

## Tilburg University

### Pioneers at the Crossroads

Schelkens, Karim

*Published in:*  
Catholica. Vierteljahresschrift für Ökumenische Theologie

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Schelkens, K. (2016). Pioneers at the Crossroads: The Preconciliar Itineraries of W.A. Visser 't Hooft and J.G.M. Willebrands. *Catholica. Vierteljahresschrift für Ökumenische Theologie*, 70(1), 23-39.

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Pioneers at the crossroads

### *The preconiliar itineraries of W.A. Visser 't Hooft and J.G.M. Willebrands (1951-1961)*

KARIM SCHELKENS

#### *Introduction*

The two dates mentioned in the subtitle of this contribution<sup>1</sup> are all but random. In fact, they are intimately linked to events and places that have shaped the history of the ecumenical movement in the mid-twentieth century. The cities of Amsterdam, Toronto, Mainz, Evanston, Gazzada and New Delhi immediately ring a bell to those acquainted with the story of the ecumenical advance. What is laid out in the following pages is closely connected to the tale of these cities, but perhaps even more to the actions and interactions of two of the most widely known and acknowledged pioneers of twentieth-century ecumenical history: Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft and Johannes Gerardus Maria Willebrands.<sup>2</sup> Both had a lot in common: if not their passion for the cause of Christian unity, then at least the plain fact that they both originated in small and religiously segregated villages in the Dutch polders, and eventually grew to become global leaders in interconfessional dialogue. The present contribution aims at investigating their relationship more profoundly, taking into account the stark differences between the milieu of the World Council of Churches and that of Roman Catholicism in the 1950s when dealing with religious otherness. As indicated, our portrait of this evolving friendship in ecumenicis is strictly limited to the period before the Second Vatican Council, which provided a turning point in the ecumenical relationships between

---

<sup>1</sup> This contribution has been prepared with the kind collaboration of Dr. Jurjen Zeilstra, who stands preparing a biography of W.A. Visser 't Hooft, under the auspices of the Free University of Amsterdam. His comments have proven of great value to my study. Given that I stand preparing a biography of Willebrands, our tracks have a tendency to intersect. I also owe credit to those who commented upon my text: canon Leo Declerck and Prof. Peter De Mey, director to the Center for Ecumenism at KU Leuven, and two well esteemed German colleagues, Prof. Dr. Jörg Ernesti and Dr. Michael Quisinsky.

<sup>2</sup> Our contribution is not the first ever to be written on the evolving relationships between the WCC-secretary general on the one hand, and one of the most prominent ecumenical voices from the Roman Catholic side on the other. It is quite interesting and even revealing that the most important studies on the topic published up until this day differ significantly in their appraisal: from a Roman Catholic perspective, a study by W. Henn, *Cardinal Willebrands and the Relations between Rome and the World Council of Churches*, in: A. Denaux & P. De Mey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Legacy of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands (1909-2006)*, Leuven 2006, pp. 211-226, provides with a clearly positive approach of Catholic engagement, whereas the article by L. Vischer, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Roman Catholic Church*, in: H.E. Fey (ed.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 2: *The Ecumenical Advance, 1948-1968*, Genève 1970, pp. 311-352, offers quite a different reading of the same tale. An interesting document in which Willebrands expressed his deep appraisal for Visser 't Hooft remains his article after the passing of his compatriot: J. Willebrands, *Un pioniere dell'ecumenismo*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15-16 July 1985.

Geneva and Rome.<sup>3</sup> Thus, our focus lies with the 1950s: this decade before Vatican II proves of major interest. While the World Council of Churches grew in importance and impact, Rome did not have any official organ for inter-church contacts, and Catholic ecumenical efforts were largely organized on the informal level. Precisely in this realm of actions under the radar, the story of Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft may serve as an excellent illustration of the importance of individuals in the ecumenical movement, in order to prepare institutional and ecclesial reform, so needed in ecumenical matters. In this era, our two protagonists played a key role in seeking convergence: the reformed pastor Visser 't Hooft stood at the head of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Willebrands as the central figure in the so-called Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions (CCEQ).<sup>4</sup> Let us look at some key moments in the story of their mutual contacts.

#### *Around Amsterdam*

“Dear Jo, I have been sitting here thinking how extraordinary it is that two boys from North Holland, who wandered around in the same countryside of meadows and cows, should each have been carried along his own different path to play a role in church history at the world level. Some time we really should take a walk through the polders and ask ourselves just what hangs in the air here; but we would have to quickly conclude that the Holy Spirit does not reveal its secrets.”<sup>5</sup> The above cited phrases are taken from a letter by Visser 't Hooft to Willebrands. They date years after the closure of Vatican II, and thus fall outside of the scope of our story. Still, they may serve as a valuable illustration of the nature of the ecumenical friendship between the two protagonists of this story. But, genuine friendships require time to develop and require personal encounter. The latter point took quite a period in the case of these two men. Somewhat in defiance of their shared birth ground in the Dutch polders, Visser 't Hooft and Willebrands, their ecumenical leadership preceded their mutual contacts. While Visser 't Hooft was engaged in Christian dialogue already strongly in the 1930s, Willebrands took his

---

<sup>3</sup> These conciliar and postconciliar relationships have been documented at length by eminent scholars such as Mauro Velati and Jan Grootaers – who has diligently illustrated these relationships in the early postconciliar years. See J. Grootaers, *Rome et Genève à la croisée des chemins, 1968-1972*, Paris 2005, and M. Velati, *Una difficile transizione: Il cattolicesimo tra unionismo ed ecumenismo (1952-1964)*, Bologna 1996 (TRSR: N.S. 16).

<sup>4</sup> Mainly primary sources have been used for this contribution, most of which have not yet been subject to scholarly research. These sources were found in the Archives of the World Council of Churches at Geneva (henceforth WCC Archives), the archives of the Centre Istina in Paris (Archives Istina), the papers of the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions at Chevetogne (Archives CCEQ), the Cardinal Willebrands Archives at Leuven (Archives Willebrands). Concerning the latter two collections, inventories have recently been published by L. Declerck, *Mgr J. Willebrands et la Conférence catholique pour les Questions oecuméniques. Ses archives à Chevetogne*, Leuven 2015 (Instrumenta Theologica 39) and *Inventaire des archives personnelles du Cardinal J. Willebrands, Secrétaire (1960-1969) et Président (1969-1989) du Secrétariat pour l'unité des chrétiens, Archevêque d'Utrecht (1975-1983)*, Leuven 2013 (Instrumenta Theologica 35).

<sup>5</sup> Archives WCC, 994.1.13/2.3.: Letter from Visser 't Hooft to J. Willebrands, 31 March 1969, on the occasion of the elevation of Johannes Willebrands to the cardinalate.

turn a decade later, on account of his study on John Henry Newman. Yet, the two men would not personally encounter one another, and somewhat remained “invisible” until the mid-1950s. By that time, they were both well established in ecumenical milieus and well aware of the other’s respective activities. In the process of this mutual awareness, the year 1948 provided a milestone for both the history of the ecumenical movement and the future relationship between the two Dutchmen.<sup>6</sup> In Amsterdam, two pre-existent movements merged into one newly established World Council of Churches, led as of that moment by Visser 't Hooft. In the slipstream of the Second World War, the establishment of the WCC drew international attention. On the part of Roman Catholicism, a mixture of curiosity and suspicion was seen. While Visser 't Hooft was open to inviting Roman Catholic observers at the Amsterdam assembly, the Catholic hierarchy found itself in the impossibility to allow Catholic theologians to attend. The official position of the Roman magisterium, most clearly expressed in Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical *Mortalium animos*, was that of a rejection of Catholics participating in ecumenical dialogue.<sup>7</sup> The Catholic Church maintained a defensive position in line with the teachings of nineteenth century popes such as Gregory XVI and Pius IX, exhaustively identifying itself with the Church of Christ and stressing an ecumenism-of-return of the “separated brethren” to its bosom.

The official magisterial standpoint, however, did not imply a complete denial of the importance of ecumenism among Catholic theologians. On the informal level, voices such as those of the Belgian priest Gustave Thils and the Parisian Dominican friar Yves Congar<sup>8</sup> made clear that a certain openness existed. Yet officially sanctioned initiatives proved to be troublesome: Congar, for instance, wrote a letter to the then archbishop of Utrecht, Cardinal Johannes De Jong, asking for his permission to attend the Amsterdam assembly as an “observer”, but the cardinal’s reply in April 1948 was an unequivocal “njet”. This story alone marks the evolution made in the next decade on the level of thinking about “observership”.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For a broad survey of the genesis of the WCC, see W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches*, in: R. Rouse & C. Neill (ed.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, London 1967, pp. 695-724. A concise overview of Roman Catholic dealings with foundational movements of the WCC before 1948 is found in: P.A. Crow, *The Roman Catholic Presence in the Faith and Order Movement*, in: *Pro Unione Bulletin* 62/2 (2002) 3-15.

<sup>7</sup> See Pius XI, *Mortalium animos*, 6 January 1928, in: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 20 (1928) 5-16. The encyclical caused a virtual standstill in the ecumenical endeavours made by Catholics on a local scale and important initiatives such as the so-called Malines Conversations, held in the 1920s between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, were ended.

<sup>8</sup> G. Thils, *Histoire doctrinale du mouvement œcuménique* (*Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*, 8), Louvain 1938, and Y. Congar, *Chrétiens désunis: Principes d’un œcuménisme catholique*, Paris 1937 (*Unam sanctam* 1).

<sup>9</sup> Archives Istina, Letter from Card. J. De Jong to Y. Congar, 6 April 1948. De Jong touched upon the risky idea of sending Catholic observers, writing that: “Il faudrait que nous ayons, en effet, la certitude que les observateurs (en question) ne soient influencés par certaines théories œcuméniques qui n’auraient pas notre assentiment. Car cela pourrait veiller des espoirs qui en fait ne se réaliseraient jamais. C’est pourquoi, nous tenons à nous réserver la désignation des personnes qui pourraient assister à la conférence.” It is striking to note that throughout the 1950s the question of sending Catholic observers to non-Catholic assemblies, as well as the idea of inviting non-Catholics at Roman Catholic gatherings remained an item of discussion. Also see the interesting article on this issue by Y. Congar, *La question des observateurs catholiques à la Conférence de Amsterdam, 1948*,

Still, returning to Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft, Cardinal De Jong's refusal did not fully prevent Catholic theologians from keeping a close watch. Although, popular rumour has it that Willebrands was present in Amsterdam as an accredited journalist in August of 1948,<sup>10</sup> there is no official record of his entering the assembly, neither did he have direct conversations with Visser 't Hooft. Willebrands had taken a lively interest in other denominations since his study years in Rome where he defended a doctorate on John Henry Newman and had gradually expanded his curiosity.<sup>11</sup> This prudent openness led, among others, to his visit to the Berkouwer speech, an attitude which helps him being nominated as director of the Saint-Willibrord Society in 1948.<sup>12</sup> The Society replaced the former Apologetic Society of Petrus Canisius, and Willebrands would help it evolve away from classic Catholic apologetics toward what was at first dubbed "religious conversation". Now, Willebrands helped reshape the society's orientation and adapted the statutes so that it would work toward the "service of the Catholic Church in its mission of evangelization and of reunification". In retrospect, it can be argued that the ecumenical careers of both Visser 't Hooft and Willebrands made a leap forward that year.<sup>13</sup>

---

in: L. Hein (ed.), *Die Einheit der Kirche. Dimensionen ihrer Heiligkeit, Katholizität und Apostolizität*. Festgabe Peter Meinhold zum 70. Geburtstag, Wiesbaden 1977, pp. 241-254.

<sup>10</sup> Willebrands was well acquainted with church life in Amsterdam, where he had been a chaplain in the city's Roman Catholic beguinage between 1937 and 1940. In the latter year, he had caused something of a stir because of his attendance at the inaugural lecture of the Dutch reformed theologian Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam. This was highly exceptional at that time. See D. Van Keulen, G.C. Berkouwer and the Council, in: *Trajecta* 22 (2013), p. 19. As for the story of Willebrands' presence at the Amsterdam Assembly, this is told, among other places, in: H.J. Selderhuis, *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, Göttingen 2014, p. 594, yet no sources warrant this claim. In their later personal publications and speeches, Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft did not mention such presence, nor is any record of it found in the personal archives of Willebrands or the WCC Archives' section on the Amsterdam Assembly. WCC Archives 4201.1.2 hold an interesting dossier on the issue of Roman Catholic observers in Amsterdam without a trace, just as the dossiers on the unofficial observers (WCC 31.019.3), on the accredited visitors (31.019/4) and the press representatives (WCC 31.022). Who effectively was on the list of accredited journalists was Willebrands' close friend, Frans Thijssen. It is likely that the latter kept Willebrands updated on the events. This would be in line with the findings of J.H.Y.A. Jacobs, *De heerlijkheid van de katholieke eenheid: Gave en opdracht*, in: *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis* 48 (June 1998), pp. 67-87, see esp. pp. 76-77. Also see Archives Willebrands, Dossier 199, where a speech of Willebrands at an ecumenical seminar in Venice, organized by the Stiftungsfonds Goetze in 1994, records him saying that "At the first and founding Assembly of the WCC, no Catholics were present. [...] From the early fifties I had known also Dr. Willem Visser 't Hooft."

<sup>11</sup> Cf. K. Schelkens & H.P.J. Witte (ed.), *Johannes Willebrands, De denkleer van kardinaal Newman en haar toepassing op de kennis van God door het geweten*, Bergambacht 2013 (Willebrands Studies 1).

<sup>12</sup> J.H.Y.A. Jacobs, *Nieuwe visies op een oud visioen. Een portret van de Sint-Willibrord Vereniging, 1948-1998*, Nijmegen 1998.

<sup>13</sup> In the case of Willebrands, this is somewhat ambiguous. As director of the Saint-Willibrord Society, which in 1948 succeeded the Apologetic Society of Petrus Canisius, he paved the path to more open conversation with the protestants in the Netherlands. All the while, much in line with the official Catholic doctrines, he will remain engaged in the work of conversion and of guiding converted protestants into the Catholic Church. Genuine ecumenical dialogue as it is interpreted today was not the case yet. On Willebrands' involvement in the so-called *opus conversionum*, see the fascinating article by H.P.J. Witte, *Willebrands en de pastores convertiti*, in: A. Denaux, *De Nederlandse jaren van Johannes Willebrands (1909-1960)*, pp. 83-114.

### The Ecclesial Elements

If Willebrands' role in the Saint-Willibrord Society provided one prudent step, it ultimately took a decision from the Vatican to turn the tables and allow Catholics more action space: this decision arrived in December 1949 and was made public early in 1950.<sup>14</sup> At that moment, the Congregation for the Holy Office, reacting to the Amsterdam events, issued a very concise instruction, entitled *Ecclesia Catholica*, in which it recognized the presence of the Holy Spirit in the ecumenical movement. However brief the statement, theologians such as Congar and Willebrands immediately recognized its groundbreaking consequences for the evolution of Catholic doctrine, since it implied the recognition of positive elements outside of the confines of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> Put otherwise: the defensive and apologetic Catholic position as regards religious otherness was prone to change. The magisterial statement soon triggered new initiatives. From 19 to 22 September 1950, a conference was organized at Grottaferrata under the leadership of the French Jesuit Charles Boyer, who simultaneously established the so-called Foyer Unitas at the residence of the Ladies of Bethany, Piazza Navona, in Rome. One year later, a Dutch priest, Frans Thijssen, pushed his close friend Willebrands into launching a first project of what would become the so-called "Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions".<sup>16</sup> The idea was plain and simple: the two Dutch priests, the flamboyant character of Thijssen, and the more diplomatically skilled Willebrands would travel throughout Europe and seek to unite Catholic ecumenists and their local organisations under one single international umbrella. While at their first stop at the Belgian monastery of Chevetogne they underwent a rather frosty welcome from the side of Dom Clément Lialine, the reaction at the Centre Istina at Boulogne-sur-Seine in the outskirts of Paris was enthusiastic.<sup>17</sup> The Dominican friar Christophe Dumont, who had founded the centre al-

---

<sup>14</sup> Congregation for the Holy Office, *Ecclesia Catholica: Instructio ad locorum ordinarios De motione oecumenica*, in: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 42 (1950) 12-17. For an English version of the document, see G.K.A. Bell (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity: Fourth Series, 1948-1957*, London/New York NY 1958, pp. 22-27.

<sup>15</sup> This paved the path for eventually coining the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Christ in an inclusive rather than in an exhaustive manner, as became clear in article eight of Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church, where the doctrine of the ecclesial elements is central. For the conciliar doctrine and the postconciliar debate on this clause, see my article *Lumen Gentium's subsistit in Revisited. The Catholic Church and Christian Unity after Vatican II*, in: *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), pp. 875-893.

<sup>16</sup> Initially, the two wrote a draft text for a "Conseil oecuménique" which would eventually be called Catholic Conference. Note the striking convergences with the setup of the WCC on several levels: next to the initial idea of an "Ecumenical Council", which only later would be turned into the concept of a "Conference", there was Willebrands' personal insistence on not having a president, but only a secretary to lead his organisation. See the excellent historical overview of the origins and development of the CCEQ by P. De Mey, *Précurseur du Secrétariat pour l'Unité. Le travail oecuménique de la 'Conférence catholique pour les questions œcuméniques' (1952-1963)*, in: G. Routhier, Ph. Roy & K. Schelkens (ed.), *La théologie catholique entre intransigeance et renouveau. La réception des mouvements préconciliaires à Vatican II*, Louvain-la-Neuve – Leuven 2011 (Bibliothèque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique 95), pp. 271-308.

<sup>17</sup> Archives CCEQ, Dossier Chevetogne, Report on the journey made by F. Thijssen and J. Willebrands in view of establishing a 'Conseil oecuménique catholique', s.d., p. 11.

ready in 1927, fully supported the initiative and in time helped convince the Belgian benedictines into joining.

The instruction was also received favorably in Geneva, where Visser 't Hooft welcomed the new openness from the side of Rome.<sup>18</sup> This development aligned well with the conversations the secretary general had already had with the Parisian Dominicans – who henceforth would play a mediating role in helping establish the connection between the two Dutchmen. Even if Dumont had second thoughts on the nature of the WCC, and criticized it for running the risk at “false irenicism”, he did rank among the few Roman Catholic theologians with whom Visser 't Hooft kept an ongoing correspondence in the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> Already in September 1949, Visser 't Hooft assisted at an informal meeting in Istina together with the Anglican theologian Oliver S. Tomkins<sup>20</sup> and with Dumont's Parisian confrere, Yves Congar. These four men openly discussed the theme of the upcoming WCC Central Committee meeting at Toronto, “The Church and the churches”. The 1950 meeting would become famous for issuing the “Toronto statement”,<sup>21</sup> which installed the sixteenth century Calvinist notion of *vestigia ecclesiae*, the “remnants of the church of Christ” as a guiding principle for ecumenical engagement. The notion proved helpful in seeking common ground, since it enabled Christian churches to recognize and valorize the existence of ecclesial elements outside of their own confines.<sup>22</sup> In Paris, still in 1949, Yves Congar had proposed the idea and Tomkins and Visser 't Hooft immediately picked up on it. Together with the “disclaimer” that the WCC did not perceive of itself as a “Super-Church”, the principle of the ecclesial vestiges became a key element in the statutes of the World Council. Henceforth, the possession of ecclesial remnants of the church of Christ would constitute a basis for WCC-membership, and it helped smoothen talks between Roman Catholic theologians and WCC-staff members, even if Catholicism held no official relationships with Geneva.

Another key moment in these early years was a meeting, jointly prepared by Tomkins and Dumont, at the Swiss “abbey” of Présinge, in the vicinity of Geneva. The talks were held between 14 and 16 November 1951, and were held in partial preparation of the conference of Faith and Order that would gather in Lund the next year. While Visser 't Hooft was present, Willebrands was not, but he did send Frans Thijssen and the Dutch dominican Piet Kreling to attend on behalf of his Willibrord Society. The central theme was that of the ecclesial remnants, in both a

---

<sup>18</sup> Archives WCC 4201.1: Dossier on the instruction *Ecclesia Catholica*.

<sup>19</sup> Another prominent contact for Visser 't Hooft was the French Catholic priest Paul Couturier, founder of the annual Week of prayer for Christian Unity.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding the pivotal role of the Centre Istina in preconciliar Catholic ecumenical commitment, see É. Fouilloux, *Les catholiques et l'unité chrétienne du XIX au XX siècle*, Paris 1982, pp. 396-402 and 652-660.

<sup>21</sup> M. West, Toronto Statement, in: N. Lossky et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva/Grand Rapids 1991, col. 1008-1009.

<sup>22</sup> Both on the importance of the meeting in Paris as a preliminary of the WCC's Toronto Statement and the later evolution of this doctrine, see S. Arenas Pérez, *Fading Frontiers? An Historical-Theological Investigation into the Notion of the Elementa Ecclesiae*, Phd, KU Leuven, Leuven 2013, esp. pp. 66-71.

talk from Congar entitled “À propos des vestigia ecclesiae”<sup>23</sup> and a talk by Tomkins on the “Contribution à une conversation sur le Conseil Oecuménique, les églises membres du Conseil Oecuménique et l’Église de Rome”.<sup>24</sup> This evolution clearly brought Visser 't Hooft and Willebrands closer, and ever more a triangular structure of communication emerged: both the contact between the leading voices in the WCC and the French Dominicans was strengthened, and the Parisian scholars expanded their contacts with Dutchmen such as Willebrands and Frans Thijssen. Although at the time of Présinge, Visser 't Hooft and Willebrands had still never met, they were now continually updated on each other’s activities through their ecumenical peers Dumont and Congar. When in 1952 the benedictine monastery of Chevetogne in Belgium hosted its annual *Journées oecuméniques*, Willebrands was present and became more convinced than ever that collaboration among Catholic ecumenists needed to overcome national frontiers. A next phase would soon be initiated.

#### *Around Evanston*

By the time of the Présinge gathering, informal preparations for establishing the aforementioned Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions were well underway. In the spring of 1951, Willebrands had been increasingly involved in discussions with Frans Thijssen to prepare a plan for what they first called a *Conseil Œcuménique Catholique*. In August 1951, the two travelled through Europe in order to promote their initiative, and by September 1951, they drafted the first project text for their “Council”. The name alone – which would eventually be turned into Catholic Conference – revealed the extent to which the Geneva World Council served as a model. This period of informal preparations was closed a year later at Fribourg, when the “Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions” (CCEQ) was officially launched. Willebrands would lead the organisation, and stressed how it would henceforth serve both as a means for establishing contacts with the “separated brethren” and as an informal network that would help develop a true sense of catholicity. Correspondence between Willebrands and Dumont on

---

<sup>23</sup> Congar’s talk was based on the insights he had developed in his key work of 1937, where he had stressed the idea that Christian tradition had always recognized the existence of ecclesial value outside of the “visible” church, thus challenging the ecclesiology that had emerged in catholicism after the council of Trent. See various documents in Archives CCEQ, Dossier Présinge, p. 344. From the Catholic side, the people who attended were, just as the Dominicans Dumont, Congar and Jérôme Hamer as well as Olivier Rousseau of Chevetogne, the Swiss theologian Charles Journet, the two Dutchmen Frans Thijssen and Piet Kreling and the British Benedictine monk Columba Carry-Elwes. Non-Catholic representatives were: Visser 't Hooft, Jean Bosc, Oliver Tomkins, Jean Courvoisier, the Swedish Nils Ehrenström, Alexander de Weymarn, Max Thurian, Hendrik van der Linde, Hendrik Kraemer, Suzanne de Dietrich, Paul Evdokimov and Max Thurian. Cf. Archives Istina, Rapport rencontre de Présinge, a report in French and Dutch (24 typed pages plus two introductory pages). The secretary general’s memoirs also refer to this meeting and to the importance of the ecclesiology of the “elements”. See W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs*, Geneva 1987, p. 320.

<sup>24</sup> Archives Istina, Rapport rencontre de Présinge, p. 6.



the one hand and between Dumont and Visser 't Hooft on the other hand reveals an ever increasing mutual curiosity. Still they never met.

Finally, their parallel yet separate tracks would intersect in the course of Willebrands' preparations for the meeting of the Catholic Conference of April 1954 in the German city of Mainz. While preparing for the gathering, the Catholic Conference decided to reflect upon the theme of "Christian Hope", the key theme of the upcoming WCC assembly at Evanston in August 1954. Once again, the French dominicans played a mediating role: Congar – who at that time recently fell under suspicion – prepared his *Dix Thèses catholiques sur le Thème d'Evanston: "Jésus-Christ, Espérance du Monde"*,<sup>25</sup> which were sent on to all CCEQ-members by Willebrands on 30 January 1954. Even though these theses did not have an actual impact on the debates within the WCC, they helped strengthen the sense of a common path.

More important for our purposes is that, several months before the CCEQ meeting, during the last month of 1953, Willebrands planned to travel to Rome, and, while planning, decided to make a move:<sup>26</sup> he wrote a friendly, yet quite formal letter to the WCC headquarters, asking for information on the upcoming Evanston assembly and suggesting to meet Visser 't Hooft on his way to Rome. Willebrands' letter to Geneva, drafted on the first day of december, is where direct contact began:<sup>27</sup> after having obtained the approval of the local ordinary, François Charrière – the Catholic bishop of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg –, Willebrands was welcomed at the Route de Malagnou in the early days of January 1954. Judging from internal reports, the tone of this very first encounter between Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft was polite, yet distanced, not to say formal. Yet, a huge step was taken: direct conversation had learned Willebrands that the theologians in Geneva were very interested in establishing further contact with Catholic theologians such as the Belgian Gustave Thils, whose book on the ecumenical movement had been debated upon in an internal WCC-study group without the author's knowledge. Willebrands seized the occasion and immediately decided to invite Thils to be present at the CCEQ-gathering in Mainz.

---

<sup>25</sup> By the way, Visser 't Hooft was also well aware of the problems Congar was experiencing with the Catholic hierarchy, due to a letter from Dumont, who assured the WCC-leader that "en tout cas, les activités oecuméniques du Père Congar ne doivent nullement en souffrir ... Je pense, au contraire, qu'elles bénéficieront du fait qu'il ne soit plus enchaîné à son enseignement au Saulchoir" (9 March 1954). See the dossier in the Archives CCEQ, Meeting at Mainz, pp. 185-186. Also note that Dumont was quick to inform Willebrands that he had underlined that the actions taken against Congar from the side of the Catholic hierarchy, ought not to have any impact on his ecumenical engagement. See Archives Istina, Letter from C. Dumont to Willebrands, 2 March 1954: "Pour ma part, je me réjouis un peu que des circonstances adverses l'obligent à se libérer de son enseignement et lui offrent la possibilité de contacts plus larges et plus approfondis avec l'étranger. Son travail oecuménique doit en profiter."

<sup>26</sup> Archives CCEQ, Correspondence with governing board, Letter from J. Willebrands to C. Dumont, 1 December 1953.

<sup>27</sup> Archives CCEQ, Dossier Mainz, Letter from J. Willebrands to W.A. Visser 't Hooft, 30 December 1953. See Inventory CCEQ, p. 105.

### Seeking Convergence

Perhaps the most striking effect of the emerging conversations between Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft in the mid-1950s – still years before the Catholic Church officially committed itself to ecumenical dialogue – was the increasing convergence of the agendas of the CCEQ and the WCC. While Visser 't Hooft was eager to understand Catholic developments, Willebrands went along and proposed the publication of a report on the Mainz conference in *The Ecumenical Review*, the official periodical of the World Council. Soon, collaboration was deepened: notwithstanding some troubles, Dumont travelled – with a ticket financed by Willebrands' Willibrord Society<sup>28</sup> – to Evanston, to attend the WCC meeting there in the capacity of accredited journalists,<sup>29</sup> and before August 1954, a "Catholic" memorandum on "Christ, the Church and Grace in the Economy of Christian Hope" is prepared and distributed at Evanston by Visser 't Hooft.

As were Congar's theses, so too the influence of the CCEQ-memorandum on the talks at Evanston was minor, yet once more the efforts to have the agenda of the CCEQ converge with that of the WCC helped establish strong informal relationships between Catholics and non-Catholics. This path was taken further in October 1954, shortly after Evanston, when Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft met for a second time and discussed the past assembly. The WCC-secretary general warmly approved Dumont's report on Evanston in Istina's bulletin *Vers l'Unité Chrétienne*, and soon other encounters followed. By November 1955, Visser 't Hooft expressed, in a letter to Willebrands, his profound gratitude on the fact that: "The Catholic Conference and the World Council are able to work distinctly yet not apart from one another on the same questions. It is very important for Geneva that Roman Catholic theologians confront those themes on which the WCC is not aware of the catholic position."<sup>30</sup> Visser 't Hooft's interests laid not so much with the "classic" issues of the nature of tradition or Christ and the Church, but rather with themes that have remained in the shadows. The WCC-secretary general proposed the topic "The Lordship of Christ" to Willebrands. Half a year later, in May 1955, the CCEQ governing board ponders the idea and embraces the topic and Willebrands is rapid to inform his Dutch counterpart that "his" conference will debate the degree to which the Catholic Church perceives of itself as a mediator (*Vermittler*) of Christ's reign over the world, and to what degree it might acknowledge the possibility of a direct reign, unbound by visible ecclesial structures and thus transcending the confines of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Archives Istina, Letter from Dumont to Willebrands, 25 March 1954: "Votre lettre m'annonçant l'aide accordé par l'Association Saint-Willibrord pour mon voyage éventuel à Evanston m'a grandement réjoui et je vous remercie bien vivement de cette première démarche et de ce premier succès".

<sup>29</sup> As was the case with the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly, no official allowance was given by Catholic church officials to send "observers" to the WCC-meeting at Evanston. So, the status of "journalist" was used in these years to assure the presence of Catholics at WCC-events.

<sup>30</sup> Archives CCEQ, Dossier Chevetogne, Letter from Visser 't Hooft to J. Willebrands, 14 November 1955.

<sup>31</sup> In February 1956, Willebrands and Thijssen studied the subject further in Paris with the Dominicans. See Archives Istina, Letter from C. Dumont to C. Boyer, 9 March 1956: "Mgr. Willebrands et

By August 1957, Willebrands promised sufficient study ought to be done in order to organize a CCEQ-meeting on the topic. Indeed, at meetings (in late February 1956) in Chevetogne and later (April of 1957) at Münster the issue was discussed with theologians such as Thijssen, the Dutchman Johannes Groot, the Belgian Dominican friar Jérôme Hamer and the Münsteraner Professor Hermann Volk.<sup>32</sup> All the while, Willebrands continually informed Heinrich Harms in Geneva on the progress that was being made.<sup>33</sup> Visser 't Hooft, too, was enthusiastic on the growing consensus. When in the course of 1958 the Dutch episcopate decided to appoint Willebrands as their official delegate for ecumenical affairs, a novelty in Catholic circles before Vatican II, the Dutch priest had slowly taken in a key position in the European ecumenical landscape.

### *Planning an Ecumenical Council*

The story of the evolving friendship of Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft could, however, impossibly remain this smooth. In the second half of the 1950s, the ecumenical movement changed and with it the relationship between the two Dutchmen. This had much to do with the World Council's gradual expansion toward the orthodox world by the end of the decade. In August 1958, a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church met with WCC-officials in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Alongside these meetings, on August 9, Visser 't Hooft quietly updated his Catholic colleagues Willebrands and Dumont, both in town for the occasion.<sup>34</sup> The two Catholics were fascinated by the evolution of the Geneva Council, but could not yet foresee that precisely this would soon complexify the relationships between the WCC and the CCEQ. Apart from the fact that the conflictuous attitude of Dr. Horst Michael and his open hostility against Heinrich Harms as well as against some members of the CCEQ<sup>35</sup> made Willebrands' life increasingly difficult, other frictions would rapidly follow. First, there was the negative press in Catholic circles that followed Visser 't Hooft's article in the *Ecumenical Review* of April 1958. In it, the secretary general discussed the issue of *The Super Church*

---

l'abbé Thijssen sont venus passer deux jours à la fin du mois dernier pour élaborer un plan de travail de notre conférence sur un sujet qui intéresserait le Conseil oecuménique de nous voir travailler. On a retenu 'La Seigneurie du Christ sur l'Église et sur le monde'".

<sup>32</sup> As of the mid-1950s, the role of German theologians increased in the CCEQ, given the establishment of the ecumenical Johann-Adam-Möhlner Institut für Konfessions- und Diasporakunde, in January 1957. Through his good contacts with bishop Lorenz Jaeger, Willebrands was closely connected to this institute from its earliest days. See the dossiers in the Archives Willebrands, Dossiers 32 and 73.

<sup>33</sup> WCC Archives 42.11.8, Letter from Visser 't Hooft to Willebrands, 8 November 1957: "I am very grateful that You have sent us so many valuable materials regarding 'Lordship'. A very first impression convinces me already that we, from our side, have much to discern from it and that this will be fruitful in our further process of study."

<sup>34</sup> See Archives Willebrands, Dossier 68, Report of a Meeting between the Russian Orthodox Church and delegates of the World Council of Churches, at Utrecht from August 7th to 9th, 1958, dated 10 August 1958.

<sup>35</sup> See Archives Willebrands, Dossier 34, various correspondence.

and the Ecumenical Movement,<sup>36</sup> and defended the growth of the World Council over against charges that his institution risked of becoming a “super church”. He also underlined the importance for the WCC-member churches not to lose their autonomy when entering into dialogue with larger bodies. For Catholic readers, the article sounded as an attack against the Roman Catholic Church, with its official position of an ecumenism of return, as the sole institution claiming the position of a super-church.

The theologians Congar and Dumont were shocked and made this known to Willebrands, who was now perceived as the one responsible for upkeeping the good relationships with Geneva.<sup>37</sup> Not only the French Dominicans reacted, for in the fall of 1958 the Jesuit rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Augustin Bea, also voiced his critique to Willebrands.<sup>38</sup> The latter decided, when in Utrecht, to confront Visser 't Hooft with the Catholic reception of his article, and was utterly relieved to find Visser 't Hooft surprised and saddened. The WCC-leader indicated that he had not desired these interpretations. Willebrands brought this message to the meeting of the CCEQ's comité directeur in Rome in November 1958 and could restore calm. Such anecdotes reveal that not only for his Catholic peers, but also at the headquarters at the Route de Malagnou in Geneva, Willebrands had reached the status of a “trustworthy Catholic”. Nothing illustrates this better than the fact that, in the same fall of 1958, he was invited to be the first Roman Catholic to teach a course at the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies at the WCC's Ecumenical Institute in Bossey. On 8 January 1959, Willebrands reported his excellent “impressions of the climate of serious study, religious interest and openness he had found in Bossey”. Two weeks later, things looked even better when John XXIII announced his intention to organise an ecumenical council.

The year of 1959 announced itself as promising for ecumenical relationships, and mere days after John's XXIII announcement Willebrands voiced his surprise and enthusiasm to his friend Visser 't Hooft.<sup>39</sup> Willebrands wrote that the news of the council required an extraordinary meeting of the Catholic Conference's comité directeur on February 27, in Rome. In preparation, he scheduled meetings with the Vatican State Secretary, Cardinal Tardini and with Cardinal Tisserant – prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. However, he would not discuss the ecumenical scope of the upcoming council without consulting Geneva. So, on 22 and 23 February 1959, he talked with the Greek Orthodox theologian Emilianos

---

<sup>36</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Super-Church and the Ecumenical Movement*, in: *Ecumenical Review* 10 (1957-8), pp. 365-85. The article was in fact a revised version of Visser 't Hooft's speech for the English Free Churches at Folkestone in 1958.

<sup>37</sup> See Archives Willebrands, Dossier 34, Letter from Y. Congar to J. Willebrands, 23 August 1958, in which Congar speaks about “un mauvais article” from the side of the WCC secretary general.

<sup>38</sup> See Archives CCEQ, General correspondence, Letter from A. Bea to J. Willebrands, 16 September 1958.

<sup>39</sup> Archives WCC 42.11.8, Letter from Willebrands to Visser 't Hooft, 15 February 1959: “The announcement of the council by Pope John has surprised all of us. [...] Given the utmost importance of this council I have asked the members of the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions to gather in Rome at the end of February to discuss this matter. On my journey to Rome I would like to stop in Geneva and visit the World Council. I hope to be able to discuss the council there with you and with Dr. Harms.”

Timiadis and Visser 't Hooft.<sup>40</sup> Together they considered three options for the Roman Catholic Church to deal with the “separated brethren” during the upcoming council: first, an invitation as it was extended before Vatican I. This would meet with a general negative response. Second, they debated the option of inviting non-Catholic “observers” at Vatican II: in such case, the secretary general feared that the churches would only send “second rank” men. The final option consisted of holding private conversations on Christian unity outside of the council’s organisational structures.

Strikingly, Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft agreed upon their preference for the third idea. Willebrands felt this would be accepted well by the leadership of the CCEQ and underlined the importance of enhancing basic interpersonal contacts. So, it was in Geneva and less than a month after the announcement of the council that these two Dutchmen agreed upon a twofold *modus operandi*: at the council itself “indirect” action was required through a Catholic discussion of ecclesiology and of the role of the episcopate in the church(es). Next would come direct actions: theological conversations and collaboration on an international scale outside of the conciliar confines. Central to this second track would be a discussion on the notion religious liberty as a basis for dialogue.

Both Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft spontaneously presumed that the Congregation for the Eastern Churches would have to take the lead at the upcoming council, where the relationships with non-Catholics were concerned. Both also feared the incompetence of some Vatican officials in ecumenical affairs. It is no surprise then that Willebrands informed Cardinal Tisserant of his talks in Geneva. Moreover, remnants of the conversation with Timiadis and Visser 't Hooft found their way into the CCEQ’s preparatory *Note on the Restoration of Unity*, which was drafted in close collaboration with Dumont, and sent to the secretary of the Council, Monsignor Pericle Felici, and to Cardinals Tardini, Ottaviani and Tisserant,<sup>41</sup> as well as to a series of Catholic bishops supporting the CCEQ’s agenda. Willebrands’ efforts in helping shape the ecumenical direction of Vatican II already in the first half of 1959 were closely followed in Geneva. In a letter dated on the first of May, 1959, Visser 't Hooft jotted down his conviction that “at this point in time only very few Catholic theologians truly understand the spirit required for the

---

<sup>40</sup> See Willebrands’ report on this meeting in Archives Willebrands, Dossier 46, Confidential Report from the CCEQ-secretary on the event of his journey to Geneva and Rome from 20 November to 12 December 1959.

<sup>41</sup> Not everyone shared the ecumenical enthusiasm, however. In his diary, Felici reacts negatively on the ecumenical proposal coming from the CCEQ, and indicates that the Vatican State Secretary, Cardinal Tardini, shares the same feelings. See V. Carbone, *Il Diario conciliare di Monsignor Pericle Felici*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015, p. 47. See the entry of 16 July 1959: “Riferisco a Sua Eminenza su una Nota stesa dal Comitato Direttivo della Commissione Cattolica Ecumenica. Il mio giudizio è sfavorevole e trovo strano che la Nota sia stata firmata anche da P. Carlo Boyer S.J. della Gregoriana. Sua Eminenza [Tardini] è d’accordo nel riprovarla e si dice ancora meravigliato che in Segreteria di Stato ne abbiano a lui fatta una relazione con molto favore.” On Tisserant, see the excellent biography by É. Fouilloux, *Eugène Cardinal Tisserant 1884-1972. Une biographie*, Paris 2011.

work of unity. Hence we are so grateful that on a responsible spot we find a man who so very well understands this."<sup>42</sup>

### *Tumultuous Closure of a Decade*

The same year of 1959 ended in an ecumenical drama: on August 23, Visser 't Hooft approached Willebrands in person, and told him: "I thought that I had invited the two most sensible Catholics [Willebrands and Dumont], but I got the two dumbest ones. Everything has gone the world over." Notwithstanding the southern location of the Isle of Rhodes, the atmosphere had turned frosty.<sup>43</sup> The reason for this furious expression was this: after some deliberations, Visser 't Hooft had insisted that Willebrands and Dumont be present at the Central Committee meeting of the World Council in Rhodes. The disastrous story of the events is well known and reported upon. While the Central Committee meeting prepared the integration of the Orthodox into the WCC, a process that would be completed at the New Delhi assembly of 1961, Willebrands and Dumont – present in the status of accredited journalist – engaged in a private meeting with Orthodox representatives aside of the official talks in Rhodes.

This was picked up by the press and caused an enormous stir and a quasi breach of the carefully built up relationships between Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft – who accused the Catholics of applying tactics of *divide et impera*. The experience was dramatic, and things escalated further after a Vatican Radio Broadcast announced a meeting in Venice with Roman Catholic and Orthodox delegates. The quarrel only ended in November 1959, when Willebrands anonymously published an article in *Herder Korrespondenz* under the title *Keine orthodox-katholische Theologenkonferenz*.<sup>44</sup> Shortly before, he had privately informed Visser 't Hooft that he had succeeded in convincing several Vatican officials to refrain from such a meeting. Willebrands only succeeded in doing so after intense contacts (in November and December 1959) with Visser 't Hooft, the Lutheran theologian Heinrich Harms and Timiadis on the WCC-side, and at the Vatican with Cardinal elect Augustin Bea and Pietro Parente, assessor of the Holy Office, as well as Cardinal Tisserant. There, Willebrands had summoned the comité directeur of the Catholic Conference, for he could only act when having full support from all sides. Through the incident, Willebrands, Visser 't Hooft and Cardinal Bea understood one thing: the Vatican offices were not fully competent in order to engage in

---

<sup>42</sup> Archives CCEQ, General correspondence, Letter from Visser 't Hooft to Willebrands, 1 May 1959. Also see Visser 't Hooft's account of the crisis in W.H. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs*, pp. 326-327.

<sup>43</sup> On the Rhodes incident, see the dossier of files and correspondence in the Archives Istina as well as the Archives Willebrands, Dossier 46. Also the Archives CCEQ hold a Dossier Rhodes. A full reconstruction of the events is found in K. Schelkens, *L'affaire de Rhodes» au jour le jour. La correspondance inédite entre J. Willebrands et C.J. Dumont*, in: *Istina* 54 (2009), pp. 115-139. Also see the entries in the edition of Willebrands' diaries for these years, in: Th. Salemink (ed.), *"You Will Be Called Repairer of the Breach". The Diary of J.G.M. Willebrands, 1958-1961*, Leuven 2009 (*Instrumenta Theologica* 32), pp. 118-133.

<sup>44</sup> [J. Willebrands], *Keine orthodox-katholische Theologenkonferenz*, in: *Herder-Korrespondenz* 14/2, November 1959, pp. 67-69.

ecumenical relationships, and there was a need for both a strengthening of personal and institutional relationships.<sup>45</sup> If anything, the Rhodes incident painstakingly revealed the lacking of a competent office for ecumenical affairs in the Roman Catholic Church.

While the relationship between Visser 't Hooft and Dumont never really got restored after Rhodes, an encounter between the two Dutchmen in the spring of 1960, at the Evangelische Akademie at Loccum, helped to restore mutual confidence.<sup>46</sup> This too reinforced the image that the Geneva leadership saw Willebrands as a central player for the future of Catholic ecumenism. Willebrands was quite aware of this, and already before the crisis at Rhodes he had confided to his diary that "both Visser 't Hooft and Harms would like to see *me* in this role [of Catholic contact person for the WCC]. *They want this.*"

### *On the Radar*

In 1960, both men prepared their meetings: Visser 't Hooft started planning the WCC's General Assembly of New Delhi, and Willebrands paved the path for the CCEQ-gathering at Gazzada, near Milan, with the approval of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini. In this year, events followed upon one another fast: on 5 June 1960, shortly after the encounter at Loccum, John XXIII made it public that he established a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity as one of the bodies that ought to shape the council. He confided its leadership to Cardinal Bea<sup>47</sup> and appointed Willebrands as its secretary. The Geneva secretary general was relieved, and showed himself immediately aware of the fact that Willebrands would now officially be able to represent Catholicism. The key word was "official": as of Willebrands' appointment as SPCU-secretary, his relationship with Geneva entered a new phase. All the while, Visser 't Hooft rejoiced in the continuity that was now created between the preconciliar work of Catholic theologians below the radar and the official ecumenical approach in the SPCU. This continuity between the CCEQ was all the more striking given that not only Willebrands, but no less than nineteen protagonists of the CCEQ would be appointed as official members or consultors to the SPCU in the period of council preparations in 1960 and 1961.<sup>48</sup> This officialization was immediately taken for granted on the occasion of the CCEQ meeting at Gazzada from September 19 to 23, 1960. Though Visser 't

---

<sup>45</sup> Archives WCC 4201.2.2, Letter from J. Willebrands to H. Harms, 3 November 1959: "one thing I learned from all that happened at Rhodes: it is surely to evaluate the extreme difficulty in a critical situation, to keep the trust between persons as well as communities."

<sup>46</sup> See Archives Willebrands, Dossier 202, Letter from Willebrands to B. Alfrink, 13 April 1960.

<sup>47</sup> See M. Velati, *Un indirizzo a Roma. La nascita del Segretariato per l'unità dei cristiani (1959-1960)*, in: *Il Vaticano fra attese e celebrazione*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Bologna 1995 (TRSR: N.S. 13), pp. 83-84.

<sup>48</sup> The following CCEQ-related Catholics would become SPCU-members: Lorenz Jaeger, François Charrière, Thomas Holland, Josef Höfer, Charles Boyer, Gustave Thils, Pierre Michalon; and SPCU-consultors: Hermann Volk, Davis, Bellini, Joseph Feiner, Eduard Stakemeier, Frans Thijssen, Janez Vodopivec, Christophe Dumont, Jérôme Hamer, Maurice Bévenot, George Weigel, Georges Tavard.

Hooft would not be present at the gathering, he did agree to come to the nearby city of Milan.<sup>49</sup>

Although the story runs on, the period of informal relationships ends at this point. By means of closing this contribution, we wish to offer some citations from a memorandum – written by Visser 't Hooft and sent to the American Lutheran pastor Franklin Clark Fry and the British Baptist theologian Ernest Alexander Payne – on the private talks held in the slipstream of the meeting with Visser 't Hooft, Willebrands and Cardinal Bea on September 22, 1960. These talks would mark the end of an era, and the transition toward a new phase in the relationships between Rome and Geneva. Willebrands had already expressed his awareness of that shift in a letter to the WCC-secretary general soon after he heard of his appointment in Rome.<sup>50</sup>

Reading the memorandum on the talks of September 1960, it is clear that Visser 't Hooft was positive on the turn taken by the Catholic Church. According to his report, the three men touched upon a number of points: for a start it indicates that Cardinal Bea expressed his enthusiasm about the fact that the Vatican had finally left a fear of “relativism” that was there until 1948. In Bea’s mind, “the turning point had been when in 1949 the Instruction said that the Holy Spirit was at work in the ecumenical movement”, and the cardinal stressed that the Roman Catholic Church “had learned that it could not be indifferent about the future of Protestant Churches”.<sup>51</sup> This confirmed some of the fear Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft had shared already in 1959, namely that competences were under debate, and Bea was quite clear on the fact that the relationships to the orthodox remained in the hands of Cardinal Tisserant and the preconciliar Commission for the Oriental Churches. In reaction, Visser 't Hooft wrote that his impression was that “to say the least, the people of the Eastern Congregation are inexperienced and clumsy, there will likely be more activity on the Roman Catholic-Protestant front than on the Roman Catholic-Orthodox front”. On another front, things had changed since 1959. Visser 't Hooft underlined that a new meeting ought to be scheduled, dealing with the conciliar agenda, and stressed that two topics should be properly discussed: religious liberty and the renewal of the church.<sup>52</sup> The idea of holding such conversations outside of the council was abandoned here. And finally, the three discussed the issue of observership. Here, Visser 't Hooft reports that “we agreed that it was better not to ask churches to appoint observers, but to invite individuals”. Once again, a step forward was taken, and, finally, the Roman Cath-

---

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Th. Salemink (ed.), “You Will Be Called” (note 43) p. 63.

<sup>50</sup> Archives Willebrands, Dossier 351, Letter from Visser 't Hooft to Willebrands, 15 July 1960. Also see Archives WCC 42.11.8: Letter from Willebrands to Visser 't Hooft, 5 July 1960: “On 28 June I have been informed that the H. Father has appointed me as secretary to the Secretariate for Christian Unity. I hope that this position will allow me to work even harder for the ideal which I have received as a divine task in my life. Now that I will assume an official position, our contacts will have a different character than before. I sincerely hope that the openness and the confidence that have marked our contacts, even through hardships, will remain in the future.”

<sup>51</sup> WCC Archives 21.11.8, Memorandum from Visser 't Hooft for Ernest A. Payne and Franklin Clark Fry, 3 October 1960.

<sup>52</sup> In a later stage, in conversation with François Charrière, on 12 November 1960, Visser 't Hooft would build on this to discuss the issue of religious liberty further.



olic Church was ready to invite non-Catholics to be present at the Council as well as to send official observers to WCC-assemblies.<sup>53</sup> This would have Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft occupied for another five years, but that story falls beyond the confines of the present article.

### Conclusions

Ecumenical history since the early 1960s has shown that the complex relationship between the WCC and Catholic Church is a matter of ongoing debate. Tensed moments have been witnessed with the failing of the Joint Working Group in the early 1970s and still today, the Catholic Church has not become a full member of the World Council.<sup>54</sup> This contribution did not aim to investigate the background of these issues. If anything, our focus on the preconciliar years has illustrated the importance of personal encounter as a basis for ecumenical advance. The story of the evolving friendship of Willebrands and Visser 't Hooft gives proof to this. But there is more to it: a closer look at a period in which the official Catholic position was that of an ecumenism of return, does reveal the inner complexity of the Catholic Church as well as its individual actors. A balanced judgement when studying the role of Catholicism in its relationship to the World Council of Churches requires a keen understanding of this complexity. Pioneers such as Willebrands are marked by their sense of loyalty to the Catholic hierarchy, but all the while they grant themselves the freedom to interpret magisterial guidelines in order to help advance their own tradition. Against this horizon, the position of Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft in this story is fascinating, given the patience with which he approached his colleagues, and his awareness of the limits within which his Catholic counterparts could or could not act. This attitude of mutual openness and readiness for discernment and change is perhaps the most valuable aspect laid out in our historical survey. When on 29 May 1975 the then cardinal Willebrands handed over the Augustin Bea prize to Visser 't Hooft, he pronounced these words in his laudatio – which we gladly pick up as our own closing words: “L’ouverture au dialogue du docteur Visser 't Hooft a facilité des rencontres entre des dirigeants du mouvement oecuménique et des théologiens catholiques, déjà à l’époque où l’attitude de l’Église catholique était déterminé par l’encyclique *Mortalium animos*. Ces rencontres, qui pendant plusieurs années gardaient un caractère privé ont démontré tout leur valeur au moment où le Secrétariat pour l’Unité fut créé par le Pape Jean XXIII et où le problème oecuménique fut posé au deuxième Concile du Vatican comme un des problèmes majeures.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> The story of the observers at Vatican II has been documented at length in the recent book by M. Velati, *Separati ma fratelli. Gli osservatori non cattolici al Vaticano II*, Bologna 2014.

<sup>54</sup> After the initial progress made in the relationships between Rome and Geneva, it was clear that the stagnation of dialogue after 1968 was deplored by early pioneers such as Visser 't Hooft. These feelings were clearly expressed in his article, entitled *The General Development since 1948*, in: H.E.Fey (ed.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* (note 2), pp. 1-16.

<sup>55</sup> Archives WCC 994.1.32: Cardinal Bea Prize, Lugano, 29 May 1975.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*Im vorliegenden Beitrag untersucht der Autor die Beziehung zweier „Pioniere der Ökumene“, die beide aus den Niederlanden stammen: Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, erster Generalsekretär des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen, und Johannes Willebrands, der schließlich Präsident des Päpstlichen Rates für die Förderung der Einheit der Christen wurde. Diese Studie konzentriert sich nicht auf den offiziellen Dialog zwischen Rom und Genf, wie er sich nach dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil entwickelt hat, sondern untersucht auf der Basis von Archivdokumenten die Beziehung zwischen diesen beiden Vorkämpfern in einer Zeit, in der keine offiziellen Beziehungen zwischen der römisch-katholischen Kirche und dem Ökumenischen Rat der Kirchen unterhalten wurden. Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf der Bedeutung zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen als einem grundlegenden Baustein auf dem Weg hin zu einer Einheit der Christen. Dieser Beitrag zeigt, wie eine enge Zusammenarbeit – theologisch, geistlich und persönlich –, den Weg zu einer ökumenischen Wende ebnete, den der Katholizismus mit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil einschlug.*