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THE ACCRA CONFESSION

An example of the ecclesiological implications of public theology²

ABSTRACT

The report of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ghana in 2004 with the title *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice*, has resonated within the Reformed churches worldwide. In this document, WARC, as an alliance of faith communities, reacts to the devastating effects of economic globalisation. It offers a faith perspective on a phenomenon, the negative consequences of which all people, but especially those in the global South, are experiencing. Following an extensive summary of the document, this article will reflect upon some ecclesiological implications and problems related to being a church that intends to speak out on social and public issues. In order to better understand the way Reformed churches tend to go public, a comparison will be made between the Accra document and a recent document issued by the Roman Catholic Church that also deals with public issues.

INTRODUCTION

The recent 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ghana in 2004 – where the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv was represented by, among others, its General Secretary, Dr Antiev, as observer (Asling 2005:309) – produced three reports: one on covenanting, one on mission, and one on spirituality. The first one particularly, *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice*, has attracted the attention of and is resonating within Reformed churches worldwide (Asling 2005:153-160). In this document, WARC, as an alliance of faith communities, reacts to the devastating effects of economic globalisation. It offers a faith perspective on a phenomenon, the negative consequences

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2 This contribution was presented at the first conference of the Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies on the theme of Theological Education for Nation Building. It was held at the Reformed Theological Seminary, Mkar – Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria, from 28 February to 2 March 2006. This conference was instrumental in the preparation for the Joint Project on Religion and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies.

of which all people, but especially those in the global South, are experiencing. Following an extensive summary of the document, this article will reflect upon some ecclesiological implications and problems related to being a church that intends to speak out on social and public issues. In order to better understand the way Reformed churches tend to go public, a comparison will be made between the Accra document and a recent document issued by the Roman Catholic Church that also deals with public issues. It is hoped that this will contribute to an awareness of the ecclesiological issues at stake when churches decide to go public.

THE ACCRA CONFESSION AS A FAITH STANCE

The document *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice* consists of three parts, preceded by an introduction. This introduction (paragraphs 1-4) describes the background of the document. The 23rd General Council of WARC, in Debrecen in 1997, invited member churches to enter into a process of “recognition, education, and confession (*processus confessionis*)” (1). After observing that nine member churches had in the meantime committed themselves to “a faith stance” (2) and, after being confronted during the conference with the former slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast (3), the churches decided to take “a decision of faith commitment” (4).

The first section, *Reading the signs of the times*, refers to Romans 8:22 – creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for liberation. It also refers to the challenges issued by the cries of the people who suffer, and by the woundedness of creation itself (5). Scandals such as the growing income gap between rich and poor, the growing number of people living in absolute poverty, the increase in the debt of poor countries, the millions dying of preventable diseases, the poor who die from the global HIV/Aids pandemic, and women and children being the majority of those living in poverty, are all a denial of God’s call to life for all (7). The consequences of the plundering of the earth as a result of policies promoting unlimited growth among industrialised countries and the drive for profit by transnational corporations have become clear, namely the rapid extinction of species, climate change, depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, threats to fresh water, a global increase in storms and flooding, and the loss of livelihoods. Furthermore, increased radioactivity continues to threaten people’s health globally, and life forms and cultural knowledge are patented for financial gains (8). These signs of the times have become so alarmingly obvious that they need to be interpreted. The root cause of this massive threat to life, the document says, is the unjust economic system, a system that is defended and protected even by military might (6). This system of neoliberal economic globalisation is based on certain specific beliefs (9), namely:

- i. That ownership of private property brings no social obligation.
- ii. That wealth for all is best achieved by capital speculation, liberalisation and deregulation of the market, privatisation of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investment and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital.
- iii. That social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.

The document unmaskes these beliefs as constituting an ideology, one that demands endless sacrifices from the poor and creation, and one that makes false promises and demands total allegiance, all of which amounts to idolatry (10). This immoral economic system is defended by “empire”, meaning

the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests (11).

Since the 1980s, through the transnationalisation of capital, neoliberalism set out to dismantle the welfare functions of the state (12). The government of the United States of America and its allies, together with international finance and trade institutions (IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization) use political, economic, or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of the owners of capital (13). In concluding this part of the document, it is stated that economic globalisation and geopolitics, backed by neoliberal ideology, protect the interests of the powerful and holds all people captive. This system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is condemned, with a reference to Jesus’ call to choose between God and Mammon (Luke 16:13), as unfaithfulness to God (15).

This analysis of the current global economic order is followed by a *Confession of faith in the face of the economic injustice and ecological destruction*, affirming that “global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians”. As a consequence, the participants in the Accra meeting felt obliged to confess before God and one another (16), and what follows is a confession of faith in the Triune God (17), Father (18-27), Son (28-31) and Holy Spirit (32-36), with corresponding anathemas. Based on faith in God’s sovereignty over all of creation and because of the promise in Christ of a life in fullness (18), economic systems that defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable, and all of creation from such fullness of life, are rejected together with any claim of economic, political, and military empire that acts contrary to God’s just rule (19). Because of God’s inclusive covenant of grace with all creation (20), the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market are rejected (21). Because of the accountability to God in terms of the dignity and well-being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation (22), the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth at the cost of millions and of God’s creation is rejected (23). Because of the justice of God, caring in a special way for the poor and calling for a just relationship with all creation (24), the ideology that puts profit before people, and all teaching that supports such an ideology in the name of the gospel are rejected (25). Because of God’s call to stand with those who are victims of injustice (26), any theology that claims that God is only with the rich, or that claims that human interests dominate nature, are rejected together with forms of injustice that destroy right relations (27).

Because Jesus brought justice to the oppressed (28), any church practice or teaching that excludes the poor or the care for creation in its mission is rejected (29). Because of God’s call for the unity of the church in order to make the reconciliation in Christ visible (30), all attempts in the church to separate justice and unity are condemned (31).

Because of the call to hope in the Spirit (32), participants committed themselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth (33), while being aware that they stand under the judgement of God's justice themselves. Complicity with the current neoliberal economic global system, acknowledgement of being captive to the culture of consumerism and competitive greed, failing to play a role as stewards and companions of nature, and the disunity of the Reformed family are all confessed as sins (34). The conviction of being called to confess, witness, and act, are reiterated (35), and this confessing part ends in Trinitarian praise of God (36).

In the final part, *Covenanting for justice*, the confession leads to a commitment to work together for justice in the economy and on earth (37-38, 42), to translate the confession in a prophetic manner to local congregations (39), to follow up the recommendations on economic justice and ecological issues (40), and to work together with others towards a just economy and the integrity of creation (41).

THE CONFSSIONAL STATUS OF THE ACCRA CONFSSION

The above summary of the content of the Accra Confession omitted a reference to one paragraph that is crucial in understanding its ecclesiological framework. Paragraph 15 reads:

Faith commitment may be expressed in various ways according to regional and theological traditions: as confession, as confessing together, as faith stance, as being faithful to the covenant of God. We choose confession, not meaning a classical doctrinal confession, because the World Alliance of Reformed Churches cannot make such a confession, but to show the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time and the call of Debrecen. We invite member churches to receive and respond to our common witness.

The plenary debate agreed to include this explanatory paragraph in the understanding of "confession" in the draft text (Möller 2005:202-213, esp. 205).³ Seong Won Park, the Executive Secretary of WARC's Department of Cooperation and Witness, indicates that, despite the consensus about the problematic nature of today's global economy and about the need to respond in a confessional manner, some delegates were in favour of a declaration or a statement instead of a confession. In order to avoid division on the question of whether or not this issue constituted a *status confessionis*, the General Council distinguished its faith stance against economic injustice only in the form of a confession in the traditional sense (Park 2005:199). Paragraph 15 justifies this decision with a formal argument. As an alliance, not being a church itself, WARC cannot make this statement into a classical doctrinal confession, but it leaves this possibility open to individual member churches.

In fact, the confessional status of a declaration on economic injustice and ecological destruction has been part of the discussions within WARC since the suggestion to declare a *status confessionis* made by the Southern African constituency when the latter met in Kitwe, Zambia, in 1995. The Debrecen General Council of 1997 decided to allow time for careful

³ The proceedings of the meeting are vague regarding this inclusion as can be seen in Asling (2005:32-33, 42, 46).

reflection, “a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession” – a so-called *processus confessionis* – instead of a quick move to *status confessionis* (Opočenský 1997:198). The decision to continue with a confessional approach without declaring a *status confessionis* was matched by the Executive Committee in its meeting in Bangalore in 2000, which gave the process a more comprehensive name, namely “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth” (Park 2005:192). Due to uncertainty on the right way to address economic issues as confessional issues, the assembly broadened the scope with an action aspect: confession leads to covenanting – another typical Reformed focus (Smit 2004:172-174).

The call for *status confessionis* at the regional meeting in Kitwe in 1995 echoed the earlier statement by the 22nd General Council in Seoul in 1989 on the issue of a *status confessionis*, namely that

[a]ny declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error to truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The church's practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of *status confessionis*. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless the danger inherent in that error also calls in question the integrity of proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing (Opočenský 1990:173-175).

Milan Opočenský described the change of “status” in Kitwe to “process” in Debrecen as a shift in focus from credibility and faithfulness to effectiveness (Opočenský 2003:392). Explaining the term *status confessionis*, he stresses the need for a radically challenging situation, a *Grenzsituation*, a matter of life and death, as a necessary condition before we can call it a *status confessionis* (Opočenský 2003:394; Smit 2004:170). Opočenský understands the confessional terminology as part of the Reformed tradition, always struggling for an adequate expression of Reformed faith in every new circumstance and place, and at every new time (Opočenský 2003:393). He refers to the examples of the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934 and the Belhar Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986 (Opočenský 2003:393-394).

The Debrecen General Assembly stated that the current economic injustice and ecological destruction has reached a crisis level to the extent that it has become a matter of life and death: the survival of planet Earth is at stake.⁴ The Accra General Assembly confirmed

⁴ “In many parts of the world, Reformed churches and communities are challenged by the appalling circumstances in which many people live and by the threat of the ongoing destruction of the environment. Many believe that the time has come to make a confession of faith which rejects and struggles against these injustices, while affirming our faith in the triune God who in Christ offers a new creation” (*Debrecen 1997*, in Asling 2005:197-198).

this conviction by affirming that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and discipleship as Christians, and that by remaining silent or refusing to act, the integrity of the faith is at stake (§16).

ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS BEHIND THE ACCRA CONFESSION

As became clear in the overview of the development of the Accra Confession, the urgency of the current disastrous economic and ecological situation was put on the agenda of WARC by the Southern African churches. And, as an article by René Krüger, President of the *Institutio Universitaria* ISEDET in Buenos Aires shows, some Latin American churches have been supporting this plea wholeheartedly. He describes the Accra Confession with perspectives from the South as very challenging, especially for the churches and individual Christians from the North (Krüger 2005:226-233). Krüger's point of departure is the injustice and human despair caused by the devastating collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001, resulting in a social explosion. He challenges the North's hermeneutical approach to neoliberal globalisation with its logic of "keep the good and correct the bad". Krüger urges churches, especially those of the North, to choose what he calls a "hermeneutics of life".

What are you doing about the religion of Mammon? Which themes are defining the agendas of congregational councils, the meetings of church leaders, synods? What motivates professors and students in theological faculties where the next generation of ministers and teachers of religious education are trained? Which are the overarching concerns, themes and tasks of theology and church policy? What part is played in your reflection by the connection between money, property, poverty and eternal life? In this regard the South today is also asking the North: Are you willing to share with us the Bible's critical presentation of social, economic and political developments? Are you willing to share with us the fundamental biblical concerns for a life in love, dignity and abundance? (Krüger 2005:233).

These powerful and challenging questions make it very clear that, for the churches to speak out on social issues, they need a hermeneutical reorientation. Speaking out on social issues – thus, practising public theology – is not just an occasional business, but also an expression of a church that has gone through a conversion process. Krüger is addressing in the first place the churches of the North, but in the context of this conference he also puts the issue on the table of the Reformed Theological Seminary of Mkar-Gboko – at the moment its staff is considering the development of the theological curriculum for the coming year – and challenges the NKST synod to make social issues a substantial element of its agenda as well.

However, besides that, the logic of Krüger's argument also reveals another aspect of the ecclesiological presuppositions behind the Accra Confession. The acceptance or refusal of neo-liberal globalisation is linked to the choice between Mammon and God. As a consequence, the rejection of this economic model must take the form of a confessional statement. From what has been described in the previous paragraph, it becomes clear that not all partner churches within WARC will follow the same logic. And the Nigerian churches' theological seminaries, too, are invited by WARC to consider the way they think critical

social issues are best addressed publicly – by statements or by confessions? Can a faith stance on pressing social issues be expressed only in a confession, or is the option of a statement a better sign that the church is not making the radical choice between God and Mammon?

A PLEA FOR A RESTRAINT IN THE USE OF CONFESSIONAL LANGUAGE

In order to stimulate the discussion on the ecclesiological consequences of public theology, one not only can put forward some ecclesiological presuppositions underlying the Accra Confession, but some arguments for a restraint in the use of confessional language, should churches take a faith stance as advocated above. Already before the start of the Accra General Assembly, Ulrich Möller published some critical questions on a *status confessionis* (Möller 2004:176-189). This Ulrich Duchrow tried to refute (Duchrow 2004:200-204). In my opinion they are still on the table after the final draft of the General Assembly has been accepted.

Regarding the difference between Barmen, Belhar and Accra

Although the Accra text itself does not refer to the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar Confession, it is evident to everybody that these documents were inspiring examples, most of all for Southern African churches that initiated the process that led to the acceptance of the Accra Confession. Still, an important difference remains between the former two documents and the Accra Confession. Through their heretical identification of church and “Volk”, the *Deutsche Christen* jeopardised the unity of the church, as did the Dutch Reformed Church with its theological justification of apartheid. However, in the case of an unjust economy and ecological destruction, no member church of WARC is justifying neoliberal globalisation in its teachings. It is a moral issue that demands a strongly worded condemnation by the church. We most definitely find ourselves in a situation that demands urgent theological reflection (and action) by the churches; however, I do not think this should be done in the form of a *processus confessionis*. Duchrow’s reference to the “prosperity gospel” is not convincing (it is not the official church teaching of the member churches of WARC), nor is his reference to the hidden agenda of the neoliberal market economy (2004:202-203) (in contrast to the open intentions of the Nazi and apartheid ideologies) a sufficient ground for a *status confessionis*. Therefore, I prefer to restrict the use of confessions to situations where, due to heretical teaching, the unity of the church is a stake.

Regarding the risk of the strategy

It remains questionable whether the theological reflection in the long term is really helped by the declaration of a *processus confessionis* when many churches in reality are still only beginning to theologially reflect on the global economy (Möller 2004:184-185). In the short term, a strongly worded condemnation of the ideology of neoliberal economic globalisation, defended by empire, might seem a victory in the struggle to fight its terrible consequences. However, when it becomes clear that the situation is more complex than the analysis offered in the Accra Confession, the individual faithful and synods may come to distrust the analysis of WARC – they may lose sight of the fact that this document admits to the enormity and

complexity of the situation, and intends to refrain from simple answers. Not all synods may react in a way similar to that of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, which endorsed the conclusions of the document without fully accepting what it considered an incomplete analysis, and because they had reservations about the form of the Accra Confession.⁵ Other churches may not be inclined to consider economic globalisation as a faith issue under the pretext that they cannot agree with an incomplete analysis combined with a confessional statement, or because they are of the opinion that the identity of the church is not at stake. So it is questionable whether addressing this very pressing economic issue in confessional language (declaring a *status confessionis* or a *processus confessionis*) is the best way to put pressure on the churches, especially those of the North.

Regarding the danger of ideology

Putting theological emphasis on the issue by way of the declaration of a *processus confessionis* increases the risk of the ideological abuse of theology. It is one thing to translate the ethical challenges of neoliberal globalisation in terms of faith affirmations (Botman 2003:381), but it is another to suggest that the declaration of a *processus confessionis* on this issue will eventually result in the declaration of a *status confessionis* that will decide who is inside and who is outside the communion of the church.⁶ Under pressure of Nazi and apartheid ideology, some Christians in Germany and later in South Africa were tempted to supply a theological justification of the identification of *Volk* and race. It remains a warning for us today not to go the same way by radicalising theological justifications or condemnations on ethical issues that open the door for theologically justified ideological stances. Instead of declaring a *processus confessionis* that may lead to a *status confessionis*, or of demonising economic structures and mechanisms, there is a need for “recognition, education, and confession”, as the Accra document says. However, this process of recognition, education, and confession should be separated from a connotation of heresy in which the unity of the church is at stake.

Regarding the Reformed character of this statement

Dirkie Smit refers to the specific Reformed character of the confessional approach in the Accra Confession in its reference to specific situations, in its appeal to action, and in the use of Reformed theological themes – such as the sovereignty of God, the rejection of idolatry,

⁵ The General Synod 24/25 November 2005 of the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* accepted the Accra Confession, although it preferred the expression “Accra Declaration”. In preparation, the members of the synod were offered a paper on faith and the economy with the title *Accra’s appel* (“Accra’s appeal”). It refers, among other things, to the identification of the actors in economic globalisation as international financial institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, “Washington”, and Transnational Cooperations. This was considered a simplification, because first, in many cases, the intention is not the impoverishment of people and, second, because more actors are involved, including the consumers, even from the South. The report explains the problem of the neoliberal globalisation in terms of the dominance of the (current) financial system (p. 12). The Accra document is described as a document in which the church speaks in a prophetic and confessional manner. The prophetic element refers to the experience of and the option for the poor and suffering, while the confessional aspect refers to the hopeful perspective of the kingdom of God.

⁶ Cf. the title Möller’s 2004 article, “Folgt im ökumenischen Prozess des Bekenkens jetzt die Feststellung des *status confessionis*? Standortbestimmung vor der Generalversammlung des Reformierten Weltbundes 2004 in Accra.”

the confession of responsibility for economic injustice, and the confessional and covenantal approach (Smit 2004:164-174). However, such a reference to the “Reformed character” is not without danger. Other Reformed Christians who see themselves as proud heirs of the Reformed confessions and traditions in the Netherlands reject the Accra Confession, not because it deals with an economic issue, but because they are of the opinion that the document takes as its point of departure non-Reformed presuppositions on the understanding of God, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. Many Reformed churches proudly claim to be heirs to a tradition that produced such brave documents as the Barmen Declaration and the Belhar Confession. However, especially since being Reformed, a self-critical reflex forces us to admit that we are the Christian tradition with the worst record of church schisms in history. More than once, a dogmatic, ecclesiological, or ethical difference of opinion proved so divisive that a *status confessionis* was declared, which led to a permanent break in communion. At the same time, it is important to be aware that all major Christian traditions have become aware of the need to address the terrible consequences of economic globalisation. Recently, the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, also dealt with economic and ecological issues, and spoke out on them by accepting the so-called AGAPE Document, without feeling the need to make a new confessional statement on these issues in the way the Accra Confession did.

DEUS CARITAS EST

After the identification of some ecclesiological presuppositions in the Accra Confession and the discussion of the nature of its confessional language as examples of ecclesiological issues related to public theology, this section focuses on another contemporary example of public theology, but from another Christian tradition. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI published his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, on Christian love.⁷ It is a totally different genre of church document, but what the Pope writes in it helps us to see more clearly the ecclesiological element at stake. Encyclicals are open pastoral letters written by popes. Its addressees are the clergy, those who have taken religious vows, as well as all the lay faithful. With his letter on *caritas*, the pope focuses the attention of believers on the core of Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny (§1). He frames his encyclical in the context of “a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance and even a duty of hatred and violence” (1). The Pope unfolds the theme of Christian love in two connected parts: the first, under the title of “The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History”, is on the love God lavishes upon us. The second part, entitled “Caritas: the Practice of Love by the Church as a ‘Community of Love’”, is on the love that we, in turn, must share with others. In the context of the theme of this conference on public theology, the focus here will be on the second part.

⁷ Originally planned to be published on 25 December 2005, but actually released on 25 January 2006, the day of the commemoration of the conversion of Saint Paul.

This second part offers a description of “the Church’s charitable activity as a manifestation of Trinitarian love” (19) and continues with the description of charity as a responsibility of the Church, both on the level of each individual member, as well as on the level of the entire ecclesial community. This responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning, as is attested by Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-37. Believers held all things in common and there was no longer any distinction between rich and poor. As the Church grew, this radical communion could not be preserved, but its essential core remained: within the community of believers there can never be room for poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified existence (20). The communal ministry of charity became part of the fundamental structure of the Church in the formation of the group of seven deacons (Acts 6) (21) and proved to be one of her essential activities (22-24). Thus, the first conclusion of this section of the encyclical can only be that, next to the proclamation of the Word of God (*kerygma-marturia*) and celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*) is part of the Church’s threefold responsibility, which expresses her deepest nature. And second, in the Church as God’s family in the world, no one ought to go without the necessities of life and, at the same time, its charity also extends beyond the boundaries of the church (25).

The Pope then continues his reflection with a section on justice and charity, which is particularly interesting for our conference. Since the nineteenth century, the objection has been raised – especially by Marxism – that the poor do not need charity but justice, and that, instead of contributing through individual works of charity to maintaining the status quo, we need to build a just social order in which all receive their share of the world’s goods and will no longer depend on charity. The Pope admits that there is truth to this argument. The pursuit of justice must be a fundamental norm of the State, and the aim of a just social order must be to guarantee each person a share of the community’s goods (26). After the industrialisation of society in the nineteenth century, the Church’s leadership was initially slow to react. However, since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the Church has permanently developed its social teaching into a social doctrine offering fundamental guidelines (27). The Pope points out two elements that must be taken into consideration if one wants to define the relationship between justice and charity. First of all, the Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet, at the same time, she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. Second, *caritas* will always prove necessary, even in the most just society (28). Promoting justice being an indirect duty of the Church, one element of her core business is doing charity, doing what corresponds to her nature (29). Globalisation has created more channels for communication and humanitarian assistance, and cooperation between State, Church agencies, and Roman Catholic and other churches’ charitable agencies (30). Still, the Church’s charitable activities have their own distinctiveness. The Pope distinguishes between three essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity:

- i. Christian *caritas* is not only executed with professional competence but also with a heartfelt concern.
- ii. Christian *caritas* must be independent of parties and ideologies, because it is not a means of changing the world ideologically and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which humankind always needs.
- iii. Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in proselytism (31).

Finally, the Pope turns his attention to those responsible for the Church's charitable activity. The true subject of various Catholic organisations that undertake a ministry of charity is the Church herself, at all levels, from all parishes, through the particular churches, to the universal Church. The fundamental ecclesial nature of the ministry of *caritas* becomes clear in the promise made by the ordained bishop in the ordination rite to be welcoming and merciful to the poor and all those in need of consolidation and assistance (32). Thus, the personnel who carry out the Church's charitable activity must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love. As a consequence, the personnel of Catholic charitable organisations want to work with the Church and therefore with the Bishop (33). Interior openness to the Catholic dimension of the Church stands not in contradiction with working harmoniously with other organisations, and respects what is distinctive about the service, which Christ requested of his disciples. The activities should be driven by love, humility, and prayer (34-36). In *caritas*, faith, hope, and prayer go together (39). In conclusion, the Pope refers to the examples of the saints and especially to Mary (40-42).

This document is only indirectly linked to our theme. If we have identified the agenda behind the Accra Confession as the intention to put pressure on the churches of the North to be more outspoken in their condemnation of the neoliberal globalisation, then we can refer to the appeal made on Catholic charitable organisations to confirm and strengthen their Christian, Roman Catholic identity as the core of the encyclical. In relation to our topic, a few elements may be mentioned that may help to identify issues that have to be taken into consideration when developing a public theology.

- Reading *Deus Caritas Est*, one is struck by the development of the argument from the heart of the Christian message in strong biblical and theological language, with the exception of a few passages, to which Reformed Christians can easily relate. It will be a challenge for churches going public on ethical issues, to relate their convictions well to what is at stake in Scripture, to the confessions and theological traditions of the church through the ages. The more the actual ethical stances of churches have deep roots in the Bible and the tradition of the church, the more convincing their arguments will be. By starting with an economic analysis and the conciseness of the references to Christian principles in the confessional part, the Accra Confession lacks being embedded in strong theological discourse.
- *Deus Caritas Est* reminds us of the role Christian tradition has traditionally reserved for the State. The Accra Confession does not only lament the eclipse of the nation state under the economic pressure and ideology of neoliberal globalisation, it also seems to

presuppose that the church itself will be the instrument to realise the dream of a just society. After the rise of the nation states, expectations soared, even expectations that they might turn out to be the instruments par excellence to establish the kingdom of God. After bad experiences with state power and the pressure it feels from economic globalisation, a tendency is growing of not expecting any positive influence of state power in relation to justice. When churches go public, they have to consider the role they expect the State to play.

- *Deus Caritas Est* links its theological discourse on *caritas* to the ministerial structures of the church. The *caritas* promise in the ordination rite of the bishop signifies the centrality of *caritas* in the life of the church. It presents a very strong argument why the church feels obliged to speak out on issues such as *caritas* and justice. It is part of its central mission. Reformed churches have a somewhat different ecclesiology that identifies the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as the central marks of the church. Public theology within the Reformed tradition will be strengthened if it can be related to the way it understands preaching and the sacraments. It will be a challenge to find ways to relate the preaching ministry of the church to social issues people are faced with. As long as the interpretation of Scripture and proclamation is understood solely in terms of individual salvation, it will be difficult to explain why it should be a task of the church to also consider social issues. When the minister understands his/her calling to minister the Word not only in terms of relating to his own congregants but also in terms of reaching out to those outside of it as well, then public theology becomes part of reaching out to society and its issues. Once baptism is explained as burying the old life with its old communal belongings and as beginning a new life in Christ in which there is neither Jew nor gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free person, then one realises the social implications of baptism. When the Lord's Supper is joyfully experienced as a time of brother and sisterhood at the table where the Lord Jesus is the host, then the public theology of the church will become embedded much more strongly in its sacramental interpretation of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

If churches, ecclesial bodies, or theological institutes want to go public and engage in public theology, they are forced to consider important ecclesiological issues such as the style (confessional or in the form of a declaration), the role of the State, and the relationship between public issues and their (the churches') central ecclesiological structures. I hope the new Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies in Mkar-Gboko, Nigeria, will contribute to the global ecclesiological discussions on these topics.

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

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