

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Europe's Christians Meet in Sibiu, Romania

Third European Ecumenical Assmembly, 4-9 September 2007

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Ruth and I were thrilled to be able to share in the Third European Ecumenical Assembly which took place in this relatively small Romanian city from September 4 – 9, she as co-chairman of the Creation Forum, I as a reserve interpreter. The sheer fact of the gathering of some 2,500 people, brought together by the partnership of the Conference of European Churches, whose members are both Orthodox and Protestant, and the Conference of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences, involving all the Roman Catholic Churches, is a deeply encouraging sign that almost the whole spectrum of Christian churches are now in contact with one another. All the more so if we remember that the first of these, in the Swiss city of Basel in 1989, was the first occasion for a representative cross-section of Christians from both the East and the West of Europe to meet since the mutual excommunications of the year 1054 !

Each person there will have been able to meet and talk with people from very different backgrounds, cultures and churches to her/his own. Our stewards, over 100 young people, half from Romania, the rest from 27 different countries, wrote a letter at the end reflecting on the title of our gathering: **The Light of Christ Shines upon All – Hope for Renewal and Unity in Europe**. 'Where have we found the light of Christ ?' they ask. 'The light of Christ shines in the faces of delegates, staff, volunteers and our fellow stewards: through a smile, a handshake, a heartfelt thank-you, through prayer with a friend. These God-given moments have given us the strength to endure harsh words, pressure and exhaustion. (...) We will never forget what we have learned from each other, the experiences we have had, the friends we have found.' All of us will gladly echo that.

Sibiu was a particularly good place in which to hold such an event. It has quite a small city centre, with the old walls built many centuries ago to defend it against the Turks. It was founded in the early Middle Ages by German miners coming to search for useful minerals in the Carpathian mountains, ruled for most of the last 400 years until 1918 by Austro-

Hungarians, yet with Romanians having been in the numerical majority for a long time now. So it has several churches built to the taste of each of these ! It is serving this year as one of Europe's Capitals of Culture, with a lot of new investment in facilities for tourists, including a very large tent courtesy of the City which was a symbolic meeting place for Christian pilgrims.

Our programme was full. We began each of the main days with a lively Morning Prayer in the tent, with an exuberant choir leading our singing (from a most useful book of 51 **Songs** from all our traditions, which can be ordered by email from either of the sponsoring bodies: ccee@ccee.ch or cec@cec-kek.org). In the first of these, the **Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I**, from Istanbul, gave a profound meditation, ranging over all the nine topic areas of the Assembly, and expressing precise hopes and expectations for our work, on the basis of Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21:

' ... we unreservedly promote and support every ecumenical theological dialogue, on equal terms, as something absolutely necessary, even in the most critical relations among us, given that without dialogue it is impossible to achieve the desired ultimate goal of Christian reconciliation, communion and unity. It is only through sincere and objective dialogue that we shall also be able to contribute in a crucial way to the consolidation and communion even among the people of Europe, supporting and promoting the creation of a new Europe, where Christian principles and values will rule on the basis of the spiritual heritage of Christianity.'

The main part of the morning was taken up by a long plenary session, where between greetings, addresses on the theme and a panel discussion, we listened to up to 8 or 10 prepared speeches (rather too many, though the best were excellent !). In the lunch break there were optional 'hearings' on topics chosen by participants. In the afternoon there were parallel sessions of 3 of the 9 Forums,

- on Wednesday on matters to do with the Church (Unity, Spirituality and Mission)
- on Thursday Europe (European Integration, Religions and Migration) and
- on Friday the World (Creation, Justice and Peace).

In each case these included at least two opening addresses and sometimes discussion in smaller groups. There was evening worship in the local churches and then later, alongside dinner in the various restaurants, another set of 'hearings' in several buildings around the city.

Different people will no doubt have taken home different highlights. For myself, I pick out - as addresses unlikely to be heard elsewhere:

1. The President of the European Commission, **Jose Manuel Barroso** from Portugal, spoke on ***Reconciled Diversity in a Unified Europe***. He insisted all through on the importance of **values**:

A Union defined by its geographical and economic dimensions only would lack unity. Only a sharing of values can put flesh on the bones of a political entity such as the European Union, which was conceived as a community of values, not an association based simply on common interests. It is a community of values that takes shape in a diversity of cultures and mutually enriching traditions within the framework of an enlarged and open Europe that is capable of building bridges towards other world regions and of holding a dialogue with other cultures and religions. (...) Thus Europe is deeply attached to humanism and democracy, which it has 'invented'. But respect for diversity rests on the deeper respect for the principles on which the European Union cannot compromise: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom of creation.

2. From a radically different angle, **M. Gpakilè Félérou**, from Guinea in W. Africa and a member of the (Catholic) Sant' Egidio Community, spoke movingly about the depth of the hurts that Europe has over the centuries inflicted on Africa. He spoke of a letter written by two girls of 14 and 15 seeking to get to Europe, but who died in the landing gear of a Belgian air-liner:

Their problem was neither only poverty or overwhelming ambition. It is loss of hope and of trust in their own world, in its institutions, authorities, and at times even in their own family of origin. A very deep feeling of having been betrayed. (...) Being children often means to be ghosts, invisible, with no documents. (...) I think about young street girls and boys in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. I met them. They are sexually abused at 12-13 years of age. I think about public schools with overcrowded classes with 100-120 children in a classroom. If children are the world's future, where is future?' (...) So he pleaded: 'We do not see how Africa can save itself on its own, or how America can save itself on its own, or save the world on its own; we do not see how Europe can save itself and

abandon Africa, or how Africa can face its development challenges without Europe.

3. **Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania** (the local version is 'and all atheists'), perhaps Europe's most outstanding Christian leader today, began by discussing the relation of the light of Christ as already in the creation of the world (Jn 1:3 and 8:12), on Mount Tabor in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2) and promised at the end of time (Rev. 21:23), to the way science has explored the nature of light and its contribution to all that is. His address culminated in a striking catalogue:

What is, at first sight, the whiteness of light is, as we all know, in fact the synthesis of seven different colours. So also the light of Christ can be broken down in a variety of ways and shades in life. We Christians, as “children of the light” are called upon to offer up all the colours of the spectrum of white light with:

- the light of peace, with ourselves, those around us and the whole world
- the light of justice, with us fighting for a just society on the local, pan-European and global levels
- the light of truth, in investigating history and in analyzing social reality
- the light of the breath of creation, which encourages original thought in sciences, the arts and culture
- the light of hope for the unity of all peoples of our continent, with their differences reconciled and harmonized
- the light of love, in the sense and power that has been given by the Christian faith and the living example of all those who have experienced it. The foremost responsibility and mission of the Church is to provide love, linking people with the source of love. There is no other social institution that can replace it
- Unwaning Paschal light, which reveals the final victory over sin and death through the power of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ.

By living and acting in this way, we shall belong to those creative bodies of people who, whether as majorities or minorities, have the ability to use to the full the best elements of the European heritage and to guide the continent forward to a state of renewed spiritual vigour.

The **Creation Forum**, which Ruth Conway chaired together with Markus Vogt from

Germany, heard two excellent short addresses. The first was by **Isabel Carter**, a former member of staff of Tearfund, who summarized the warnings of the International Panel on Climate Change, and then discussed how Christians can respond to those challenges:

Climate Change needs to be mainstreamed. It is an issue of human rights and of justice; it is a political issue; an issue of economics. It is an ethical issue that we as Christians need to take responsibility for. It will increasingly also become an issue of political stability; political leaders are ultimately responsible for dealing with its impact. (...) Let us take the initiative and say "ENOUGH". We have to stop sacrificing the earth on the altar of consumerism. We can lead the way !

Metropolitan Chrystopher, leader of the Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, who has the Academy of Vilemov under his care (which has pioneered many renewable energy sources), spoke no less forcefully:

Peace in today's world is threatened by the unfeeling thirst of the industrial world for the non-renewable fossil energy resources. Comparison of today's world to a drug addict is in our situation very appropriate. (...) A lifestyle based on respect for God's creation and our neighbours must be offered as an alternative which would on one side sustain our spiritual and intellectual integrity, and on the other side help to save God's creation and God's gifts of clean air, water, soil and unchanged climate for our neighbours. (...) Nature is transformed or dies, not by itself, but under the impact of man. Human spiritual condition plays the decisive role here.

It was hardly surprising that the ***Summary of the Creation Forum's Findings***, from the groups that followed these addresses, starts with a warning:

Global climate change is one of the greatest threats for the present and future generations. Without a change of mind and heart, technological solutions or political negotiations to protect the climate will not achieve their goals.

The churches should therefore give priority to the cause of responsible and sustainable life-styles. The *specific* contribution of the churches to the environmental movement is a better understanding of our interconnectedness with all of creation. Today a simple life style is an important Christian witness. The Christians and churches in Europe are called to use the Creation time (from 1st September to St Francis day) to pray and act in response to this ecological crisis which already affects the lives of million of people and the whole creation.

We commit ourselves to strengthen our current networks, e.g the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), in order to equip Christians for practical and political action ensuring that the earth's capacity rather than economic development takes priority.

We call churches to provide guiding examples that will inspire and encourage their members and the wider community to practise excellence in eco-management and substantially reduce their carbon footprint.

The **Message** of the Assembly as a whole turned out to be horribly rushed, and so failed to do justice to many of the concerns highlighted in the different forums. Several of its ten recommendations sound all too general and easy. Thanks however to the presence on the Message Committee of **the Revd Arlington Trotman**, lately Director of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland's Commission for Racial Justice, it speaks out clearly about the situation concerning migrants and minorities:

Enlightened by the Light of Christ, we Christians, according to biblical injunctions to the unity of humanity (Gen. 1:26-7), commit ourselves to repent for the sin of exclusion; deepen our understanding of "otherness"; defend the dignity and rights of every human being, and ensure protection to those in need of it; share the light of Christ which brings others to Europe; call upon European states to stop illegal administrative detention of migrants; make every effort to ensure regular immigration, the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, uphold the value of family unity and combat trafficking in human beings and exploitation of trafficked persons. We call on Churches to increase their pastoral care of vulnerable immigrants.' (...) 'Christian immigrants are not just the recipients of religious care but can play a full and active role in the life of the Church and of society.

Look it up on the website of the Assembly, where all the documents are becoming available as this is written: www.eea3.org , not least for the one-page statement of the young delegates, from their preparatory meeting at the end of July 2007, where they provide an admirable set of short commitments on all nine of the Forum topics. Faced with many criticisms of the omissions of the Message, its Chairman agreed to attach this paper to the Message. If these are indeed typical of how the next generation sees these

challenges, we can be confident that the Sibiu Assembly will have a lasting and healing effect.