

## **Therapy of Renewal- The Third European Ecumenical Assembly**

The Third European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu, Romania from September 4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> on the theme *The Light of Christ shines on all: Hope for renewal and unity in Europe*, provided not only analysis of the ecumenical difficulties facing the churches, but also encouraged a "therapy", as Cardinal Kasper put it, that begins with a "readiness for renewal and reform...whereby every church must begin with itself." In this short article, I would like to reflect from within a Catholic perspective on some of the pointers for renewal that emerged in the light of the Assembly's Final Message and comments made during the Assembly itself.<sup>1</sup>

### **Admit Failure and Begin Again**

The topic of a new beginning and with it purification and healing of memory was mentioned several times during the Assembly not least during a forum on peace that saw inputs from Bishop Anthony Farquhar of Down and Connor, Sr. Geraldine Smyth of the Irish School of Ecumenics and Rev. Ken Crowe of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The responsibility for facing up to the past and dealing with the legacy of suffering is one that lies on all of society, the state and the Church. It's something that we associate directly with the post-conflict situation of Northern Ireland but, of course, it's a theme that impacts also on the whole Church regarding many aspects of life, both personal and ecclesial.

The Final Message itself began with an acknowledgement of how the churches have failed to fulfill even some of the commitments taken on in the previous assemblies held in Basel in 1989 and Graz in 1997. Acknowledgement of failure is a healthy thing when we set out on a new beginning. It is what we saw Pope John Paul II do during the Jubilee Year in the Day of Pardon when, in unprecedented fashion, he asked forgiveness from the Lord for the sins, past and present, of the sons and daughters of the Church.

The purification of memory isn't just about failures. To limit it to that, rather than being an exercise of humility, could well end up being a sin against the Christian virtue of hope! The healing of memories demands a conviction, as the Final Message puts it that "the transforming energy of the light of Christ is stronger than the darkness of resignation, fatalism, fear and indifference." To begin again no matter what is the great work of the Holy Spirit whose characteristic action is to bring about a dying and a rising, a knocking down and a building up, instilling in us the courage to set out again bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things and enduring all things (1 Cor 13:7).

### **Acknowledge the Treasure of Spirituality**

A number of people commented that the Final Message of Sibiu might be considered more spiritual in tone than those of the Basel and Graz assemblies.

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<sup>1</sup> For a flavour of the event itself as experienced by the Irish delegates present, see Susan Gately, "Exchanging Gifts" *The Irish Catholic* (13 September 2007), 4.

Perhaps there's a greater recognition today that "our Christian spirituality is a precious treasure". It is by attending to spirituality that the true experience of "koinonia" can grow and this in turn leads to a transformation that is necessary in the face of contemporary social and cultural trends. The Lutheran Bishop Wolfgang Huber affirmed "I am convinced that...a well-founded spirituality is a strong force of resistance against all secularism, all militant nihilism and religious terrorism and fundamentalism".

It is not without significance that in a key document some years ago regarding the future of the Catholic Church, spiritual renewal was underlined: 'let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth'.<sup>2</sup> Parishes and dioceses, groups and agencies are called to renewal by promoting a spirituality of *koinonia*, of communion, at all levels.

Prof. Andrea Riccardi of the Sant'Egidio Community quoted Martin Buber in advocating this primacy of spiritual renewal: "To begin with oneself: that is the only thing that matters... The lever of Archimedes with which we can lift up the world is our inner and personal transformation". Lifting up the world begins from hearts that are converted because, in the words of the Orthodox Saint Seraphim of Sarov: "Acquire peace in yourself and thousands around you will find salvation". There were many testimonies of spirituality on the part of men and women, communities and movements. Indeed, rather than acknowledging spirituality it could be said that Sibiu helped us appreciate the range of spiritualities that the Holy Spirit is opening up today to help renew the Church.

One of the effects of the Assembly taking place in the primarily Orthodox context of Romania (the first assembly was held in the primarily Protestant town of Basel, Switzerland, the second in the mostly Catholic city of Graz, Austria) was a greater appreciation of just how much we can receive in terms of liturgy and spirituality from the East. The growing presence of Orthodox churches in Ireland is an opportunity to enlarge our understanding and living out of Christian spirituality, breathing with the "two lungs" of European Christian experience.<sup>3</sup>

### **Rediscover Mission: Be and Speak!**

The need to re-proclaim Christ was voiced often throughout the Assembly. One of the explicit recommendations in the Final Message was that we renew "our mission as individual believers and as Churches to proclaim Christ as the Light and the Saviour of the world". First and foremost that requires we ourselves be the light we are proclaiming. The first task in Sibiu became, therefore, that "of deepening and living out Christianity" because, as Cardinal Péter Erdő, President of CCEE, commented "we often need to acknowledge...how little Christianity is known in its true essence...There are many masks of Christianity...If we wish to be authentic missionaries of Christ, we need to be his true disciples".

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<sup>2</sup> See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January, 2001), 43.

<sup>3</sup> For a good introduction to Orthodox spirituality and practice see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

But we also need to learn to speak in the contemporary cultural setting. The Anglican Bishop of London, Rt. Rev Richard Chartres described our culture. On the one hand, we can see some incredible people spending themselves for others, running marathons for cancer sufferers, making collections for charitable activities and being good neighbours. And yet we also see a culture where there is a weary cynicism and a cult of celebrity where people are well known not for their virtues but for their known-ness: "It is a culture in which people are finding it hard to sustain their relationships which is not really surprising seeing that the dominant ethos insists that we are self made individuals or we are nothing...a caricature of life is exhibited for us to observe in the tragic human zoo of Big Brother". Many are "baffled by the rapid disappearance of an old social world in which they felt very much at home" while many of the values most cherished today are divorced from their Christian matrix.

To respond to this cultural shift, it is not enough, as von Balthasar once put it to "toss a saccharin tablet into this raging ocean" by settling for a fashionable consensus or retreating into a ghetto. There's a need to engage with the culture around us bearing witness to the Gospel. Recent coverage of Archbishop Seán Brady's remarks at the Annual National Novena at Knock regarding new trends in Ireland, including the new Irish superstition, indicates the need also in Ireland to rediscover mission both in terms of who we are and our need to speak of the Gospel. A review of what happened at the Sibiu Assembly suggested many platforms of mission that call for creativity and initiative: create spaces of encounter, avail of the possibilities offered by national and local media outlets, put on cultural events, engage in dialogue with politicians, organize forums, seminars and exhibitions.

There was a strong sense of the importance of the inclusivity of all in mission. The Assembly noted in particular the place of young people not just as the Church of the future but of today. To that end, a message that had been issued by young delegates at a preparatory meeting held in St. Maurice, Switzerland, was appended to the Final Assembly Message. It was a sign of the need to trust young people, work with them, and give them responsibility. The Final Message also reminded us of the active agency of the elderly, ethnic minorities, and disabled people in our Church life.

### **Learn More about All Religions**

Not surprisingly, given the presence of many members of world religions in Europe, the topic of our relationships with other religions emerged in the Assembly. The Final Message put it straightforwardly: we all need to learn more about all religions. To this end, the Ecumenical Charter (the "Charta Oecumenica" as it is called), signed in April 2001, was brought to our attention. This deceptively simple document contains many pointers for reflection and action, ostensibly on an ecumenical, inter-church level, but actually it's a document that can be read at many levels, including by each church in its own deliberations.

What is the proper attitude to believers of other religions? The Greek Orthodox Archbishop Dr. Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania proposed the "testimony of life". Both the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Metropolitan Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate pointed out that it is precisely our understanding of the Light of Christ whose radiance cannot be confined that makes us respectful of other religious experiences and traditions. They expressed their conviction that solidarity with people of other faiths and other worldviews in the face of common challenges, particularly in the moral sphere, will give a new dynamic to inter-Christian relations. The Final Message included an affirmation of the right to life from the beginning of life to its natural end.

In Ireland, we are at the beginnings of encounter with other faith communities. The Three Faiths Forum of Ireland is a dialogue point in the Republic for Jews, Christians and Muslims while the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum caters for a broader range of religions in dialogue. There are many issues arising for parishes and schools in the welcoming and integration of the "new Irish" of Islamic, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist religious persuasion. Cardinal Kasper reminded the Assembly: "We ought to respect the otherness of other religions, but have the courage of our own otherness too". The English experience of inter-religious dialogue stood out in Sibiu for its achievements to date. The Catholic Church there has also produced documents that could be of use to us in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

As Archbishop Martin commented in his address at the Greenhills Ecumenical Conference in January this year, inter-religious dialogue is both an opportunity and a necessity for Ireland. It has a value in itself that would be dangerous to put to one side. It would, he commented, "also be, curiously, a renunciation on the part of the Christian community of an integral part of its mission, namely that of fostering in our world an understanding of the unity of humankind, in that we are all children of the same God."

### **See Migrants as a Blessing**

In what was called "a social project unparalleled in human history", the phenomenon of the large-scale migration in Europe was addressed during the Assembly. The question was asked: will we be able to turn the fact of such wide-scale migration into a blessing or will our diversity prove to be unsustainable? Sister Joan Roddy, Director of the Refugee Project of the Irish Bishops' Conference shared in plenary session her vibrant first hand experience of issues relating to migration in Ireland.

The Final Message encouraged every effort to ensure regular immigration, the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, the upholding of the value of the family unity and the combating of exploitation of trafficked persons. The churches were called to increase their pastoral care of vulnerable immigrants.

But the Assembly reminded the churches to recognize Christian immigrants not simply as recipients of religious care but rather as capable of

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<sup>4</sup> See the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Committee for Other Faiths, *Interfaith Dialogue: The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (2002) and *Catholic Schools & Other Faiths* (1997)

playing a full and active role in the life of the Church and of society. To esteem and value migrants for what they can give and not just for how they need to be helped requires a change of mentality.

### **Peace, Justice, Care for Creation and Remember Africa!**

To avoid "squandering the precious heritage of those who for the last sixty years have worked for peace" Europeans ought not to take for granted the relatively pacific state of Europe's socio-political landscape. The Assembly heard reminders of a risk that Europeans might simply live off the fat of the land, forgetting responsibility towards others. There's a need to actively reject war as a tool for resolving conflict, to work against divisions created in a global market between winners and losers, to back initiatives for alleviation of poverty, debt cancellation and promotion of fair trade and to promote a Europe of values. In Ireland we might consider how we can best honour the precious heritage committed to us by previous generations.

The theme of the care of creation was highlighted. For some years now, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has made its own this concern. Apart from addressing ecological issues in our preaching and catechesis, we were invited to revisit our whole attitude to creation. Indeed, while some may think of eco-congregations, care for creation can also be expressed in how we attend to the aspect of beauty in our church buildings, premises, grounds and projects. God is not only good and so just, true and so logical, God is also beauty and we bear witness to the light of Christ in the Church also by the way of beauty.

The Final Message acknowledged that Africa is a continent intertwined with European history and its future. It's part of the "love story with the South of the world that needs to be rekindled" as Prof. Andrea Riccardi put it. The wounds of Africa touched the heart of the Assembly. Through its missionaries Ireland too senses a strong link with Africa and feels the levels of poverty experienced there as something about which we cannot remain indifferent and inactive. Perhaps there are initiatives at parish level that might involve linking up with Africa (for instance through missionary societies and projects) that might capture people's imagination and engagement.

### **Don't feel alone!**

There's no true renewal without the Cross. The renowned Romanian Orthodox theologian and former rector of the Theological Faculty of Sibiu, Dimitru Staniloae was quoted at the Assembly: "every gift requires a certain cross". Embracing the Cross and remaining united to one another are two indispensable planks of renewal. In 1999 Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Teoctist met in an historic encounter in Bucharest. On that occasion, the Romanian people present, Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed, in seeing the leaders together, spontaneously began to chant: "unitate, unitate".

The Sibiu Assembly itself was a wake-up call that the way of the Church is the way of Unity - with God, with one another, with our Christian heritage and the "cloud of witnesses" (Rom 12:1) both past and present. Creating opportunities for people to come together in assembly has the value of encouraging one another because, in truth, we need not feel alone. We don't go to God on our own, but through and with one another.