

International Twin Consultation on Reformation, Education, Transformation

19th November 2015

The grace and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of us, now and forever. Amen.

Luke 24:17 - Jesus said to them,

“What are you talking about to each other, as you walk along?”

Amos 5:14: **Seek good and not evil.**

On behalf of the IECLB Presidency, including the vice-presidents Pastor Silvia Genz and Pastor Inácio Lemke, I want to welcome all of you, participants of this International Twin Consultation on Reformation, Education, Transformation.

Appreciative greetings to the institutions promoting this international consultation.

I welcome the coordinator of this project, Mrs. Anneheide von Biela.

I welcome the dean of Faculdades EST, Rev. Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Wachholz.

I welcome the lecturer Rev. Prof. Dr. Rudolf von Sinner.

I welcome as well the brothers and sisters from afar, from other countries.

I welcome the ecumenical brothers and sisters!

On behalf of IECLB I want to receive gladly each of you and express our joy and keen expectations with regard to this consultation.

The 2017 Jubilee of Reformation is the frame defining the work of this consultation. In the case of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession/IECLB it is not different. We want to celebrate this historic journey in an approach of commitment to the witness of faith in Jesus Christ. We want that this testimony results in favor of building up lives and contexts which promote living in freedom, justice, dignity, and peace.

The two biblical words that I read at the beginning point to the Themes of the Year we are working on as IECLB. In this moment we are in a process of transition to the new Theme of the Year, always launched on the 1st Sunday of Advent.

During the current year of 2015 we are working on the theme: CHURCH OF THE WORD: CALLED TO COMMUNICATE! The development of this theme - in connection with the question of Jesus, as the biblical watchword: “What are you talking about to each other, as you walk along?” - yielded a lot of impulses, challenges, unveiled concerns, uncertainties... - but also much of certainty. Where we don't dialogue there either we don't construct nor educate, empower or transform anything!

In this being underway we inquire about what it means to be a Church of the Word! What are we communicating? To whom we are coming closer? Much beyond of discussing communication media, we inquire about how we dialogue both in the context of the church and with society; how we are interacting, how we are hearing. How we walk together as institutions? As churches, as houses of theological education, as institutions of diaconia? Which are the questions of the members to their church? Which are their hopes? Which are their pains, crises, doubts, yearnings, expectations? We ask also about the answer we are giving as Church of Reformation, Church of the Word; about the language we use and how we translate the concepts of Reformation for our days! Do they reach the heart of people?

The questioning of Jesus is deep! It is a question on a journey branded by Good Friday, under the sign of the cross, the death, the loss of hope.

The question aroused an intense dialogue and the reflection on the Word, that began to illuminate the present; it made burn the heart, it lead to hospitality - stay with us; it culminated in communion around the table. With the breaking of the bread, their eyes were opened, Jesus was recognized. It is a journeying in which the hope has been rebuilt. The communion with God and with brothers and sisters is restored, and the mission is assumed with new hope!

Thus we have learned a lot! We have learned that we have to learn yet much more! To interrogate much more, to hear much more! We realized that Jesus' gesture of approaching them, of joining their way, of asking, of insisting in an answer, of taking the disciples to verbalize what they had experienced, of not conforming themselves with the first version of the happenings - these are fundamental approaches for a church which wants to make the difference in people's life, in society, which has in faith education a fundamental task.

Why do I emphasize this?

Because in looking over the list of participants in this consultation I realize that all of you put yourselves on a path, and these paths brought us to this point, Brazil, São Leopoldo, a first station. The second station will be in Germany. It is a most beautiful movement. The richness of stories, of experiences, of knowledge, already by itself is reason for gratitude and joy. I am seeing in this consultation a mission!

What about you are going to talk? Which are the intents? Focused at what? Will that bring your hearts to burn? What will be the horizon of this dialogue?

I tried to acquaint myself with the objectives outlined for this consultation, and among them I emphasize: "To reflect on the relevance of reformatory education programs in processes of social transformation." The churches are questioned about their insertion in public spaces - through education!

I see in this consultation an ambitious, challenging project! A necessary and urgent dialogue!

Why? Because walking, hiking, navigating through social networks, I see that conversation, mediation, are unusual experiences - also in the context of the churches and the ecumenical movement. We are living moments of heavy confrontation! There is a lot of religious, political, polarization; dreadfully are increasing the gestures of intolerance, of aggressiveness, of violence. The different street manifestations and the social networks are showing this.

This is so striking that there already are publications on that reality. The philosopher Marcia Tiburi, author and university lecturer, wrote a book entitled: "*How to talk with a fascist - reflections on the Brazilian authoritarian daily life*"¹. Her quest is: *I wanted to know why it is impossible to dialogue*".

The writer, commentator and documentarist Eliane Brum, in the light of Marcia Tiburi's book, estimates that the present contest in Brazil is not a contest

"between right and left, expansionists and environmentalists, governing parties and oppositionists, machistas and feminists" - this, according to her, is a diminishment.

"The current confrontation is a deeper one and also a more dramatic one: between those who think and those who don't."

And she continues: *"In a country of anti-politics and generalized anti-education as Brazil it is necessary to move. [...] dialogue is an act of resistance."*

I am stressing what these two authors have written because I see here a fundamental task for the churches and the educational institutions: amid these old roundabouts we are rushing through - where do we still reflect, evaluate, discern, dialogue?

Another not least important focus of this consultation is the question about the pioneering role of the churches in the perspective of transformation, in how to make transforming education.

Besides this question about the role of the churches, I want to add the question about the protagonist role of the institutions which forge theological education, which generate the research, which think Theology in view of that transforming education to be experienced in the context of the communities - or not.

I make this reservation because once I heard a dean of a theological school saying: my problem is to get students for the course of Theology; what people afterward will do with them in the church that is no longer a problem of mine!

Enabling a theological education in the patterns we are thinking about in this consultation, in our Brazilian context, means to face a cruel competition. Here I wish to highlight the efforts of Faculdades EST. Hard roads have been traveled, both for the churches and for the houses of theological education: financial sustainability, closing of institutions for theological education, and, last but not least, the vocational crisis.

Along this journey happened a mismatch between church and educational institution, and, I would add, a mismatch also between diaconical institutions or project funders and the churches! Such circumstances weaken our public testimony and our effective presence in society. Here we must be self-critical!

LWF yearly performs a meeting of Lutheran church leaders of Latin America, Suriname, and Caribbean. When we spread on the table our pains and concerns, there are always present the fragility of confessional identity (WHICH IS THE FACE OF THE CHURCH?) and the issue of the theological education.

Latin American Theology and Paulo Freire's educational perspective taught us that, in both cases, the pedagogical process must be incarnated in life. Its starting point is the very person (or the community) to be liberated. This is the path taken by Jesus with those two disciples, in order to make them to be no longer mere spectators in their history, but rather its protagonists, builders of their process of liberation, empowerment, and transformation.

In the light of what we talked about this year we are coming to next station of our walk. The **Year 2016 Theme** will be officially launched on the 1st Sunday of Advent, later this month: **By the grace of God, free to care**. This theme comes with three sub-themes: Salvation is not for sale. People are not for sale. Nature is not for sale. The biblical motto that illuminates the theme is the word of Amos, chapter 5, verse 14a: **Seek good and not evil**.

The 2016 Theme is driven by two impulses. The first comes from the Lutheran World Federation. The second impulse comes from the growing concern about the ethics as daily effort to discern what is right, in order to act responsibly.

What is the challenge that haunts us? How to translate the message of God's grace for social and religious contexts which have nothing for free!? Which are driven by magic, where the human being is the subject, and the object is God? Driven by a religious perspective that empties the world of the holiness that God gave it, thus condemning people to a meaningless and empty everyday life!? Here we want to rescue Luther's writings about the three orders (or estates) instituted by the Word of God: Church / Economy / State - through which He/God sustains and sanctifies his creation.

In her writing "Thoughts about grace from an impoverished continent," the Mexican Theologian Elsa Tamez brings the following reflection:

Where does come from the need to speak of grace? [...] Grace is the theological response to a particular, also theological, reality: sin in the singular. This doesn't mean little sins: sin in the singular is an unsustainable reality, a deadly power. [...]

This is not an abstract or invented reality, nor demons flying through the air. (...) It is a power that is present in [...]

wounds, sufferings, touching deaths, desperate cries for justice, wars - holy or pagan ones - that produce deaths; these all are visible marks of sin.

This reality, on the one hand, and the reality of fascination being created by the market culture on the other, tread opposite ways. [p. 129]

The experience of grace makes things happen: it illuminates the dis-graces of the world, that is, reveals them in order that we become aware of them and of our responsibility, and grace also encourages to cultivate the faith in which the reign of God is possible, a reign where, also due to gratuity, you may celebrate beforehand in those spaces affirming concrete and bodily life, without turning away from death.

[p. 132. Our translation. TAMEZ Elsa. Pensamentos sobre a graça a partir de um continente empobrecido. In: *Profecia e Esperança – um tributo a Milton Schwantes*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2016, p.125-135.]

Personally I am very excited about this new theme of the year. I see that much of the agenda that you will address meets this issue. Therefore I await, with great expectancy, the impulses to come from the work you will perform!

I wish that this consultation, and the next, may be experienced as a being on the way under the grace of God, a journey in the light of Jesus' question: "What are you discussing as you walk along?" A walk of intense dialogue, deep reflection, conversations that make burn the heart, that provide us the experience of hospitality, of communion, of incarnation in real life, that help us to discern between good and evil.

God, by His grace and care, bless the fellowship and the work to be done both in this consultation here in São Leopoldo and that will happen next year in Halle/ Germany. Amen!

Pastor Dr. Nestor Paulo Friedrich
Presiding Pastor of the IECLB-
Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil
(Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil)