

PIOTR KOPIEC

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“FROM THE TRUE TREASURE OF THE CHURCH(ES):
DISCOVERING THE GOSPEL TOGETHER.”
ECUMENICAL CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL
ECUMENICAL FELLOWSHIP
Wittenberg, 21–28 August 2017

On 21–28 August 2017, the employees of the Ecumenical Institute of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL): Rev. Przemysław Kantyka, PhD, DSc, Assoc. Prof. (KUL), Piotr Kopiec, PhD, DSc, and Rev. Tomasz Siemieniec, PhD, took part in an ecumenical conference organized by the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF) together with many other denominational and cross-denominational church organizations. The motto of the meeting, “From the True Treasure of the Church(es). Rediscovering the Gospel Together,” alluded to Martin Luther’s 62nd thesis, and the whole event was called the Wittenberg Ecumenical Assembly.

The congress took place in the context of two anniversaries, which dominated it thematically. The first one was the quincentenary of the Reformation, which had a particularly intensive and symbolic dimension in the place where the Reformation had started. The other one was the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the International Ecumenical Fellowship, the largest of the organizations participating in the event. Established in 1967, the IEF currently comprises ten national regions (British, Belgian, Czech, French, Spanish, German, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, and Hungarian), which meet biennially (before 2011 they met annually) at an international congress in order to pray together, to study comparative theology as well as the principles and history of ecumenism, and to discover the Christian community in friendship. The Polish region

PIOTR KOPIEC, PHD, DSC—ecumenical theologian and sociologist, Assistant Professor at the Department of Protestant Theology at the Ecumenical Institute of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; he is interested in Protestant theology, particularly contemporary, and in the social and cultural processes associated with the postmodern era; address for correspondence—e-mail address: petrko@kul.pl

was represented by the above-mentioned three members of KUL's Ecumenical Institute staff as well as by others who were also present, namely: Irena Saszko, PhD, a graduate of the KUL Ecumenical Institute; by doctoral students at the KUL Faculty of Theology: Rev. Paweł Samiczak (Ecumenical Institute, KUL) and Rev. Stanisław Sadowski (Institute of Biblical Sciences, KUL); and by other IEF members from Poland.

Wittenberg is a small town, located somewhat out of the way, surrounded by beautiful forests and picturesque villages with timber-framed houses. Its panorama is defined by two churches: the Town Church (*Stadtkirche*) and the Castle Church (*Schlosskirche*), both of which witnessed the events that so strongly influenced the history of the whole world. Apart from the churches, what attracts attention in the town is two other central landmarks. One of them is the majestic town hall, on whose terrace there are words to be seen that are often attributed to Luther: "Fear God, respect authority, and do not side with the revolutionaries." The other one is the university, founded in 1502 by Frederick III the Wise, which was the place where Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon worked for many years and from where, in the first decades of the Reformation, the ideas of the emerging Protestantism spread in all directions. The university, as well as the whole town, is full of mementos of the lives of key figures of the Reformation, such as Luther's and Melancthon's houses, their graves, the rooms where they taught, or restaurants that take pride in the fact that Luther ate there. For historians, theologians, or ecumenists, the town is a living illustration of the knowledge they acquire from books or during lectures, and the sights they see are not only biographical but also theological references. One of these references are Luther's words visible on the structural beam of the university: "Nothing depends on me, but I want to respond to the Word of God with a joyful heart and with complete trust, for which God endowed me with a joyful and fearless Spirit."

In the year of the Reformation jubilee Wittenberg lost its sleepy character. Hundreds of tourists came in and out of the town; they explored it following one of the several thematic routes. The university and other venues that offered proper conditions played host to participants in tens of meetings, scientific symposiums, workshops, concerts, and church services. These events took place one after another, though sometimes they were held simultaneously, which gave an impression of extraordinary animation at times. What additionally contributed to this impression was informal groups of various social or political activists, members of social and religious movements, who made Wittenberg the place where they presented their demands, sometimes in very unconventional and picturesque ways. For instance, IEF members met a cross-denominational group of Christians from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (these were mainly Protestants, but also members of the Orthodox Church and Catholics), who went down the main street of the town wearing stylized medieval habits and shouting out slogans: *Solus Christus*, *Sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fides*. At the Castle Church, opposite the iron door on which there is an engraved representation of the 95 theses formulated by Luther in 1517, these people thanked German Christians for the support received during the years of communist rule.

Thus, the Wittenberg Ecumenical Assembly proceeded in an inspiring atmosphere and itself provided inspiration to its participants. Each day was given a motto, which served as the keynote for the issues addressed in the successive stages of the pro-

gramme. The motto for Monday was “Seeking Treasure”; for Tuesday—“Justification and Liberation”; for Wednesday—“Discovering God Anew”; for Thursday—“Justice and Peace,” for Friday—“From Division to Churches in Communion”; for Saturday—“Sharing Our Treasures”; for Sunday—“Celebrating Communion”; and the motto for the next Monday was “A New Way.”

The conference opened with a service in the Castle Church, officiated by Bishop Margot Kässman, former President of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. The consecutive days followed a similar schedule, based on the order of IEF conferences established a few decades ago, although the Wittenberg meeting had its special character, too. Every day started with matins, comprising meditation on biblical fragments as well as theological reflection and singing. Next, there were lectures, which were unique in that they were delivered by two speakers, who then entered into dialogue with each other and answered questions from the audience. The issues discussed during such plenary sessions were then explored further in small discussion groups. After a lunch break there were workshops, organized in between ten and twenty language and thematic groups. During the workshops the participants also had the opportunity to see the town with a qualified guide. In the evening there was a service in one of Wittenberg’s several churches—first of all in the already mentioned Castle Church and Town Church. In accordance with the tradition of IEF conferences, each day was dedicated to a particular denominational tradition. And so, on Wednesday there was an Evangelical Anglican Communion Service, on Friday—an Orthodox liturgy of breaking the bread, and on Saturday—a Catholic Holy Mass. The novelty compared to the previous congresses was the greater emphasis placed on ecumenical liturgical forms, which found expression, above all, in the ecumenical Lima Liturgy on Sunday before noon. It should be noted that this event was particularly solemn, because for the first time this liturgy was celebrated with such a large group of Christians representing various denominations. The service was broadcast by several TV channels. A liturgy of reconciliation was held on Tuesday, and on Thursday there was a service called Thomas Mass (*Thomasmesse*), whose somewhat controversial form has been developed in the contemporary Finnish Lutheran Church.

As in previous years, the programme of the conference included not only lectures and prayer meetings but also entertainment and free time, in which it was possible to enjoy ecumenical friendship, though it should be noted that, compared to other IEF congresses, there was less free time in Wittenberg. The participants could go for one of the trips offered in the programme. One of the options was a trip to Torgau, the town where the Torgau Articles were drawn up, which served as the foundation of the Augsburg Confession, and where Martin Luther’s wife, Katharina von Bora, was buried; other options were a trip to the Wörlitz palace complex or a tour of the vicinity of Wittenberg during a cruise on the Elbe. On Saturday evening, a fairly large group of participants in the conference went to the Luther Pop-Oratorium, organized that day in Wittenberg—a great music and entertainment event during which several joint choirs and about a dozen professional singers and dancers presented a libretto based on the key points of Luther’s biography. The spectators were impressed by the panache of the performance, although it must be admitted that the content of the libretto may have stirred some controversy.

The highlight of the congress was the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the International Ecumenical Fellowship, held on Thursday evening in the dashing interior of the Town House. Olaf Fykse Tveit, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, took part in the celebrations and delivered a speech on the current problems faced by Christianity and the ecumenical movement, also discussing the main points of commitment of the Geneva-based organization. The programme of celebrating the IEF anniversary also included a banquet, singing songs together, and an art and entertainment programme, whose preparation was the responsibility of particular regions.

The Wittenberg Ecumenical Assembly undoubtedly gave its participants many experiences. The very rich programme, filled with lectures, prayers, and time spent together, inspired deep reflection on the meaning of ecumenism as well as on the meaning of Christian faith and community. The topic of Christian liberty, which is characteristic of Lutheran theology and which dominated in the lectures and homilies, at the same time created a unique opportunity for Christians from outside the Protestant world to come into contact with a somewhat different theological sensitivity. Certain moments of controversy did occur during the conference, but this is an intrinsic element of intense ecumenical meetings, where difficult topics are not avoided. This controversy, however, did not obscure the experience of ecumenical friendship based on common faith in salvation offered by Jesus Christ.

Translated by Piotr Czyżewski



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