

VOTE OF THANKS – ‘LET US BE ONE’

Centenary conclusion
Reformation Day, 20-17

Sisters and Brothers, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Reformation Day 2017 is a hallmark in the history of both the Christian ecclesial tradition and of course, our Faculty. The one looks back at a 500-year history and the latter, at 100 years of existence at the University of Pretoria.

What is especially important at this commemoration today is that it also formally concludes the Faculty’s centenary celebrations. Almost 4 years of planning, deliberations and even lobbying, comes to a conclusion today.

The Faculty has reached the zenith of its existence this year. Ranked the foremost Faculty of Theology in Africa, the 14th in the world with regard to research impact and position 28th in the world with regard to citations per published paper. An achievement of no small degree. Better evidence than this, can hardly be offered at the crescendo of our celebrations.

In addition, to complete with an ecumenical service like this afternoon’s with the theme based on John 17, “Let us be one”, closes both the 500-year and the 100-year circles graciously.

It is my conviction that no other public body has brought certain denominations closer to one another than the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. This is the only faculty in South Africa where all four our partner churches, elected moderators from the ranks of our professors: the DRC, the NDRC, the UPCSA and URCSA. This is a clear indication of the close and positive relationship between the Faculty and the churches.

But even more than that. I believe that the DRC and the NDRC have established special relationships at this Faculty, so too the DRC and URCSA and even the UPCSA and the EPCSA. The most important example is that the DRC and the

NDRC accept each other's ministers without a *colloquium doctum* and the DRC and URCSA acknowledge each other's church orders. Personally, I look forward to the time when the NDRC becomes a virtual 11th regional synod of the DRC where not historical or geographical reasons separate people, but that faith communities are defined positively as centres of spiritual gravity.

1.

In my reflection on the Centenary this year, I often referred to Paul Ricoeur's threefold *mimesis* of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration or, *mutatis mutandis*, to Walther Brueggemann's threefold interpretation of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. It is so much in line with the University's motto of "Today matters"!

I am of the opinion that Augustine provided us with the first systematically accountable understanding of time. In his Confessions, Book XI, he rhetorically asks the question, 'what is time?', and adds that one knows the answer, but only up to the point when one has to start explaining it!

In his exposition of his explanation however, he makes *inter alia* the important point that both the past and the future have no other *locus* than the present, either as memory or as expectation. In essence, there are only three tenses: the *present past*, the *present present* and the *present future*. The junction or interface is the *here and now*. Again, 'today matters'.

Augustine illustrates this enigma when one cites a known psalm. The whole of the psalm is throughout present and what I am citing at the present moment, is protracted by both my memory and my expectation simultaneously. Augustine applies this to human existence, and I quote: 'the same holds in the whole life of man, of which all the actions of man are parts; the same holds in the whole age of the sons of men, of which all the lives of men are parts.'

'We are what others are', and to tweak it a little bit, we are profiled by both our antecedents and our corollaries.

The baseline of this statement is in the renaming of the Faculty as from next year:

Faculty of Theology and Religion. A movement from exclusivity to inclusivity, and always with the one unnegotiable premise: a faith-based approach to our subject matter. Let us be one.

2.

The 'United Christian Witness' signed this afternoon by the Faculty and our four official stakeholders epitomises this characteristic of our Faculty. We acknowledge where we come from and we commit ourselves to a life-giving theology that matters.

Without being inspired or guided by the WCRC's recent declaration in Wittenberg on July 5th, the similarities of what has happened today are apparent. The WCRC formally joined an ecumenical statement with Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists aiming to overcome divisions between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

With this, the WCRC formally associated itself with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, originally signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on the 31st October 1999. There they stated in Paragraph 14 that having listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture, a shared understanding of justification exists between Lutheran Churches and the Roman Catholic Church concerning the theological controversy, which was the major split in the 16th century.

An important statement in this regard was made by Walter Kasper in his reflection: 'What we did discover anew was that this one and for all revealed Gospel is so deep and so rich that nobody, no council and no theologian, can ever exhaust it. It was by the gift of the Holy Spirit that we were able to deepen our understanding, so we could recognise and re-receive our respective traditions. The new perception and re-reception is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into the whole truth'.

What was significant of this Declaration is that they acknowledged different languages, different emphases, and different concerns and have come to a *differentiated consensus* rather than total agreement. It excludes contradictions, but it includes complementary oppositions. Full consensus would make unity an eschatological matter. There would always be unity in diversity, or as the Lutherans say, a unity in reconciled diversity. And even better said in the Mission of our Faculty,

a *reconciling diversity*, no past participle, but a present participle, truncated and open to the front.

3.

Many Christians today no longer understand the formulations of the 16th century. Many prefer to speak about justification rather with concepts like salvation, grace, new life, forgiveness and reconciliation. We no longer feel the burden of guilt and sin as Luther did, we no longer live in the fear of God's judgement, we have become less theistic in our understanding of God's presence in this creation. Hence, Luther's quest for a merciful God leaves many believers somewhat cold.

Thus, we have to translate both the questions and the answers of the past into contemporary language and dialectic, so that our words will touch and make impression on our deepest experiences, anxieties and hopes and stir us as much today as in the past. Justification enables us and even compels us to work for justice and peace, the recognition of human dignity and human and environmental rights.

4.

The Faculty of Theology and Religion is not a church and its professors are not campus pastors either. Let me repeat what the Rev Louis Brand said to the new students in Theology in 1930 when the TUC accepted the official name of the 'University of Pretoria':

'University' is an ambitious and comprehensive name...All of creation is your workplace, from the lowliest of organisms and the so-called inorganic (the atoms and electrons), to the highest spiritual life of human beings and the love of God, on earth and in the immeasurable universe.

At our Centenary Banquet on July 29th this year, our guest speaker of the event, Prof David Ford, provided us with a very apt interpretation of what a faculty of theology at a public university should be:

We have no choice about whether our public universities and societies are plural; the great question is whether and how they can

be healthily plural.

To be healthily plural is to appreciate and nurture the depth, richness and long-term fullness of life present in each major tradition at its best. It is no good having a university or public sphere of shallow tolerance, where no one can speak and act from the heart of their understanding and commitment.

We need a pluralism of multiple depths.

In addition, to this enterprise, our Faculty commits itself towards the future. 'Theology is a scholarly endeavour of believers in the public sphere in order to make sense of multidimensional realities in a manner that matters'.

5.

Allow me to extend a warm and appreciative vote of thanks to my colleagues and the officials of the partner churches involved in putting this event together. Being on a sabbatical currently, this is the one event of the Centenary to which I have contributed very little. The Deputy-Dean and at the moment, Acting-Dean, Prof Dirk Human, together with Prof Jerry Pillay, have taken pain to achieve what we are witnessing tonight. Thank you for achieving exactly what I had in mind: not a commemoration of a schism, but an appeal for unity, reconciliation and healthily plural.

Thank you to the supporting staff and the clerics of the churches too. The two declarations followed a joint and bottom-up approach. My appreciation goes to everyone involved. Allow me to mention the names of people who have contributed much: Ms Tania Arrison, Ms Nina Grundlingh, Ms Christine Nel of the Library and Mr Mathias Shunmugam, chairperson of House Theology.

Perhaps I could revise my image of a closing circle I alluded to in my introduction. We are not closing a circle, rather begin a new circle, the next 100 years, the spiral towards the point where God is everything in everyone.

Thank you for attendance!