

Morning Prayer October 4, 2002 (Ephesians 3,18 'Together with all the Saints')

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Dear seafarers' friends in Christ,

These few words have fascinated me as long as I have worked in the seafarers ministry. At first sight they are about ecumenism – and I think they are. But instead of 'ecumenical' I prefer the traditional term used by the Nicene Creed: 'We believe in one ... *catholic* ... Church...'. In the context of this Congress I'd like to use the words 'global' or 'universal' as synonyms for 'catholic'.. I myself am of a Reformed or Presbyterian origin. In my own Church I have missed so often the sensitivity to being part of a catholic, universal, or global Church. Both in its theology and in its practice, my Church sometimes acted too parochial.

Writing about the Church in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul envisages visibly organised community with a universal, global or catholic scope. In my life I have experienced this Catholic Church from three different perspectives: the past, the present and the future. I'd like to say something about each one of them.

1. Past

We are not the first ones who believe in God. Through all ages, our ancestors from all over the world tried to express their faith in the Triune God in doctrines, confessions, declarations, agreements and so on and so forth. As to the mission (*Apostolatus*), many women and men committed themselves to make true that the Gospel has a global, universal or catholic scope. They went out to preach and to practice the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in the power of God's Spirit.

I myself am always again impressed by the writings of theologians right from the beginning of the Church up until today, belonging to various Christian traditions. The catholic, universal or global Tradition of all ages and all places still is a rich source that also can feed us today ! Many were the light beams from the one Light in the past already !

2. Present

Ten years I worked as a port chaplain. In my ship visiting and in the centres I met seafarers from all the regions of our Global Village: people of all nations, colours, languages, races, and religions. In the many meetings with them it was a privilege to experience in reality that all of us belong to the catholic, universal or global Church: 'Many are the light beams from the one light / we are one in Christ'

In 2000 I started to work as the General Secretary of ICMA, the International Christian Maritime Association. As you may know, ICMA is a free ecumenical association of Christian organisations engaged in seafarers welfare. In this ministry again I have had the privilege to meet many people from different Christian traditions: Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, evangelical and charismatic Christians and communities. Again I have experienced how wide and long and how high and deep the love of Christ has gone into our global world. I have experienced that the Christian faith can be interpreted and practised in ways completely different from my own tradition. But this does not mean that the other Christian

traditions are not truly Christian. More than often I have had to reconsider my own traditional or doctrinal prejudices. We do need all the saints indeed to grasp how wide and long and high and deep His love in Christ is and how powerful His Spirit. The Triune God should always be the one source of a truly global, universal or catholic Church. Only He can bring all the saints, all the believers together...

This can be a painful process sometimes. All of us know about the pain caused by the very sad fact that we as Christians from different traditions still cannot celebrate Eucharist together. That's why I hope for the continuing reformation by the Spirit in *all* Churches. It may be noted that Paul's words about the catholic Church are put in the context of his prayer for the Church of the Ephesians !

3. Future

Visiting seafarers from the Global Village, I also met many people of other faiths. Many of them are very sincere believers, good and honest people. It is a privilege to work with them and for them. Again, I had to unlearn so many prejudices, not only racial and national, but also religious ones. Through them I have learnt that the catholic or global Church should not only be open to (potential) Christians, but also open to people who still prefer to keep their own faith. Again and again, until today, all these friends of other faiths have made me asking the question: Who actually is God ?! I mean: the God of Israel, our God in Jesus Christ and through His Spirit, who is He ?! I think many of us have that experience, as all of us are at the sharp edge of the mission of God to the seafarers' global world. Of course, as the song puts it: OUR one light is Jesus / OUR one tree is Jesus... But what does it mean when the song also says: 'Many ways to serve God, the Spirit is one, servant spirit of Jesus' ?

'Together with all the saints', Paul writes. 'We believe in one ... *catholic* ... Church...', we still confess today. In our days of a Global Village we should not be surprised if at the end of time 'catholic' has even a wider scope than Christians only.

Personally I would not be surprised as we believe in a God who commits both Christ and the Spirit to effect his final purpose: one God and Father of ALL, who is *over* ALL and *through* ALL and *in* ALL ! (Eph 4,6)

Amen