Together (,) we hope

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These lines reach you at the heart of Advent, dawn of a new liturgical year and sunset of a civil year. If the scanning of social time leads us more and more often — and with increasing anxiety — to ask "what future awaits us?", church time brings Christians back to an inverted question: "But do we really await the return of the Risen Lord?" and to the consequent question: "What do we do with this time? What do we do with this waiting?". It is in the light of this awareness that we would like to read with you some of the connotations that Christian waiting takes on in the calendar year that is now opening.

The year 2025 marks the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council, which took place in Nicaea (in present-day Turkey). Conferences and reflections throughout the Christian world will be dedicated to this council and its theological content - among other things, it structured the first nucleus of the formulation of the Creed, which is still recited in all churches today, called 'Niceno-Constantinopolitan' for this reason. For our part, we would like to emphasise two aspects that seem to us to be extremely fruitful even today. First of all, the very fact that Christians, a dozen years after the end of the generalised persecutions, thought that in order to tackle the difficult issues of proclaiming the Christian message to the heart of a pagan empire it was necessary for the community leaders to come together so that "what concerned everyone could be decided by everyone", together. We have no idyllic vision of that ecclesial season in which complex issues and even bitter and violent discussions preceded, accompanied, and followed the council: mutual accusations of heresy, appeals to the imperial authority - which concretely summoned the bishops to the council, also for its own political interests, - misunderstandings linked to different cultural approaches, and progressive separation from the common Judeo-Christian matrix... Yet the path that the Christian communities of the fourth century undertook to try to solve the problems and make a common discernment was that of finding themselves together to outline together the path to take and undertake it in communion. It can be said, perhaps with some emphasis, that the unprecedented and complex situation that arose with the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire stimulated the 'invention' of the council as a means of 'walking together' even in diversity, so as to be able to offer a shared witness to the Gospel message.

This is also why, when the Dicastery for Christian Unity and the Faith and Constitution Department of the Ecumenical Council of Churches asked our Community to prepare the outline for the next Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, beginning the outline from the first ecumenical council, we wanted to 'reread' the themes addressed at Nicaea, not only highlighting their biblical foundation, but also using patristic texts that are more or less contemporary, but from different geographical and cultural areas.

This convergence of different people trying to think together in order to consistently bear witness to their one Lord also helps us understand why, amidst matters of profound theological depth, such as the very definition of the Trinitarian mystery, an issue such as the setting of a common date for the celebration of Easter found a place and solution at Nicaea. The Council fathers of Nicaea - mostly from the Christian East - realised that the fact that Christians would all celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of their one Lord together would be an eloquent testimony in a world that linked calendars and festivals to disparate deities or to events concerning warring kingdoms or rulers. The adoption of a fundamentally astronomical and geographical criterion - the spring equinox in Jerusalem, corresponding to the time of the year when the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus took place - helped to create an 'objective' convergence, but also laid the groundwork for changing astronomical knowledge over the centuries to give rise to different calculations and, consequently, to different dates for the celebration of Easter, thus provoking a counter-witness to non-Christians.

Now, in 2025 all Christian churches, by a rare and happy coincidence of calendars, will celebrate Easter on the same day: Sunday, 20 April. Many quarters within the Christian world would like to seize this dual circumstance of the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and the coincidence of the date of Easter to make permanent this convergence on a single Resurrection Sunday for all Christian churches. This does not seem to be a marginal issue, as indeed it did not seem to be a marginal issue to the Council Fathers of Nicae. The credibility of the Christian proclamation depends on it, especially in those countries where Christians are a minority, even if it is not the common Eucharistic celebration that we aspire to as the culmination of the ecumenical journey.

Finally, for the year 2025 the Catholic Church has also proclaimed the Jubilee, which Pope Francis wanted to place under the sign of hope. We are aware that this type of celebration, since its first occurrence in 1300, has given rise to tensions within the church and ended up contributing in an emblematic way to the division of the church in the West. Even today, the Jubilee is an event that struggles to offer opportunities for ecumenical dialogue and arouses other kinds of perplexity in a society that is no longer Christian, yet recovering its biblical foundation could stimulate gestures of common witness by Christians in societies that are no longer Christian or have never been Christian. We know that the radical demands for social justice that the Torah (cf. Lev 25) posits as precepts to be lived out during the Jubilee have never or almost never found implementation in historical reality. However, some of them have never lost their relevance and deserve to be taken up not only by the churches but also by civil society and its national and international institutions. Let us think of the forgiveness of debts, not only and not so much between private individuals, but between

states, with particular attention to the poorest countries, already plundered of their wealth; or the restitution of occupied lands and the renunciation of conquering or dominating by war and force lands inhabited by other peoples, everywhere in the world without exception; or freedom for slaves, starting with those to whom we do not want to give this name: workers, especially immigrants, exploited in our countryside, victims of sex trafficking and gender or racial violence, child soldiers or abused minors...

May the Lord whose return we await find us his disciples together, awake, ready to receive him, "with our loins girdled and lamps burning" (cf. Lk 12:33), that is, dressed for work and on our way, enlightened to discern his presence in the poor and faithful and in serving him in one of his sisters or younger brothers.

The brothers and sisters of Bose
Bose, 1 December 2024
I Sunday of Advent