

“The Light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe”

The Third Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania: 4-9 September 2007

A personal response

“Do not adapt to this world but be changed and renew the way you think” the Apostle Paul tells us (Rom 12.2) and this rallying cry became a central tenet of my experience in Sibiu, Romania last week.

I joined a huge assembly of Christians from across Europe. Patriarchs and peoples from eastern Europe mingling with cardinals, bishops, clergy, lay people and youth from all the Christian Churches of western Europe. With many monks and nuns representing Europe’s great monastic tradition and the babble of hundreds of languages it seemed like a glorious gathering of Christendom. And, entirely appropriately, we met in a tent. We were on a journey and our tent, an ancient symbol of hospitality, was our oasis. A spirit of openness ruled our gathering. We met as equals and explored our differences in friendship and enquiry.

We prayed together, repenting our failures and divisions and asking for blessings on our hopes and enthusiasm for a renewed unity. We listened deeply to the voices of others and for signs and symbols of where the Holy Spirit might be leading our gathering. We were inspired by people who spoke with a vision of holiness and wholeness for our lives and in biblical meditations we began to understand that the journey of one who seeks unity is an exodus from oneself.

Between sessions in the tent we spilled out into the centre of Sibiu and filled up the local restaurants, sharing meals and thoughts on what we had heard and talking about our lives with strangers who became friends on our journey.

The theme of our gathering “The Light of Christ shines upon all” was reflected in the life of the city of Sibiu where Hungarians, Romanians, Orthodox, Catholic, Greek Catholic and Evangelical Christians have lived together for hundreds of years. The life of their region is a microcosm of nearly all Europe’s ecumenical questions.

Unity not uniformity

The goal of our meeting was the unity, not the uniformity of the Europe. We experienced first hand the richness of diverse cultures and the courage of those who had suffered in recent decades in Europe and our shared faith enabled us to find a point of contact in these talks.

Yet we were also reminded that cosy ecumenism which is all about being nice to each other will not get us very far – we must continue to dialogue in truth and clarity about the issues which still deeply divide us. The future of Europe depends on our being able to articulate a shared vision and a shared set of basic values.

Whilst Europe is rich in peace and wellbeing, yet it is uncertain and fearful. Professor Andrea Riccardi of the St Egidio Community in Italy put it: “The courage to be who we are cannot be found in identifying enemies on the horizon, waving Christianity like a banner against potential enemies” As Churches our mission is not to live for ourselves any more. Our witness of hope to the whole continent will only be credible if we continue our quest for visible unity.

We drew on the richness of Orthodox spirituality in our prayer and deliberations. It is an important aspect of our Christian heritage which we offer to a secular yet searching and questioning Europe. Through the practice of meditation we can encourage others to share our spiritual life and counter the hectic materialism of our times.

We find ourselves by living for others

But in the end we must begin with ourselves. “Lifting up the world begins from our hearts.”(Riccardi). And to this, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Milan added: “The journey of one who seeks unity is an exodus from oneself. It requires the courage of self-giving, the ability to lose oneself in order to find oneself again.”

The challenges faced by Europe in this new century are huge. As Christians we share the responsibility for shaping Europe as a continent of peace, defending the dignity and rights of every human being, promoting ecological justice, responding to the just shaping of globalisation and looking out towards the wounded and needy world beyond our European borders.

“If we are to be of service then we must become more authentically part of the mystery of Christ’s love” Bishop Richard Chartres told us.” The more you go beyond yourself, the more you will become your true self. The more you lose yourself in loving and serving others, the more you will find yourself. The more you keep company with those who suffer the more you will be healed. “This is the knowledge which passes all understanding. It is true for individual Christians and for Churches.”

And so we began the journey home remembering the call to delegates by Cardinal Peter Erdo to return and deepen and expand ecumenical relations, to be the ‘living message’ of Sibiu and ‘sparks of the light of Christ’ to the rest of Europe.

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