this vision and commit themselves, in a spirit of covenant faithfulness and mutual submission, to promote not only the theory but also the practice of apostolic ministry and *collegiality*.⁴ We are grateful to the Lord that we are already beginning to see some of the fruits of this.

¹ "We are committed to: The gospel of the Kingdom; The unity of the Church – with diversity; The restoration of the Church as it attains to fullness; Discipleship; Friendship and flexibility; Reconciliation in the Church and the world; Truth and tolerance; Mutual respect and submission and the value of listening"

² "We need to create an international forum for reflection, for prayer, for revelation, to hear God and to listen to one another. We need communication and we need to know what God is doing in different parts of the world, as well as what He is saying. We need to renew our covenant with God. It is a covenant of faithfulness and loyalty to the revelation of the mystery of Christ; a covenant of integrity, of self-denial, of consecration as well as a covenant of love, respect, humility, companionship and friendship between each other." Jorge Himitian. Italy 2000

³ "**The Nature of apostleship:** 1. Revelation of the mystery of Christ and of the Body of Christ; 2. First translocal creative ministry with authority to a network of churches/ministries. 3. Recognition from other apostles". (Italy 2000)

⁴ "In the New Testament there is a clear indication and understanding of the collegial nature of the apostolic ministry, as a service for the unity and "catholicity" of the Church. The Koinonia of the apostles is necessary to the connection, the coordination and the organic unity of the local, national and trans-continental fellowships over which

If we look at the objectives defined in our **Mission Statement**, we have learned – even though sometimes only partially, and necessarily in different ways – to *develop peer level fellowship*, we have *enriched and inspired each other*, we have learned to *hear God together and for one another* and to stimulate and challenge one another to fulfil our common mission; we have promoted *projects and channels of cooperation* (e.g. India, Africa) and forms of *mutual support and cross-fertilisation* (e.g. exchanges of ministry, spiritual influence on one another) which have already produced wonderful benefits and opened promising new perspectives before our eyes.

Our guiding vision has been fourfold:

- a) **Relationships**: that as men with an apostolic ministry, we meet together for several days each year in order to get to know each other and build relationships, sharing in the vision, the passion and also experiences; to also share our burdens, questions, expectations as well as revelation.
- b) **Networking**: starting from an inclusive “core group”, that as relationships grow, there is a “knitting together” of heart, vision and effort across the world at this apostolic level.
- c) **Communication**: that through the use of available technologies, communication should be developed.
- d) **Unity**: that through this ongoing relationship and co-operation, the goal of unity in the Body of Christ should be implemented and accelerated.

Over the last ten years, after an initial phase in which we emphasised *the theme of relationships (koinonia, fellowship)* as foundational to the nature of God and of the body of Christ, and therefore also to apostolic relationships, we examined and came to agreement about the strategic nature and role of apostolic ministry, both individually (*personal episkopē*) and in relationship (*collegial episkopē*), for the leadership, upbuilding and unity of the church.⁵ We then dealt more closely, as was natural, with the subject of the Church. The subject of our discussions from 2004 to 2007 was “*The Church’s progress towards its fullness*”. We explored the most important aspects of this fullness: 1. Unity; 2. Quality; 3. Quantity.

Kingdom of God, Church and Society

In Chile in 2008 we began to examine the subject of “*Kingdom of God, Church and Society*”, and we continued with the same subject last year in Nigeria.⁶

It seemed clear to us – as emerged with particular clarity from the three main papers given at Santiago 2008⁷ – that the two subjects are *interconnected and closely joined together*.

“The theme of the Kingdom is basic to the Church and intersects its path *towards its fulness*; because the path towards fulness coincides with the *process* of growth and the increase of the Kingdom; and because *the fulness* is in fact the fulness of the life of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of God fully realised. This is true at the personal level (*the person* being the habitation of God by the Spirit), at the interpersonal level (*the community* as the habitation of God by the Spirit), and at the ecological and universal level (*the earth and the universe* full of His glory!). By then God will have healed, inhabited and filled with Himself all relationships and the whole creation! A new creature! A new community! A new creation!”⁸

In the course of these deliberations... we happened on the theme of “*Transformation*”. The subject of *Fullness* and that of the *Kingdom* raise the question, in God’s economy, of *Transformation*: transformation of the individual Christian and the Christian community, and – to the degree that they are transformed, however partially (but truly!) – that of *society* and of the nations in which we live.

they preside (episcopè). This allows the recognition of individual ministry but always in bonds of unity and truth with the collective episcopè, the sphere and the responsibility of the collegial apostolic government. The apostolic nature of the Church is the responsibility of the apostles in a mutual fellowship of love and truth. The koinonia and the unity of the apostles is necessary as an authoritative “diakonia” to the universal Church so that it can grow in love and truth (from the truth in love to the truth in unity) in our individual churches, and in the wider Church, with a view to obtaining the fullness already expressed in Christ, and which remains God’s unquestionable goal for the Church.” Giovanni Traettino. Brazil 2002.

⁵ IAF documents, Italy 2000.

⁶ For some of these materials in written form, see the web site www.afint.org.

⁷ For a brief summary of these papers, see Appendix A.

⁸ Giovanni Traettino, *Kingdom of God, Church and Society*, AFI Santiago, 2008.

All this began from God's insatiable, invincible and irreversible desire to live in and possess the heart of man. It is what I like to call – more even than the Gospel of the Kingdom – the *Gospel of Desire*! We must start from the Gospel of Desire in order to understand the *Gospel of the Kingdom*. We must start from the heart of God to understand the heart of the Kingdom. The Gospel of the Kingdom is nothing but the *Gospel of the Desire* which God has always had and continues to have, to *enter and possess the heart of man*!

The *bridge*, the connection between the Gospel of Desire and the Gospel of the Kingdom, is the *Gospel of the Incarnation*.⁹ God's purpose was to inhabit and experience man – the new tabernacle (!) – *from within*. A tabernacle no longer made of walls of cloth, wood or stone, but of walls of flesh. It was inaugurated by God in Christ ("*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me*"¹⁰), and is continued in Christians through the breaking in and indwelling of the Holy Spirit ("*Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you*"¹¹). But all this would be incomplete if we did not comprehend that the ultimate purpose of the Gospel of Desire, of the Kingdom and of the Incarnation is *the Gospel of Transformation*! God's desire has always been the complete recovery of man in order to transform him, from within, in his personal life and his relationships, into His own image and likeness!"¹²

Two instruments of transformation

The papers given in Lagos emphasised that from a Christian viewpoint there are basically two possible *agencies* (and also witnesses and guardians!) of the Kingdom to transform the world: *the individual* and *the fellowship* (the natural family and the spiritual family)¹³, transformed in their character and behaviour by the "Gospel of the Kingdom" (*kerygma* and *didache*); the conversion of the individual and the reformation of the fellowship (*Ecclesia semper reformanda!*). As PN has written, "*The key is the man and the man is the key*". And he adds, "*The key is the church and the church is the key to the Kingdom of God*". From this we can understand the strategic importance of both the individual disciple and the church *taking responsibility* (JH) for living out ("*incarnating*") and proclaiming ("*preaching*") the Kingdom of God!

Therefore the secret is "seed men" and "seed churches", which hold within them the seed of the life of the Kingdom, the ingredients (the DNA!) needed to "fertilise" society and "make it fruitful", *from within*! This is why the strategy becomes "planting churches, planting the Kingdom".

The "gap" between personal experience and the social impact of the Gospel of the Kingdom is explained by the delay in the lives of many Christians in making room for God's government. *Unfortunately, walking in the flesh is commoner than walking in the Spirit!* The Church's commitment to the Gospel, lived out in holiness and proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit, cannot but bring transformation and joy to the community (Adeboye), including the secular world. There are many examples in both biblical (Abraham, the prophets of restoration...) and secular history (the historical transformation of Europe, the experience of Africa).

The models are the person of Christ (incarnate and glorified) and the fellowships described by Luke (the church of Jerusalem in Acts) and John (the new Jerusalem of Revelation).

The influence of the Kingdom of God on society

Another aspect examined in some of the papers was the presence in society, as well as *personal sin*, of *structural sin* (social, collective and institutional injustice) and the transmission down the generations of negative thought-patterns and deep-rooted destructive habits (JH). What are Christians to do? Alongside the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom and the answers derived from personal and collective transformation, are any other tools available to us?

Can we take on commitments to social projects? Yes indeed! Most Christians are agreed on that. The church is called by its very nature to be visibly, outwardly and politically "*salt and light*" in society, giving a voice to the voiceless and defending the defenceless (EK). Can we

⁹ As has been observed: "The incarnation is the spiritual and theological foundation of commitment to 'action'".

¹⁰ Heb 10:5.

¹¹ 1 Cor 6:19.

¹² From my "Welcome" at the *AFI Apostolic Consultation* in Lagos 2009

¹³ In other words: Christ and the Body of Christ!

engage in politics? Can we contribute in this way too to seeking "the common good" and "good government"? Can we agree with those who say that "politics is a demanding way of living out the Christian commitment to serving others"¹⁴? or that "politics is the social organisation of agape love"?

The general orientation of the papers given has been positive. It seems clear that structural sin requires structural answers. The church must commit itself and/or support people of integrity and ability, but it should also work out and/or support social and economic proposals based on Kingdom principles.

We must therefore live out and bear witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom and promote and support good government by praying tirelessly for those in authority, voting at elections, putting forward proposals, paying taxes, taking care of the civic education of believers, contributing to good government and the promotion of non-partisan (or bipartisan) policies, mobilising honest and capable Christian professionals, and preparing believers for heaven (Obanure/Olowu).

In working out social and economic proposals, some of the Kingdom principles on which to base them are: 1. *The earth is the Lord's*; 2. *Seeking the common good*; 3. *The fundamental value of work*; 4. *The State's responsibility for the common good*; 5. *The fundamental value of the human person*.

Some further criteria:

1. Against the temptation of power, *a serving church*; as Bonhoeffer puts it, "a church for others".¹⁵ As the motto of our spiritual family expresses it, "*Reconciliation through Service*". "We must react against the idea of a triumphalistic church operating as God's viceroy on earth... by seeking to follow the example of Jesus, who said that he had come to serve".¹⁶
2. Against the temptation of relativism, *a church representing truth (kerygma and didache)*. The early church was a persecuted minority which did not the drawback from preaching as *public truth* (doctrine, teaching) – not as a "private religion" – the Lordship of Christ and the Gospel of the Kingdom. In a society which we may well call pluralistic *par excellence* on account of the coexistence of many faiths and religions, it must challenge the relativism of our times and proclaim as objective truth, even at the price of persecution, the person and work of Christ and his teaching. It did so up to the time of Constantine, when the crisis of the Empire created a vacuum which was filled by a Christianity that progressively surrendered to the temptation to exchange service for power and "to use the civil power to compel acceptance of Christian teaching."¹⁷
3. Against the temptation of individualism, *a church of fellowship*.
4. Against the temptation of materialism, *a church for the poor*.

A critically positive spirituality

A word of warning is needed against the temptation to fall captive to human utopias or ideologies. This danger has been the widespread experience of Christians in past centuries. I am speaking of the risk to which the Gospel of the Kingdom is exposed, in its contact with social and political issues, of establishing "partisan" links with a particular section or group and of becoming transformed into a social or worldly theology (or ideology! or utopia!): as the case may be, reactionary or revolutionary, traditionalist or progressive. There have been liberal Christians and socialist Christians, anarchist Christians and fascist Christians. There have even been Christian political parties (for believers, a contradiction in terms!). As someone has said, "The Kingdom of God is not of this world. Not to conform to the world is the truest way of loving it!" So it is vital to combine our commitments with the biblical criteria of "*as though not...*" and "*as but not of*".

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI,

¹⁵ "The church is the Church only when it exists for others... The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, non dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others". Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1967, p.211.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. USA, 1989)

¹⁷ *Op. Cit.*

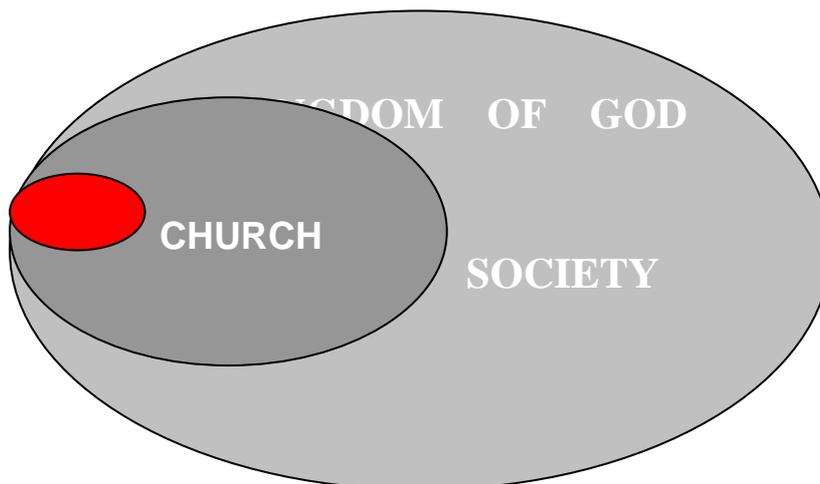
As Alister McGrath has remarked,¹⁸ we need "a *critically positive spirituality of the world*" and, as Calvin expressed it, "we *must face the world as it is to make it into what we would like to be*".¹⁹ Starting from a biblical theology of creation, the fall and redemption, the sound Reformed tradition takes account on the one hand of "the *inadequacy of an uncritically positive spirituality of the world*" while on the other hand highlighting "the *shortcomings of a spirituality of retreat from the world*",²⁰ and arrives at a critical engagement in public life, based on the criteria of the Gospel, in favour of "good government" of the community and "the common good". This is the heritage of the Reformation.

In conclusion, in the words of the Lausanne Covenant,

- We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all people. **We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression...** Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.²¹

Moreover:

- **Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture.** Because men and women are God's creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture. Missions have all too frequently exported with the gospel an alien culture and churches have sometimes been in bondage to culture rather than to Scripture.²²



¹⁸ Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh. A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1991, 1995

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*

²⁰ *Op. cit.*

²¹ Lausanne Covenant (1974), section 5.

²² *Idem*, section 10.