

## The Moravian Church on its Pilgrimage

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When John Bunyan wrote his book "The Pilgrim's Progress" 300 years ago, he could not foresee the alteration of the term "progress" which came in the 19th century, nor the second change of which we are witnesses now at the end of this millenium. "Progress" was the battlecry of science and technology; to be "up to date" was the first virtue, up to the mark dictated by the technologists and, not much later, by ideologists. Progress in itself seemed to be beneficial and promising. Even the churches, generally reputed to be conservative or reactionary, tried to make up lost ground and to pass themselves off as progressive or revolutionary. But in our days the ambiguity of "progress" is more evident than ever before. The pendulum of general opinion is swinging towards the other extreme: what is old is valuable. Nostalgia is the fashion. This trend seems to be world-wide.

We as Christians, and we as a Church are part of this world and are affected by the trends which express the feelings, the fears and hopes of our contemporaries. We cannot pretend to be a people completely apart from the rest of mankind. But as a people of which Jesus Christ is the King we are liberated from the dominating power of trends and fashions. We know of a progress which is not dependent on technological advance, not even on our social or religious achievements. It is the progress of pilgrims, the course through the desert towards the Promised Land. We go this road, each of us seeking his way through the labyrinth of the world, from birth to death. And we go this course together, as groups, families, congregations, denominations, from one generation to the next.

My subject in this hour is the Moravian Church on its pilgrimage. Of course this cannot encompass a historic review of the more than five hundred years of our past. I can only try to draw along some plain lines how I see the Moravian pilgrimage. Maybe some of you will find it too general, someone may miss a point which he regards to be the most urgent of our time, another may miss what he considers the distinctive features of Moravianism. I am aware of that. But I hope you will find that I do not want to repeat well-known dogmatic phrases but that each of the four parts has its specific point. There is truth in these sentences which tend to be neglected or even forgotten in the church. Churches must not forget this truth on their pilgrimage lest they go astray from the right path. I want to make some comments on the pilgrimage of the Moravian Church.

In communion with the Church triumphant,  
challenged by the world's needs and dangers,  
in fellowship with other pilgrims,  
in expectation of the Lord's kingdom.



## 1. In communion with the Church triumphant

We sing the hymn "In Christ there is no East or West," and it is of great significance that we are here together as one church from North India/Tibet to the West Indies, from Northern Ireland and Chechoslovakia to the Southern Cape of Africa. But do we realize that there is another boundary which has already lost its ruling importance for the church? I mean that between Earth and Heaven. In Spangenberg's hymn "Die Kirche Christi, die er geweiht" it is pointed out: "and yet in Earth and Heaven, through Christ her Lord, the Church is one". And again I am quoting Spangenberg from his "Exposition of Christian Doctrine - Idea fidei fratrum": The Church of Christ is divided into the militant, and the triumphant; we understand by the latter the souls that have finished their race, and are entered into that rest, which will have no end: by the former, the children of God, who live still in this world, and who by faith and prayer must continually be upon their guard against, preserve themselves from, and combat not only the corruption which we feel in soul and body, but also the world, and the wicked enemy.

We as the Church on Earth in East and West, North and South are only one part of the whole Church. In one of the first documents of the *Unitas Fratrum*, a confession from 1471 or 1472, we already find this fundamental knowledge: "The holy catholic Church is the congregation of God's elected, all who were from the beginning of the world, who are and will be to the end, from Abel to the last righteous man. Her branches spread out all over the world, her number and names are known to God alone."

When our Lord Jesus was asked by the Sadducees about the resurrection, he shocked them with the word of "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is not God of the dead but of the living; for him all are alive". This word remains shocking in a world where death always seems to have the last word. At the same time it is a word of comfort and a sound of triumph, of Christ's triumph, putting fresh heart into all those who have accepted Christ as their Saviour. For him all are alive: the apostles and martyrs, the teachers and pastors of the Church, Augustine and Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, John Hus and Comenius, Luther and Bach, all the missionaries of the renewed Moravian Church, the women and men who dedicated their lives to the spreading of the Gospel, all the mothers and fathers who transmitted the heritage of faith to us. They are part of the Church universal, - not "they were" but "they are".

We are in communion with the Church triumphant. When we praise the Lamb who was slain, they sing with us in the heavenly chorus. When we struggle with temptations and difficulties, they are present with their intercession. What is my point? To promote Church history in our Moravian congregations? I should be happy if I could do this, because it is a wonderful thing to delve deeply in history, we can learn a lot of it. But this is not the very point. Do I want to create a new doctrine of Saints? Surely not, if there is any idea of adoration and building of altars. I admit, however, that I have made for private use a Moravian anniversary calendar, and fairly often I have a look at it. E. g. 25.8. birthday of Traugott Bachmann, one of the first missionaries in Tanganyika. 27.8. start of the hourly intercession in Herrnhut 1727, and anniversary of the death of Luise von Hayn, lea-



der of the single sisters at Herrnhut, poetess of "Jesus makes my heart rejoice." 5.9. death of br. Elias, one of the fathers of the Bohemian Brethren in the 15th century. 12.9. Johannes Christian Erhardt, helmsman of the vessel "Irene", after landing on the Labrador coast 1752, was murdered with six fellow brethren. I know, all these people - I have about 200 of them in my calendar - were sinners, sinners, however, under the grace and forgiveness of God and thus capable of committing themselves to the service of the Lord in his Church.

So this is my point: let us take seriously the communion with the Church around the throne of the Lamb, the oneness of the Church militant and the Church triumphant. Our fathers - I am sure - were aware of this connection with the "heavenly congregation" (obere Gemeine). We are in danger of losing this consciousness. But a theology which in fact denies or neglects this wholeness of the Church universal has lost a dimension indispensable to theology. And a church which tries to cope with the contemporary challenges of the world with the help of medicine, psychology and sociology, and which is unconscious of its own spiritual sources and roots, will soon dry up and wither. It has been and will be the Spirit of God, who resuscitates the Church, the spirit of love and peace, of prayer and adoration, and not our actions and programmes.

Having said this, it is necessary to say the following: the Moravian Church on its pilgrimage is

## 2. Challenged by the World's Needs and Dangers

The world, so disrupted und frightened, alarmed by the threat of atomic destruction, lack of essential resources, violence of armies and of terrorists, this, our world, badly needs help from anybody who can help in any way. Should not we as disciples of a merciful Lord be among the first who are ready to show mercy, to give effective help wherever it is needed? In the "Ground of the Unity," we read, "Jesus Christ maintains in love and faithfulness his commitment to this fallen world. Therefore we must remain concerned for this world. We may not withdraw from it through indifference, pride or fear...". We have to struggle for peace, for humane conditions of life, together with other Christians and even with people of other religions or ideologies. And of course this is not contrary to the spiritual life, to the worship of the Church; it is part of the Christian worship. It is the same Holy Spirit who kindles our hearts to adore the Lord, to sing Halleluja, and who inflames us to give assistance to a man in despair or to show solidarity with discriminated people not only in other countries but first of all in our own neighbourhood. "To withdraw from this world through indifference, pride or fear," I think, that is a real temptation for many of our church members, sometimes also for us in church administration. We have to deal a lot with "internal affairs", with dogmatic and liturgical questions, with church constitution and church finances. We work in a rut, and the real world around us gets out of sight. Even worse than this ecclesiastical mole mentality is the pride of the sectarian: I am one of God's children, while the godless world (1. John 5,19) lies in the power of the evil one, - so why should I dirty my hands with the affairs of this world? The Moravian Church partly stems from the pietistic movement with an emphasis on personal sanctification. Pietism lays stress on Paul's admonition not to be conformed to this world but



to be transformed by the renewal of our mind (Rom. 12,2). This transformation however does not bring Christians into a ghetto. Sanctification is primarily living in this world, with transformed attitudes to people, to politics, to economy, renewed in our hearts by the love and mercy of Jesus, by the dynamic hope of the Holy Spirit. I know how difficult it is to act or react as a Church - as a small Church like ours - in the network of present political and economic powers. Sometimes we may deceive ourselves about our motives. Do we really listen to our Master's voice when, in a synod, we take a distinct moral stand-point or pass a resolution on a political question? Or are we merely parrots of very profane prophets, victims of biased information? Who can claim to have the true perspective through all those thousands of various details which form the intricate life of our societies? To err is human. Should that be reason enough to be silent? Sometimes it may be wise to say nothing, especially when we know our information is not sufficient. Surely it is not the task of the Church to make comments on all current events. But if we want to serve Christ in the least of his brethren, we must not be silent in cases of oppression, of violence against the weak and the poor. The Church has to be the voice of the voiceless. Wherever it is possible, we have to identify the evils as evil: militarism, apartheid, economic pressure, unemployment, violation of human rights. If it is true - and I think it's true - that e.g. In 1980 Jamaica had to pay for Canadian tractors three and a half times as much sugar as it had to pay in 1966, we must say this is an evil. If only half of the news about oppression and terror in El Salvador is true, we have at least to express our concern for the people and the church in that country and to pray for them. When we see, as in our country, an atheistic ideology maintaining the monopoly of state schools - and all schools are state schools -, we have to mark this clearly as an evil. And so on.

To pillory political opponents is of course not what I regard to be our task as Christians. There are too many calumnies and there is too much scandal-mongering in the mass media. We should help people to preserve, not destroy their honour and dignity. Our fight against the evils mentioned before will only prove to be authentic when we are ready to take risks and to lose some of our advantages. We in Europe can declare our solidarity with those who fight against apartheid, and this world-wide solidarity may help a little. But the risk is not ours, and so, there will remain some uncertainty whether there is reality in our catchphrases. In the Moravian Church with its manifold cross connections between South and North, West and East we have a chance to get closer to the real circumstances of our sisters or brothers in other parts of the world. Before judging, we can listen to what they tell us about their sorrows and difficulties, their joys and hopes. I do not know whether this Unity Synod will prepare a message on social and political issues. If it does, I hope it will be the result of our attentive listening to one another, not merely a compromise or commonplace statements by a majority. We are here to listen to God's word and to each other and then, if we find togetherness in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, to say a word which might be helpful to others. When we speak we must not take too much into consideration the powerful in this world. I agree with Jürgen Moltmann's words (in a speech in Nairobi 1970): "Both sides in the social and political conflicts of our time consider the Christians in their midst as unreliable, and so, in a way, they are. Christians fight the unjust leaders, the racists, the



exploiters. But they will not allow themselves to be tempted by hate and terrorism. They will not allow the adversaries to determine and dictate the battleplan they are to follow. If it has to be, they can only enter into the demonic vicious circle of violence to fight violence, because they can do no other. What they really stand for is to overcome and to destroy the demonic vicious circle, and not to promote it." To take this stand, to act and speak with this passion for peace, will not yield much applause. Peacemakers are often suspected of being partisans of the respective enemy. So our action and passion for peace may result in suffering, participation in Christ's own Passion. The church in this world cannot exist without the authentic sign of the Cross. "A church which does not suffer misses out on something essential to the nature of the church." (Desmond Tutu)

The Moravian Church finds itself in very different cultural, social, political situations. Whatever the conditions in which we live, our Lord and Chief Elder is the same, and his love to us and our fellowmen is the same. It is the same Spirit who makes us sensitive and inventive. Wherever we live, Jesus Christ sends us to those who are in physical or spiritual need to help them or, perhaps, to suffer with them.

I am concluding this second point by quoting a passage from "The State of the Church Message" to the 1980 Synod of the American Southern Province: "If the Church of the 1980's is to experience genuine renewal in spirit and mission, it must become a more aggressive Church. The people who need God's love and salvation and wholeness of life are out there - next door or around the block. We as a Moravian Church of the 1980's must go to them and invite them to become members of the Body of Christ... We cannot find our fulfillment exclusively within the bounds of a narrow group loyalty. If we attempt it we shall self-destruct. The Church, having experienced the discernment of spiritual gifts, must move out with our committed gifted people into a frightened, uncertain, angry, hungry, sick, greedy, poor, thirsty world."

### 3. In Fellowship with other Pilgrims

This is the ecumenical chapter of my speech. Fellowship with all those who adore the name of our Lord - that has been one of the essentials of Moravianism from the time of the Bohemian Brethren. Unity with all who are children of the same father and brethren and sisters of Jesus - this seems so clear and simple, sometimes. But often we have the feeling that there is nothing more intricate than the matter of ecumenism. Problem upon problem, the progress to unity blocked by irrevocable convictions, by inflexible institutions, by ecclesiological sophism with financial background. Everyone who is in a leading position in any church is involved in this labyrinth. To close our eyes to the fact that we too are part of the problem of denominationalism would make it still worse. Of course we are not the people who could make very important contributions to the work of specialists on ecumenical theological questions. But we can show our openness in all negotiations towards more cooperation on the local and regional level, like a common ministry with another local congregation, or like the Church Covenant in Britain. Our openness should not only be shown in places where we are in a weak position and need another group to lean against but still more where we are in the position of a comparatively strong partner.



Fellowship among Christians and churches takes place within and out of reach of the World Council of Churches. So we have, and will have, fellow pilgrims among those who support and those who oppose the WCC. I understand some of the reasons which are given for the harsh criticism against the Council in Geneva and its policy. But I say frankly that in my view most of the criticism comes from wrong information or misinterpretation. However I do not see another interdenominational body which has worked so hard in theory and action, without claiming exclusive rights, for the unity of Christians and churches. I hope that we as the Moravian Church will be able to play our limited role in the great concert of churches in the future as our fathers have done in the past. -

In the present situation baptism and eucharist are of crucial importance. "We were all baptised into one body" (1. Cor. 12,13) says Paul, "and we all partake of one bread" (1. Cor. 10,17). This is simple and clear again. There is substantially only one baptism in whatever denomination. There is one bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, because it is the body of Christ broken for us and his blood shed for us.

And yet Christendom is divided at the Lord's table. In spite of all the talks and studies which have shown far-reaching conformity in the theological understanding of baptism and eucharist, there is only slow progress in mutual recognition of the two sacraments, not to speak of the matter of ministry. Some years ago the World Council of Churches published an authorized study on "One Baptism, One Eucharist, One Ministry", which seemed to me a break-through towards more visible unity. Theologians of very different traditions had found so much agreement that indeed the oneness prevailed over the dissimilarity, without concealing different positions. In the meantime I have got the impression that, like in former times, the confessional peculiarities and contrasts have raised their head. Moreover, new movements within the churches have brought a fresh spiritual impetus but in several places also caused new division.

You know that we have before us proposals on baptism, Christian education, membership in the church. Dealing with these matters, we have ecumenical responsibility. How can we maintain the biblical oneness of baptism (Eph. 4,5) in accordance with the tradition of most of the "old" churches, without defending the misuse of "automatic" baptism of all children in a pseudo-Christian society? How can we clearly condemn re-baptism as a disregard of God's own action in the baptism of infants and at the same time embrace our Baptist brethren and others who are not yet able to recognize the "sprinkling of infants" as baptism? Our forthcoming decisions will be steps of special importance on the Moravian pilgrimage.

#### 4. In Expectation of the Lord's Kingdom

The Lord is King. He reigns over the world and over the church. His realm is not only Canaan, but Egypt and the desert and the Red Sea. His power prevails, not through guns nor diplomacy. His Spirit operates with the armour of love and mercy and charity. We can see the signs of the Kingdom: joy and forgiveness, fellowship and prayer. We see these signs, thankfully and surprised, within and outside our church boundaries. The Lord is present, he holds the whole world in his hands. One of the great teachers of our church, John Amos Come-



nus, has stressed this biblical truth: God's creation and preservation goes on, and the salvation centered in Christ, in his crucifixion and resurrection, is effective for the individual and for society, for the believers and for the others. God's love aims at the whole of mankind.

But still we live in a paradoxical, not in a paradisiacal world. What we experience now as signs of the Lord's Kingdom, is only the pledge of what is to come. "Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face" (1. Kor. 13,12). We look forward to the consummation of the world. The time of Babel is passing, the time of Sion is coming. "Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace for evermore." (Engl. Hymn Book 369,2). This message of the coming Christ, the Prince of Peace, is an integral part of our faith and preaching. We cannot be satisfied with an immanent eschatology. Revolution and evolution may be instruments of the Lord to push forward his plan. But man-made programmes are not capable of shaping the new world. Our hope is Christ himself.

To preach on apocalyptic texts from John's Revelation or Daniel is of course dangerous. We may fall into exegetical traps and tell dreams of our fantasy instead of interpreting God's word. I do not think we have to paint the colours of the hell or to write a calendar of the coming years with the stations on the way to the Last Judgement. But we have to proclaim Jesus Christ as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebr. 12,2) and also as the perfecter of the world. In this sense we are perfectionists, and only in this sense. We cannot imagine the glory of the new Heaven and the new Earth, and the similes and images we draw in our sermons are poor attempts to describe the indescribable.

May our Moravian Church be and become a praising church, full of hope, walking forward. Whether the name "Moravian" will last until the Lord comes is not important. What matters is that the Church, His Body, remains together with the Head; that the Church, the Bride, lives in joyful expectation of her Husband. In this Church we accept the water of life, a free gift to all who desire it (Revelation 22) day by day. And we look forward, calling: Come, Lord Jesus!