

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Grace And Truth From Graz

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A Report From The Revd Dr Donald W Norwood, URC, Press Reporter

Graz at worship was a great experience. 25,000 people from all nations of a new Europe - gathered round the cross for the final service; all embracing ecumenism of women and men, diverse traditions and differently abled participants leading the prayers. And the children were not forgotten either. On other days smaller numbers but great themes, made more vivid by active symbolism-fruits of the earth or the cross of reconciliation in Coventry and its partnership with fellow victims of war, the people of Dresden.

Graz at workshops, hearings, dialogues, forums was the place of numerous person to person encounters, exchanges of ideas, Mutual encouragement or challenge on a whole spectrum of issues Second only to the worship, each of the 1,000 who participated could probably recall a conversation or a friendship or some very personal experience as a miracle of grace, like the woman in the crowd who was amazed that Jesus knew just which person had touched him. My favourite story is of some people who went in search of a Catholic priest to make their confessions, found there was none at the time but freely accepted the ministry of a Lutheran woman pastor who gently volunteered to listen and speak the forgiving word. There and then four centuries of division were overcome and sins forgiven.

Graz as an Ecumenical Assembly, proto-council, still has me puzzled. I went expecting a lot and I guess most did. After all 'Reconciliation' is what ecumenism is all about and what the Europe without its Berlin walls keeping each side in check needs to survive. But did this Assembly make a real contribution to the ministry of reconciliation we talked so much about?

Whereas the Faith and Order Conference at Santiago made some real contribution to the understanding of *koinonia*, I doubt if Graz added anything to that of reconciliation. Here some groundbreaking work was accomplished in South Africa, first with the *Kairos Document* and now through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The report from the Secretary of the SA Council of Churches on the hard, practical decisions on reconciliation was a key moment in the Assembly. More could have been made of the preparatory study text by Geiko Muller Fahrenholz on 'The Art of Forgiveness' [WCC 1997], which draws on the author's own experience of being German; though there was some first class input by Alan Falconer, formerly of the Irish School of Ecumenics, on the Reconciliation of Memories.

Two more general questions challenge present ecumenical conciliarism. The first was raised by Paul Ramsey as a strong critique of the Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 and voiced in his 'Who Speaks for the Church?' [Abingdon Press 1967. St Andrews 1969]. The second set of questions is well expressed by Keith Clements, now General Secretary of CEC, in 'Learning to Speak - The Church's Voice in Public Affairs' [T&T Clark 1995] - Who can speak for the Church? How representative were the delegates? And do we have to speak at all? No, says Clements, unless we have something distinctive to say as Christians.

Graz betrayed our current ecumenical ambivalence about councils. On the one hand some churches took it very seriously and sent along leading bishops, secretaries, respected laity etc. The Archbishop of Canterbury was there for most of the week, as were Roman Catholic bishops like Crispian Hollis of Portsmouth. Yet Carey told us on the first day not to expect too much from our meetings. Why not urge us and himself not to expect too little? Who knows what

the Spirit might choose to say to the churches, gathered together in one place? Even among the British delegation, there were few who just came for fun; and on a wider European setting the line up was impressive: Ulrich Duchrow, Alan Falconer, Brother Roger of Taizé, Mary Grey, Cecily Boulding of ARCIC and CTE fame, John Reardon of CCBI etc. Yet some churches probably appointed delegates on the basis of who would like to go to Graz and not all will ask or act on the reporting back. There is enormous potential in such gatherings, but it is almost deliberately undervalued before we meet.

And then there is the searching question raised by Clements on whether we have anything distinctly Christian and theological to say. Graz was so anxious to be relevant to a wide range of issues, many of them commendable and urgent, like the relief of Third World debts; but we could have made much more of in-depth reflection and praxis of reconciliation. We are in the reconciling business and in that concern we have too few partners outside the churches. But what do we say about reconciliation after Graz that we could not say before; and why in places like the old Yugoslavia and Ireland do we hear less about this Gospel than we do in the daily news from South Africa?