

Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace as a Kenotic Movement

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Abstract

Following the launch of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea, in 2013, the Pilgrimage has offered a programmatic perspective for the whole of the global ecumenical fellowship. This article explores the experiences gained in the Pilgrimage in which four common themes emerged: (1) truth and trauma, (2) land and displacement, (3) gender justice, and (4) racial justice. The article goes on to explore theological reflections emerging from these experiences and proposes an ecumenical theology of companionship as a response. The development of such an ecumenical theology of companionship can help to give expression and orientation to the ethos, as well as the responsibility and mission, of those who go on pilgrimage.

Keywords

Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, World Council of Churches, ecumenical movement, theology of companionship, trauma

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Following the launch of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan, South Korea, in 2013,¹ the Pilgrimage has offered a programmatic perspective for the whole of the global ecumenical fellowship.² The ecumenical fellowship has gained experience on its various pilgrimages in different contexts, so that we can now look at directions for the future of the ecumenical movement.³

This article will draw on the experiences of two WCC groups with responsibility for the Pilgrimage: the international Reference Group, which had the mandate of shaping the pilgrimage, and the Theological Study Group, which focused on the theological implications of the pilgrimage.⁴ Both groups, which often consult with each other, include people from a variety of faith traditions, including one representative each from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. The groups are diverse in terms of gender, age, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds.⁵

In their methodology, both groups were inspired by the metaphor of pilgrimage: their encounters took the form of genuine pilgrimages (Pilgrim Team Visits) to different regions and communities around the world, with each year having its own thematic focus.⁶ We wanted to fully involve ourselves in local situations, following the insight of Rowan Williams: “Place works on the pilgrim.”⁷ The experiences at these “pilgrim

¹ This article is an edited translation of an article published in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 71:2 (2022), 234–51, and is an updated and revised version of my article “‘Brannte nicht unser Herz in uns?’ Auf dem Weg zu einer ökumenischen *Theology of Companionship*: Der Pilgerweg der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens,” *Zeitschrift für Interkulturelle Theologie* 2 (2021), 112–30.

² See WCC central committee, “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>, 2.

³ This basic approach has been presented elsewhere. See, for example, Fernando Enns, “Am Beginn eines ökumenischen, ‘Pilgerwegs der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens’: Für eine theologisch begründete, politisch verantwortliche und ökumenisch anschlussfähige Friedensethik – aus der Perspektive der Friedenskirchen,” *Evangelische Theologie* 75:4 (2015), 269–85. See also Susan Durber and Fernando Enns, eds, *Walking Together: Theological Reflections on the Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2018).

⁴ See “Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee,” in *Encountering the God of Life: Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 242–49, paras 7–12.

⁵ With Jennifer Martin of Jamaica, I am co-chair of both groups.

⁶ Annual meetings have been planned and implemented in collaboration with national and regional councils of churches and other ecumenical organizations, beginning in Europe in 2015, Israel/Palestine and the Middle East in 2016, Nigeria and the Great Lakes region in 2017, Colombia and other countries in South America and the Caribbean in 2018, Thailand and surrounding countries in 2019, Fiji in the Pacific region in 2020, and the United States and Canada (in a hybrid format) in 2021. Several more visits to Europe are planned for 2022.

⁷ See Robert Macfarlane, “Rites of Way: Behind the Pilgrimage Revival,” *The Guardian*, 15 June 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/15/rites-of-way-pilgrimage-walks>.

stations” have been marked by a rich spiritual life; together with the host communities, we shared joys, as well as sorrows and wounds, as we explored with one another the possibilities for local as well as global transformation. This approach follows a systematic approach of three dimensions of a spiritual journey as formulated by the WCC, following Dorothee Sölle⁸: (1) celebrating the gifts (*via positiva*); (2) visiting the wounds (*via negativa*); and (3) transforming the injustices (*via transformativa*).⁹ And now we can say that wisdom lies in an inversion of Williams’ phrase; that is, the pilgrims work on the place. This is because the visits of the ecumenical pilgrims of justice and peace, according to the host communities, have not remained without impact on the local contexts. The self-understanding of a community of pilgrims and host communities that emerges in such a dynamic can be appropriately described as a “witness to *God’s* pilgrimage of just peace.”¹⁰ And in this way, challenges are now being placed on the ecumenical agenda arising from the experiences of actual communities in their respective contexts but which are ultimately relevant to the fellowship of churches as a whole.

Four Themes of a Christologically Grounded Theology of Companionship

During the pilgrimage journey we have undertaken, four common themes have emerged, each relevant in a different way to all contexts and having a shared urgency: (1) truth and trauma, (2) land and displacement, (3) gender justice, and (4) racial justice. These themes serve, as it were, as specific examples of global cross-cutting issues, such as the prevalence of economic and ecological violence and injustice. Thus, the ecumenical fellowship now faces the challenge of reflecting together theologically on these injustices experienced in specific contexts. Here, we need to widen our perspective. We need to shift away from the approach of *advocacy* and *accompaniment* often promoted in the ecumenical movement (sometimes experienced as one-sided and even paternalistic) to a definition of relationship that, inspired by the pilgrimage metaphor, could be called *companionship* (*com-pan-iero/as*, i.e., those who share bread with one another on the way). Accordingly, the theological study group has begun to reflect on the four themes mentioned above within a Christologically grounded framework of a “theology of

⁸ See Dorothee Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand: “Du stilles Geschrei,”* 5th ed. (Munich: Piper, 2003); English: *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

⁹ See Fernando Enns, “Walking Gently with Your God: The Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace – A New Direction for the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society: A Compendium for Ecumenical Education*, ed. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2017), 239–47.

¹⁰ See, for example, “WCC Pilgrim Team Visits 2018,” 5 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHDat3v-7i8&feature=share>.

companionship.” The primary goal here is not to establish a systematic “coherence” – such as that which often characterizes Western-influenced theological thinking – but to direct our view more strongly to the narratives of the peacemaking ecumenical *movement*, which is gradually becoming aware of the necessity to undergo its own decolonization.¹¹

These insights were set down by the reference group and the theological study group in a document – “Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship” – presented to the WCC central committee in February 2022 as a guiding background document for the WCC assembly later in 2022. The document also recommended including the issue of health and healing, given the recent – and quite diverse – experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in all parts of the global church and underlined the urgency of the consequences of climate change. During the WCC assembly, we shall be discussing how the WCC is able to build on such learning experiences in terms of content and methodology.

Truth and trauma: God remembers

People who are traumatized often have memories that are “broken.” As a result, their narratives are disrespected and even denied validity, at times. Their way of remembering is complex, since the power of condemnation, shame, and guilt can unleash a view of the self as irredeemable and unrepairable.¹² Trauma is (also) a moral injury, “when the fabric that holds moral agency and the self together are torn asunder.”¹³ As a result, traumatized people and entire communities are often silenced. It is precisely this silence that allows the psychological and physical injuries that have been experienced to “freeze” as trauma.

Only in revealing and acknowledging the truth of the suffering that has been experienced and inflicted can one find a liberating, restorative power for victims, survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders and for the relationships within the communities concerned. For some, repentance becomes possible; for others, forgiveness. In this process of a shared recognition of a truth, it is possible to glimpse justice. But for such a power to be experienced, truth cannot be claimed exclusively from *one* perspective, nor must truth-telling be reduced to mere fact-gathering.

¹¹ See, for example, Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

¹² See Willie James Jennings, “War Bodies: Remembering Bodies in a Time of War,” in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo (Cham: Springer, 2016), 23–25, at 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*

In Colombia, many people have been traumatized by decades of civil war. One result of the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas was the creation of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition (TCC). Father Francisco de Roux, who chairs this commission, has explained that the TCC does not seek to develop a definitive account of past atrocities but rather to bring different narratives – even conflicting ones – into dialogue with each another. Truth, he has said, can only be interpreted as a *shared process* in which the wounds (*trauma* in Greek) have to be addressed.¹⁴ The goal is to create space in one's own narrative for the truth of others.

Truth is therefore to be understood as a relational concept. This in turn opens a renewed view of Christ's about himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). In Christ – "*the truth*" – the fragility and limitedness of all powers and privileges is revealed, and the injustice done to those who are marginalized and traumatized is acknowledged. Faith in *this* truth can thus liberate one to become again an agent of healing processes, because all striving for self-redemption has been abandoned.

Phillis Isabella Sheppard, however, has the following warning:

Trauma demands that our theology and commitments begin on the ground, in the blood, sweat, and tears, and the pain-induced lesions that are carved into our bodies and psyches, and in the intersubjective realm . . . If our theology is not of those who live with trauma and . . . subject to their reflection, it is dangerous to talk about theology, and its danger lies in its power in theological discourse and theological practices to reproduce trauma.¹⁵

Individuals and communities need to draw from their own spiritual roots and traditions in order to walk a pilgrimage of the healing of trauma. Contextualized spiritual practices open possibilities for creative truth-finding processes both individually and as a community, as part of collective trauma therapy.¹⁶ Symbols and rituals play a key role in such processes of "right remembering."¹⁷ For example, sharing the Lord's supper – in remembrance of the revealed "truth" who was tortured, killed, and yet resurrected – can help acknowledge a community's wounded bodies and bruised souls. In celebrating the Lord's supper, we remember the *companionero* who himself has passed through death

¹⁴ My own transcript of the meeting, Bogotá, 2018.

¹⁵ Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "Afterword," in Arel and Rambo, eds, *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, 291–300, at 292.

¹⁶ See Susanna Snyder, "La Mano Zurda with a Heart in Its Palm: Mystical Activism as a Response to the Trauma of Immigration Detention," in Arel and Rambo, eds, *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, 217–40, at 217.

¹⁷ See Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 66–84.

and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, testifies that death – and all deaths – does not have the last word about life.

Willie James Jennings aptly describes this as “God’s memory” releasing the dynamics of *communio*:

Jesus is the innocent who has been killed in conflict. Yet, he has risen not in vengeance or condemnation, but in new life . . . He offers forgiveness from the site of his body marked by violent death. Jesus returns to the scene of violence and betrayal, that is, to a world stamped with the memories of his murder, and he remembers with and for us, drawing our past into his future and shaping our present in his presence. In Jesus, we learn that God remembers. This is not a declaration of the divine capacities for memory, but for the communion dynamic in God’s memory.¹⁸

In terms of an emerging theology of companionship, such discoveries on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace demonstrate the importance of creating safe spaces where painful wounds can be touched gently and, with others, grieved over. And sometimes the trust of those who are traumatized will be placed more in the *companionero/as* than in God. For some, the reality of a Good Friday experience will be too strong; they may be reluctant to trust the liberating resurrection of Christ, the “truth.” They remain, so to speak, in the uncertainty of Holy Saturday. Then it will be the *companionero/as* who have to carry hope for those who are “brokenhearted” and “crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18). It is then up to the *companionero/as* to embody the Jesus story by re-envisioning this “truth” (see Matt. 25). In this way, a community of *com-pan-iero/as* may prove strong enough to hold the brokenness of the bodies and embrace the trauma that has been inflicted. New narratives that heal can thereby be developed that reinvigorate identity and allow belongingness to develop again. In this process, there is always a faith community’s work of remembering, believing, and witnessing to the presence of God, who remembers, and, through the power of God’s healing Spirit, moving to a renewed, shared narrative.¹⁹

Land and displacement: New creatures

In Fiji (part of the “liquid continent”), entire village communities have been resettled onto higher ground. Human-made global warming has already caused sea levels to rise to such an extent that in some places, coastlines have shifted inland hundreds of metres. Those who have been resettled feel alien in their new surroundings. In Torogu, seawater is increasingly covering pathways, penetrating houses, and salinating agricultural land. John Dunn, one of the people we met there, finds it impossible to leave behind the

¹⁸ Jennings, “War Bodies,” 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

cemetery of his ancestors. Together with a few others, he refuses to leave what remains of their village.²⁰

One of the common experiences at the various “pilgrim stations” has been the disruption of relationships between people and their surrounding world. Landless peasants further attest to this disruption. They have been displaced because of armed conflict as a result of the concentration of land in the hands of a few large landowners and/or international corporations. Rural communities often describe their land and water as their “mother,” expressing a relationship that for centuries has been characterized by mutual care and has served to form their own identity. Thus *campesino* (farmer) is not simply a job title.²¹ Today, we can clearly see that this disturbed human–nature relationship has been mainly brought about by the “colonial project” that continues to this day: the claiming of a “new territory” and its inhabitants, including their bodies, as property that can be exploited. Thus, land has become an object to be conquered, controlled, and “cultivated.”²² It is not the land that now gives the original inhabitants their identity, but it is the human being that now defines the land.²³ In this – often theologically exaggerated – colonial logic, whiteness replaces land/water as an identity-forming force. For it was this “distortion” (as Jennings calls it) that made possible the division of people into “races” separated from each other. It leads to the exploitation and expulsion of Indigenous peoples and finally to the brutality of slavery.

Traditional white theologies have legitimized this colonial project. Jennings ultimately blames this on a distorted view of creation that has reduced theological anthropology to commodifiable bodies: “Europeans enacted racial agency as a theologically articulated way of understanding their bodies in relation to new spaces and people . . . [It was done by] an inverted, distorted vision of creation that reduced theological anthropology to commodified bodies.”²⁴

²⁰ My own transcript of the meeting, Fiji, 2020.

²¹ See Andrés Pacheco Lozano, “Towards a Theology of Reconciliation: A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to Heal Broken Relations in Colombia,” PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2020.

²² See María Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015).

²³ See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 39: “The deepest theological distortion [in the disruption on our understanding of land] is that the earth, the ground, spaces and places are being removed as living organizers of identity and as facilitators of identity.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

This “distorted vision” presupposes that the supposedly original chaos first had to be ordered by God’s creation. Human beings – especially Europeans – became actors who fulfilled their vocation to “cultivate” by “protecting” the God-given order of nature and taking possession of land and people for this purpose. Until today, stigmatization and “exoticism” have been common (neo-)colonial approaches toward Indigenous peoples and their cosmologies. Right up to the present day, this colonial project has been continually finding new mutations.

A self-critical recognition of one’s own entanglement in this structural sin is a prerequisite for being able to engage in a possible common pilgrimage with the “others.” But this spiritual (and theological) reorientation can only take place in dialogue with those communities that have preserved (at least to some extent) or are rediscovering the identity-forming bond with mother nature – also because they are usually the first to have experienced the effects of the violent exploitation of nature and people. Those who are pushed to the “margins” know very well that the causes for this are to be found mainly in the faraway “centres.”

William Cavanaugh suggests that a pilgrim church – as opposed one engaging in a “tourist approach” – finds its identity in solidarity with the migrant who travels from necessity, not from a desire to transcend all necessity.²⁵ Migrants are not defined by the land/water they come from, but by borders:

The purpose of the border is not simply to exclude immigrants but to define them, to give them an identity. That identity is a liminal identity, an identity that straddles the border and defines the person as being neither fully here nor fully there. The instability and mobility of identity in a globalized world thus depends upon the borders that supposedly fix identities against the whirlwind of globalization.²⁶

It is this place of liminal existence that the pilgrim church must embrace in order to serve as a sanctuary for all those who have been displaced – seeking union with God, believing in the possibility of the reconciliation of all broken relationships with the surrounding world. The prerequisite for this is the humble service “on the ground” to become *companionero/as* for one another: “To welcome and revere migrants as Christ, to feed them, pray with them, and wash their feet, is to turn migrants into pilgrims, and thus to turn fate into destiny.”²⁷

God’s continuing care for land and water can be seen, among other things, in the way Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God. The close relation between God and creation, between people and land, is created through images and analogies of an agrarian

²⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, “Migrant, Tourist, Pilgrim, Monk: Mobility and Identity in a Global Age,” *Theological Studies* 69:2 (2008), 340–56, at 352.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 355.

society.²⁸ The language of Jesus corresponds to the agrarian society to which he belongs and to which he addresses his message. When the New Testament describes the kingdom of God with the help of this conceptual framework, God's will to reconcile even broken relationships with land/water becomes clear.

The movement of God's incarnation in Christ reveals an alternative understanding: the pre-existent logos becomes "flesh" and "reveals a broad paradigm for the intimate, ontological entanglement between divinity and all materiality."²⁹ The interpretation of the incarnation as material embodiment suggests that God's reconciliation cannot be limited by being isolated to the salvation of the individual human being, but aims at the whole web of creation – transforming *everything* into a "new creature." God's purpose for the world is the reconciliation and communion of the entire cosmos (see 1 Col. 1:19; Eph. 1:10). With this implication of the incarnation, there is a growing awareness of one's own creaturehood in relation to other fellow creatures, as part of a created web of life.

Gender justice: God's word becomes body

Discrimination, exclusion, and violence based on gender or sexual orientation are widespread realities, even within the ecumenical fellowship: we see it in the denial of women's participation in leadership positions, in sexual violence against women and children (at home and in public spaces), and in discrimination based on sexual orientation. Selina Ahmed, director of the Acid Survivors Foundation, and Farida Yasmin, a police officer in the Women's Support and Investigation Division in Bangladesh, work with traumatized women every day. They emphasize that women's lives will not change until patriarchal structures are overcome.³⁰ In many contexts, we cannot fail to hear the silence of survivors and the silence of communities about such forms of violence. At the same time, women's groups, initiatives, organizations, and LGBTQ networks can be found almost everywhere resisting and trying to overcome these cultures of silence and gender-based violence, inspired by the power of a transformative spirituality.

Kwok Pui-lan reflects Christologically on the perspective of victims of gender injustice, again in the context of the "colonial project":

²⁸ See Alain Marchadour and David Neuhaus, *The Land, the Bible, and History: Toward the Land that I Will Show You*, Abrahamic Dialogues Series, no. 5 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 63–86.

²⁹ Matthew Eaton, "Enfleshed in Cosmos and Earth," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 18:3 (2014), 230–54, at 244.

³⁰ Transcript by Susan Durber, Dhaka, 2019.

How is it possible for the formerly colonized, oppressed, subjugated to transform the symbol of Christ – a symbol that has been used to justify colonization and domination – into a symbol that affirms life, dignity and freedom? Can the subaltern speak about Christ, and if so, under what conditions? What language shall we borrow?³¹

Again, two elements stand out when looking at the movement of God's incarnation in Christ: embodiment and hybridity. The incarnation is an expression of God's will to be in communion with creation and to heal broken relationships. According to John 1, this is made possible because God's Word has become "body" and "dwells among us." Focusing on the bodily aspect of the incarnation draws attention to bodies rather than ignoring them. By becoming "flesh," God valorizes the body, which in traditional theologies often had the connotation of impurity and sin. The incarnation highlights the body and the physical as a way of knowing God and connecting with the divine.³²

As a second element, Kwok offers the incarnation as a "hybrid symbol": Jesus is neither only divine nor only human, but is divine *and* human.

The most hybridized concept in the Christian tradition is that of Jesus/Christ. The space between Jesus and Christ is unsettling and fluid, resisting easy categorization and closure. It is the "contact zone" or the "borderland" between the human and the divine, the one and the many, the historical and the cosmological ... the prophetic and the sacramental, the God of the conquerors and the God of the meek and the lowly.³³

By recognizing the incarnation as embodiment and emphasizing the divine–human mystery of hybridity, bodily experiences that have been ignored and silenced come to the forefront of Christological considerations. Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" is an invitation for every Christian and local faith community to infuse this place of contact with new meanings, insights, and possibilities, according to Kwok.³⁴

This reinterpretation of the incarnation suggests paying particular attention to Jesus' way of the cross in the context of gender violence. On the cross, his body was subjected to various forms of violence. He was stripped naked, an act of sexual violence,

³¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 2005), 168.

³² See Peter-Ben Smit, "Die Auferstehung des Leibes Christi in 1 Korinther 11: Paulus als Theologe des Leibes im Gespräch mit Judith Butler," *Lectio Difficilior: European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 1 (2019), 1–24.

³³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 171.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

according to pastoral counsellors working with victims of sexual abuse.³⁵ Becoming aware of Jesus' physical wounds can be an opportunity for victims of gender and sexual violence to identify with Jesus' suffering. Their wounds, like Jesus' wounds, also expose the structures that oppress and exclude.

On the other hand, the mystery of Jesus' hybridity opens new possibilities for those who are forced into "precarious positions."³⁶ The body of the risen Christ visibly bears the scars that reveal the cruelty of violence and yet promise the possibility of healing. The risen Christ invites us to touch his wounds (*traumata* in Greek) (John 20) to understand that these wounds inflicted by sexual and gender violence are indeed his wounds.

For an emerging theology of companionship, it is first crucial to acknowledge the senselessness of suffering, the depth of wounds, and the effects that gender-based violence has on individuals and communities. The Psalms and the Book of Lamentations, in particular, offer a language of faith for this, giving expression to pain, expressing the experience of abandonment to God. The words of Jesus on the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22; Mark 15:34) – become a proxy for such cries of pain of faith. Perhaps the most faithful expression of companionship can be to expose oneself to and share in the lament of others.

Second, the structural roots of this violence need to be exposed. While vulnerability is part of the human condition, a "precarious position" has been brought about by human beings and human institutions. The challenge is not simply to make a critical examination of society as a whole, but also to examine self-critically the life and practices of churches and communities, including theologies and traditions.

Finally, not only must a theology of companionship start from the wounds of the survivors of sexual and gender violence and discrimination, but those who have been silenced and discriminated against until now need to be empowered to take a leading role in the development of this theology by recovering the agency of their own bodies. Addressing the structural dimension is a parallel path that *compañero/as* walk together, celebrating the beauty of diverse, healed bodies.

³⁵ Elaine Heath states in this context, "In Jesus' culture ... to be stripped naked in front of a watching crowd was an act of sexual violation." See Elaine Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 123. See also Rocío Figuero and David Tombs, "Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: Responses from Sodalicio Survivors in Peru," *Religion and Gender* 10:1 (2020), 57–75.

³⁶ Judith Butler understands "precarity" as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death." See Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 33.

Racial justice: One in Christ?

When low-grade work in Brazil is undertaken primarily by Afro-Brazilians or when people in Jamaica turn to chemical products to lighten their skin, it becomes clear how deeply internalized racism is. When white police forces in the United States shoot people of colour because they are seen as a potential threat in and of themselves, we can see that racism actually kills.

Racism is the combination of discrimination – based on the constructed category of “race” – and a disproportionate distribution of power that protects the privilege of one group and denies the flourishing of another, leading to injustices being reproduced across generations. The churches of the WCC, along with representatives of the Vatican, redefined “race” in 2018 as a “social construct which claims to explain and justify the separation between human groups by advancing physical, social, cultural and religious criteria.”³⁷ The consequences are devastating:

Racism is the systemic and systematic impact of actions taken against groups of people based on the colour of their skin. It separates people from each other in the name of a false notion of the purity and superiority of a specific community. It is an ideological stance expressed through marginalization, discrimination and exclusion against certain persons, minorities, ethnic groups or communities.³⁸

According to author and social activist bell hooks, racism shaped by the “colonial project” is characterized by the construction of pervasive hierarchies originally conceived by white “explorers” and is further established as “scientific” and “theological” knowledge by assigning differing values of superiority and inferiority, of culture and nature to different people. This organizing principle is deeply connected to greed, access to resources of territories, and bodies. Whiteness and white supremacy are based on this.³⁹ The constructed “others” have been alienated by the deportation of their bodies from their homelands and communities, and their original cultures and beliefs have been destroyed.

³⁷ World Council of Churches, “Message from the Conference ‘Xenophobia, Racism and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration,’” conference organized jointly by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and the World Council of Churches in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Rome, 18–20 September 2018, para. 6, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/message-from-the-conference-xenophobia-racism-and-populist-nationalism-in-the-context-of-global-migration-19-september-2018>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, rev. ed., ed. bell hooks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 165–78.

Robert McAfee Brown has stated that one of Christianity's great errors lies in dividing life into two areas, two spheres, two sections.⁴⁰ Spirituality was separated from socio-economic realities. But reducing spiritual life to the goal of individual salvation means that the communal sin of systemic racism is unaffected. In contrast, if we look at the life of Jesus, it is precisely the connection between spirituality and social action that is crucial for liberation and healing (see Luke 4:18).

In the history of Christianity, we find institutional and structural, biblical and theological legitimations and justifications of racism on the one hand, and carelessness and ignorance, as well as “white fragility,”⁴¹ on the other. What is to be criticized here is not simply a reading of biblical texts from particular sectional interests, but the development of a Christian conceptual world that enables and nurtures racism. Jennings again identifies a “distorted vision” of creation, together with the anthropocentrism that goes along with it, as the reason for this.⁴² Notions such as being chosen, and the supersessionist theories derived from it, or the creation account itself, were used by white theologians as justifications for racism.⁴³ The Doctrine of Discovery, “a legal framework that justified European imperial ventures around the world, including the colonization of North America,”⁴⁴ provided an appropriate conceptual framework.⁴⁵

Jesus – like every human being – was born into a certain context, connected to a certain social construction of identity: a Jewish man from Galilee. In his life and ministry, he identified with marginalized people (constructed “others”) and learned to resist the discriminations with which they are accompanied. In this body, God

⁴⁰ See Robert McAfee, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 25.

⁴¹ The term has been coined by Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (London: Penguin, 2020).

⁴² See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 58: “Europeans enacted racial agency as a theologically articulated way of understanding their bodies in relation to new spaces and new peoples and to their new power over those spaces and people. Before this agency would yield ‘idea of race,’ ‘the scientific concept of race,’ the ‘social principle of race,’ or even a fully formed ‘racial optic’ on the world, it was a theological form – an inverted, distorted vision of creation that reduced theological anthropology to commodified bodies. In this inversion, whiteness replaced the earth as the signifier of identities.”

⁴³ Jennings suggests that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is an example of the Christian teaching that formed the basis for the colonial project. See *ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁴ See “Doctrine of Discovery,” United Church of Canada website, <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice/doctrine-discovery>.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Larissa Behrendt, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

identifies with a community living under an imperial system in which some people are constructed as pure and superior and others as impure and inferior: in other words, as human and inhuman. In his resistance to this situation, Jesus exposed the systemic evil that was cleverly “packaged” by the Roman Empire working in concert with local religious elites and hierarchies. But on the cross, Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15). He exposed hierarchical and oppressive definitions of humanity, including those systemic, religious, and political powers that maintain and are maintained by it.

Because of the One who liberates, who is none other than the One who created the world, people are able to find hope for their bodies. The fear of conceptual fragility, the inadequacy of all social constructions and categories, can thus be overcome. Following Irenaeus and Athanasius, Jennings points to the importance of trust in human flesh as the bearer of divine life:

Only when trust has been established can we realize that we have been joined together as one humanity in Christ . . . we become convinced by the one saving human being, Jesus, we are also convinced that there is only one real flesh that binds all humanity together with the one creation, this same Jesus.⁴⁶

Racism is the denial of the possibility of companionship. To become *companionero/as* to each other, resistance to any form of racism is essential. A pilgrimage of justice and peace requires pilgrims to resist being defined by others, instead finding their deeper identity as *companionero/as* of Christ. The term “pilgrim” – derived from the Latin *peregrinus* – includes the concepts of “stranger,” “wanderer,” “exile,” “traveller,” “newcomer.” It recalls the ancient Israelite tradition in which hospitality was motivated by the memory of an identity that had been liberated from slavery and wandering in the wilderness (see Deut. 10:19-20; 24:18).

At the institutional level, an ecumenical theology of companionship needs to lead to a self-critical examination of how practices, orders, configurations, and structures of the church(es) have perpetuated the discrimination, xenophobia, and racism that counter unity in Christ. The challenge facing the pilgrim ecumenical fellowship is thus to de-centre itself, including from prevalent privileges. This could lead to self-knowledge and purification from the sin of racism. Pilgrims find their authenticity not in opposition to constructed others but in receiving and visiting others – a

⁴⁶ Willie James Jennings, “He Became Truly Human: Incarnation, Emancipation, and Authentic Humanity,” *Modern Theology* 12:2 (1996), 239–55, at 249.

mutual gift that allows for very different identities precisely because they are one in Christ.

Conclusion: Pilgrimage as a Kenotic Movement

At the beginning of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, the WCC central committee formulated the following statement:

Pilgrims on their way are moving – lightly as they learn that only the essential and necessary counts. They are open for surprises and ready to be transformed by encounters and challenges on the way. Everyone who will walk with us with an open heart and mind will be a welcome com-pan-ion (“the ones we share our bread with”) on the way. The pilgrimage promises to be a transformative journey, discovering ourselves anew in new relationships of justice and peace.⁴⁷

What for many of us was at first simply a metaphor has now been materialized in bodily-transformative experiences. Very different “pilgrim stations” have allowed common challenges to be discovered, to which the WCC and the individual churches – in a new self-understanding as a “pilgrim church” – now wish to give particular attention.

On the pilgrimage journey travelled so far, new practices have also been (re)discovered. A primary motif of medieval pilgrimages was the transformation of the self through the forgiveness of sin. Cavanaugh reminds us that this “transformation of the self was not self-transformation, as such, because it responded to a discipline that had its source outside the self: God.”⁴⁸ The virtue of humility was the key. Pilgrimage can also be interpreted as “a kenotic movement, a stripping away of the external sources of stability in one’s life.”⁴⁹ In this respect, our Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace could become what Jesus announced to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

This kenotic movement of pilgrimage leads to the recognition of the need to walk with others, even others who are very different. Pilgrims welcome other pilgrims because the presence of pilgrims sanctifies a place. In this way, the ecumenical movement could actually become a “holy place” where we experience communion with God:

⁴⁷ World Council of Churches, “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,” para. 3.

⁴⁸ Cavanaugh, “Migrant, Tourist, Pilgrim, Monk,” 349.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The pilgrim . . . sees all potential others as brothers and sisters on a common journey to God. The pilgrim preserves otherness . . . by moving toward a common center to which an infinite variety of itineraries is possible. If God, the Wholly Other, is at the center, and not the great Western Ego, then there can be room for genuine otherness among human beings. The pilgrim church is therefore able simultaneously to announce and dramatize the full universality of communion with God, a truly global vision of reconciliation of all people [and all of creation – Fernando Enns], without thereby evacuating difference.⁵⁰

Finally, understanding pilgrimage as a kenotic movement also guards us against misunderstanding this valuable metaphor, since in certain contexts (in the so-called new world) pilgrims were, after all, actors in the colonial project. Only by recognizing the need to let go of the self in connection with the search for the others who are very different – and thereby becoming capable of actually walking with others as *compañero/a* – does pilgrimage become a transformative process for the ecumenical movement. The development of an ecumenical theology of companionship can help to give expression and orientation to the ethos, as well as the responsibility and mission, of those who go on pilgrimage in the lives of others.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 352.