



## One Body – Response to Benny Sinaga

*Bernd Oberdorfer*

When St Paul compares the communion of Christians with a body, even characterises the Church as the “Body of Christ”, he shares with us deep and meaningful wisdom about what human beings are and what humanity is and should be. A body is more than only a brain. A body feels, is sensitive to its environment, to heat and cold, it inhales and breathes out, it needs nutrition, it has eyes to see and ears to hear and a tongue to speak and sing. A body has a skin to protect its inner life and to sense what happens outside. A body has a form which makes it individual. We distinguish each other by our body: ‘Ah, that’s you.’ Of course, sometimes we get to know people by emails or phone calls, but every time it is a special moment when we meet these people “in person”, which means: in rich performance of his or her bodily presence.

A body is not a static entity that never changes. Rather it is dynamic, full of processes that even do not pause when we sleep. A body has a history, it grows and develops its forms.

A body has many parts which only together form its unity, its identity. Every part has its specific function. But they cohere by the circulation of blood and the system of nerves. In an almost mocking way, St Paul reminds us that one part of the body can neither declare other parts for less relevant to the benefit of the body nor claim to take over the functions of others.

A body is sensitive. As we have heard, this implies that it is fragile and vulnerable in many ways. It can be hurt, harmed, humiliated, tortured, it can be damaged by lack



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of nutrition, it can suffer from deceases and pandemics. Reversely, a body can harm, hurt, torture other bodies itself. A body can be a source of violence and fear.

When St Paul speaks of the Church as the “body of Christ”, he focuses on the inner life of the communion. He encourages us to embrace the diverse gifts we can find in our congregations and churches. And he reminds us not to be indifferent against the needs and suffering of any parts of Christ’s body. “If one member of the body suffers”, he writes, “all the other members suffer with it.” As Lutherans, we know that we all-too-often lack this sensitivity, obsessed by what we regard to be our own problems, eager to maintain what we have. We have to confess that we all-too-often tolerate and even stabilise inequality within or between our churches. Sometimes we even create pain instead of healing it. Luther therefore called the Church *maxima peccatrix*, “the biggest sinner”.

This sensitivity for the needs and sufferings of other, however, can not limit itself to the Church and its members. We cannot care for the welfare of our churches and at the same time ignore the needs and sufferings of other human beings, of other creatures of God. We cannot create “safe spaces” only for ourselves.

Today, we are on our way to Auschwitz. When this session ends, we will go to the busses and leave. As a German, and as German Lutheran, to me the memory of the Shoah always has formed a crucial element of my cultural identity. The older I get, the more I feel ashamed to read about the cruel and nefarious details of the discrimination, exclusion, humiliation, expropriation, deportation, and finally the explicitly planned genocide of the Jewish people which the generation of my grandparents executed first in Germany and then all over Europe. Not even their dead bodies should be granted a place of rest and remembrance: They were burnt in the crematories to extinguish any traces of their existence. Rightly, this was called a “crime against humanity”. It radically denied anything what we would expect of even basic standards of human behaviour. So it is a monstrous memorial of



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dehumanization: By dehumanizing the Jews, the Germans executing the genocide dehumanized themselves, and the German society was a dehumanized society.

Of course, this was not initiated or conducted by the Church. The Nazi ideology, in its core, was radically pagan. But, as evident, the antisemitism of the National Socialists could build on a long history of Christian antijudaism which was still widespread in the Christian congregations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the deliberate exclusion of our Jewish brothers and sisters from the people of God – or let us even say: from the body of God – had an important impact on the exclusion, discrimination and persecution of human beings with Jewish ethnical background. At least, it weakened the willingness of Christian Church leaders and Church members to defend the civic and human rights of Jews in society. Therefore, it was an essential step of repent and renewal that Christian churches after the Second World War, in the light of the Shoah, started to theologically reflect and revise their understanding of the relevance of the Jewish people as part of the people of God. And I am very glad that, preparing this assembly, the LWF initiated a task force to develop educational resources on “renewing Jewish-Christian Relations” which resulted in the recently published reflective guide “Hope for the Future”. To me, this is a significant example of a Christian sensitivity for the “body of God” which goes beyond the reductionist focus on the mere welfare of the Church.

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*The [Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation](#) takes place 13-19 September 2023 in Krakow, Poland. The theme of the Assembly will be “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” It will be hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.*



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