

## What were they saying about Ecumenism at Sibiu?

“The question of unity ought to disturb us; it needs to burn within us” – that’s how Cardinal Kasper gave voice to a sentiment felt by participants at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu, Romania, September 4-9. With some 1542 official delegates between representatives of the 125 member churches of the Conference of the European Churches (KEK) and of the 34 Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church in Europe (CCEE), together with another 1000 among press and visitors taking part, Sibiu, one of the two 2007 European capitals of culture, really became a European spiritual and ecumenical capital for that week. The Assembly was accurately described as a “rare” event, only the third of its kind in three decades, the first held in 1989 in the primarily Protestant Swiss city of Basle and the second in 1997 in the mainly Catholic city of Graz, Austria.

The choice of Sibiu in a predominantly Orthodox country was apt. This beautiful city of Transylvania, a true “Europe in miniature”, can boast a rich common history of peaceful coexistence between Romanians, Saxons and Hungarians, representing the principal Christian churches of Europe. And the theme itself of the Assembly with its focus on light resonated powerfully with the Orthodox context: “The Light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe”. The whole event glimmered with different colours of vestment and tradition, perspective and experience. Much could be said about it. In this short article, however, I would like to concentrate on the specifically ecumenical dimension. What were they saying about Ecumenism at Sibiu?

### **1. Gratitude for the Light we share**

The temptation might be to run ahead of myself and get into the “meat” of the ecumenical issues raised. But that would be a mistake because what happened everyday, whether in the huge Tent that hosted the plenary sessions or in halls and hotels, churches and town squares that provided spaces of encounter, was itself a statement about ecumenism today in Europe. It is important, therefore, to record, even briefly, the substantial degree of shared prayer and song, reflection, testimony and meditation that pervaded the Assembly and brought home to all just how much European ecumenical churches have grown as a family sharing in a common Light. Each morning for over an hour the delegates worshipped together and heard striking testimonies from members of different churches. Though these testimonies originated from diverse backgrounds, a common interior resonance welled up within the listeners, making them almost whisper to themselves: “that experience is mine too”. And the exchange of gifts in terms of testimonies and the sharing of experiences created a network of fraternity, a spiritual *koinonia* formed in the Light that unites.

So, for instance, a young Anglican, Timi Dorgu, from the Church of England, shared his independent decision as a 17 year old to follow Christ and how that impacted on the way he acts and responds to certain situations – from

the way he plays football to facing various temptations as a university student. The witness of actions is vital, he commented, but not enough: "For my friends to really understand the depth of their need for Jesus in their lives I must open my mouth to tell them". Of course, this means at times being "the odd-one-out...but it is also often the case that the person who is different gets the most attention".

Hilary Wilson from the L'Arche Community in Liverpool shared Margie's experience. Because of her disability Margie spent most of her childhood and adolescence away from her family, in institutions and long stay hospitals. Having suffered from that experience, she has not always been able to "walk in the light". She now shares in a L'Arche community. Her experience is a call to inclusion, to a real lived unity through long term relationships. It also indirectly reminded us of how much the quality of our relationships are important in ecumenism.

Rev. Fr. Mesrop Parsamyan of the Armenian Church, "survivor of the flood of atheism" under the Soviet era, told of a particular experience of light in the Monastery of Khor Virap on the slopes of Mount Arafat, prompting him to utter an oath that he should try for ever after to live in the presence of the Lord, in his light, like a child of light.

The sharing of spiritual experience wasn't confined to the moments of prayer and reflection. Round tables and forums, groups and cultural events also became opportunities to dwell together in hope. In one round table, Sr. Joan Roddy, head of the Refugee Project of the Irish Bishops' Conference, told moving experiences of migrants she has met in Ireland and the work that is going on for integration. The Dominican sister, Sr. Katrin Ámell from Norway told of her experience of life in Buddhist Zen monasteries in Japan and what it meant for her as a Christian. In a forum on peace Bishop Anthony Farquhar of Down and Connor, Sr. Geraldine Smyth of the Irish School of Ecumenics and Rev. Ken Crowe of the Presbyterian Church spoke of striving for continued peace and reconciliation, healing of memories and hope in Ireland.

Yes, whatever divides Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic Christians, the fact remains that confessing our faith in Jesus Christ binds us together. There is much that we hold in common and it is more important than any divisions.

## **2. The Gift we are to one another**

It's easy to take for granted how much Ecumenism has been a positive development for the churches of Europe. An assembly such as the Sibiu gathering was an opportunity to blow away the cobwebs that can so easily settle and see again just how much the churches are and can be a gift to each other. Cardinal Kasper put it as follows: "Ecumenism's gift to us is the fact that we have recognised this basic closeness and rediscovered that we are not alien to each other or in competition, but brothers and sisters in Christ... We should also never let ourselves be talked out of it by those for whom ecumenism is a mess".

Discoveries have been made of treasures both from the wise people of the East and the Wise of the West. An increasing love for icons, for instance, as well as an increased appreciation of liturgy, spirituality and sense of mystery has spread in the West from the East. In the West Catholics have learned much from

Protestants on the meaning and utter centrality of the Word of God. Protestants for their part have learned much from Catholics about the meaning and form of liturgy and the sacramental dimension of Christian life.

The gift of solidarity with one another was a gift that was underlined especially by Metropolitan Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate. He referred to this in commenting on the "warm fraternal congratulations from many Christian Churches on the occasion of the reunification of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Outside Russia." He also noted how much "solidarity with other Christians" is experienced "in facing numerous challenges of secularism, lack of spirituality and radicalism".

Bishop Wolfgang Huber of the Lutheran Church in Germany summarised what the Protestant churches contribute to the ecumenical community: links with Holy Scripture, the emphasis on the confession of Christ, the strengthening of the Church by the members of the congregations and the equality of responsibilities between men and women.

What came across was a sense that we need to recognise this giftedness that we are to one another. Not only that but we need to appreciate anew now much we need each other not least because today many difficulties beset all churches in Europe. There's much room for growth here. Cardinal Kasper put it succinctly: "We still do not know each other well enough and so we still do not love each other enough".

### **3. Naming the Difficulties**

A sign of the increasing maturity in ecumenical relations was the fact that the Assembly of Sibiu was also characterised by frank discussion where difficulties were clearly named. So, for instance, the document the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had published earlier in the summer setting out differences that still exist regarding our understanding of Church was mentioned explicitly. Cardinal Kasper spoke directly and sincerely about the controversy surrounding its publication. Though the intention of the document was not to hurt or belittle anyone, he too had problems with the document "for the hurt and pain of my friends is my hurt and pain as well." But he also acknowledged that declarations other churches make are not all to the liking of Catholics. "But what are we to expect? Cosy ecumenism and fake ecumenism, which are all about being nice to each other, do not get us very far; the only way forward is dialogue in truth and clarity".

Bishop Wolfgang Huber expressed a frustration from his Lutheran point of view: "No church by herself can represent the whole spectrum of colours within the light; no church alone can reflect the light of Christ". And again, 'One church's claim to be ...the only "Christ existing as congregation", inevitably downgrades other churches and obscures the common radiance and shine of the churches.'

Moving onto a different topic, Metropolitan Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate lamented how "some Christian communities have unilaterally reviewed or are reviewing the norms of life defined by the Word of God" and "there is a suspicious coincidence between the new attitude to morality current in

Christian circles and the spreading of the post-modern paradigm in the secular society". More pointedly he stated: "believers cannot recognize at the same time the value of life and the right to death, the value of family and validity of same-sex relations, the protection of child's rights and the deliberate destruction of human embryos for medical purposes".

It became evident that a major difficulty is the variety of ideas regarding visible unity the Churches have, and with this different ways of understanding the bases of ecumenical dialogue. Bishop Huber reflected on this: 'Today we have to build ecumenism on the understanding that the participating churches not only have different ecclesiologies and different ideas of ministry and ordination, different understandings of the relation between scripture and tradition or of women in the ordained ministry but that they also have different ideas of what "visible unity" means.'

For some such difficulties are best relegated to speculative abstraction and consigned to theology so as to simply get on with it! Pastor Thomas Wipf, for instance, of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe which started with the Leuenberg Agreement in 1973 and now has around fifty million Protestants, commented: "it is high time to banish the present inner and outer division to their proper place, which is theological debate, whilst...we strengthen our work together for the people outside". For his part, Bishop Richard Chartres, Anglican Bishop of London, remarked how "even the Church in many ways has become weary, dull and spiritless. In so many ways we seem baffled by the rapid disappearance of an old social world in which we felt very much at home. The reaction in so many places is to retreat into in-house ecclesiastical preoccupations".

Others, however, especially the Catholic and Orthodox churches, underlined the crucial need to keep on going to the point of full ecclesiastical communion between us. In the words of the Ecumenical Patriarch, we must "remain unwavering and unmoved in our conviction that we are obliged to do everything in our power to promote the sacred work of restoration of full ecclesiastical and sacramental communion among Churches on the basis of the same faith in love and respect for the particular expressions within which the apostolic faith is experienced". And so he declared his commitment to "unreservedly promote and support every ecumenical theological dialogue, on equal terms, as something absolutely necessary, even in the most critical relations among us".

For all the difficulties that undeniably exist, the good news underlined at Sibiu by Cardinal Kasper is that differences do not affect being a Christian as such. In other words, they do not affect the question of salvation itself. And here there is so much that unites us and that we can pursue together. The differences are linked to the question of the way salvation is mediated and the visible form of the Church. Such issues are not marginal. Cardinal Kasper summed up the situation: "For Catholics and Orthodox, these are not irrelevant questions. For the Church is formed according to the analogy of the mystery of the Incarnation. She is visible as Church, visible also as institution. And – sadly – who can deny that there is still no consensus between us on this question?"

#### **4. Recognising the Pain**

In the opening ceremony of the Assembly, Margarethe Isberg, Deputy Vice President of CEC, expressed the pain of division that Christians of Europe feel by voicing the question: “we long for unity, but why is the ecumenical road such a long and mysterious way?” It is all too obvious that when it comes to the light of faith “we have this treasure in clay jars” (2 Cor 4:7).

And the “why” question pierces any heart that is ecumenically sensitive. Its echo could be heard again and again in different ways throughout the Assembly. And it is good that it did because there’s always the risk that we might begin to take division between us as something normal and gloss over the pain.

Cardinal Kasper referred to “the real Gordian Knot that has, unfortunately, still not been unravelled”, namely the fact that since “we are not one in our understanding of the Church and, to a great extent, the Eucharist, we cannot gather at the one table of the Lord and eat the one Eucharistic bread or drink from the one Eucharistic cup”. He acknowledged “this is offensive and, for many, a heavy burden” but “it does not help to conceal wounds; we need to leave them open, even when there is pain; only then can we treat them and, with God’s help, heal them”.

A new beginning is needed. There’s no point of playing a blame game as historical investigations have shown that there is usually guilt on both sides. But, as Cardinal Kasper reminded the Assembly, that starts with recognising pain and moving in conversion towards one another: “A new beginning is possible only through the purification of memory. There is no ecumenical progress without conversion and penance. This demands the readiness for renewal and reform that is necessary in every Church, whereby every church must begin with itself.”

Bishop Wolfgang Huber acknowledged that churches are always in danger of obscuring the light. So he too proposed that mutual respect also includes self-critical revision. Monika Heitz from the Old Catholic church of Austria spoke of the journey from Basel to Graz to Sibiu commenting on what has been achieved but remarking “but there always remains a lot more to do”. She put before the delegates the need for greater inclusion of women’s perspectives.

#### **5. Signs of Hope**

In his meditation, Cardinal Tettamanzi pointed out that the conversion needed in the ecumenical movement consists in discovering the “new things” that the Lord is bringing about: “Look, I am doing a new thing. Now it spring forth. Do you not see it?” (Is 43:19). It is about making way for the new action of the Spirit.

Signs of the new action of the Spirit emerged during the Assembly. Firstly, it was acknowledged that the assemblies themselves are new signs of hope. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew spoke of the past three decades and the three assemblies bringing close cooperation among all Christian churches as a “worthy ecumenical activity”. Likewise, Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of

the World Council of Churches, referred to the joint co-operation of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches as an expression of a regionally viable and coherent ecumenical movement. He added that, "meeting in Romania" was "a sign of deepening fellowship, helping to heal the many schisms of the church that took place on European soil".

In Germany a significant sign of hope has been the recent "Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen" (the Ecumenical Council of Churches). 11 churches signed up to "recognize every Baptism that is administered at Christ's command in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit through the symbolic act of immersion in water or sprinkling with water...". It was acclaimed as the first regional ecumenical council of churches to put this idea into practice. Bishop Huber acknowledged how the initiative of this Ecumenical Council of Churches in Germany came from Cardinal Kasper.

The Catholic church re-affirmed its commitment to ecumenism. In his message to Cardinal Péter Erdő, President of CCEE, Pope Benedict quoted Pope John Paul II who affirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to "irrevocably follow the path of ecumenical venture."<sup>1</sup> He also remarked how "the many ecumenical meetings and celebrations, along with patient, local and international ecumenical dialogue, have given encouraging signs and given us a more vivid sense of the Church as a mystery of unity".

Even the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's document that had caused controversy was also seen to contain pointers of hope. For instance, it is affirmed in the document that "Jesus Christ is also salvifically present in a saving way in the churches and ecclesial communities that are divided from us too". Cardinal Kasper commented: "this is really no small thing. A few decades ago such a statement would still have been totally unthinkable."

Jean-Arnold de Clermont, President of the KEK pointed out that since the 2001 Charta Oecumenica much has happened. The Ecumenical Charter "has put up signposts in our churches, like unity, spirituality, mission, justice, inter-religious dialogue". And the Charter has been the source of many initiatives of dialogue and study together, though much still could be done with the Charter.

The presence of young delegates at Sibiu was also an important sign at the Assembly that was referred to frequently. A young delegates' meeting in July 27-20 in St. Maurice, Switzerland resulted in the release of a statement that was then appended to the final Sibiu Message. It was a sign of a newly emerging "Ecumenical Youth Movement".

The number of initiatives and developments at local and European levels was recorded at various moments during the Assembly. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) has developed considerably since the last Graz meeting. The Porvoo Common Statement has had considerable impact. The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity Agreement Statement on Justification is another step forward and sign of hope in the Ecumenical Movement.

## **6. The Way Ahead**

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), 3.

Signposts are very useful in life but as Jean-Arnold de Clermont, President of the KEK, pointed out in reference to signposts of the Charta Oecumenica's, "we cannot stop beneath these signposts." Having stretched out hands to each other at Basel in 1989, and realised in Graz in 1997 that there is a ecumenical reconciling "people" of Europe, at Sibiu there was a new realisation that we need to work together to protect unity and seek out a deeper renewal in terms of spiritual ecumenism.

Up to now ecumenical methodology has focussed on pointing out convergences between the churches in doctrinal matters. It has led to progress such as the Justification Agreement but in Cardinal Kasper's view "with time this method has gone stale". Something more is needed. It is important to be honest and go ahead in a way that is neither polemical nor narrow by embarking on an "exchange of gifts", learning from each other. He proposed that "instead of reducing ourselves to the lowest common denominator we can enrich each other with the treasures that have been given to us".

This "exchange of gifts" opens up an ecumenism of life, a dialogue of life that can't be a case of "business as usual" for the churches. Jesus' prayer for unity "so that the world might believe" (Jn 17:21) does not allow us to become indifferent to the cause of unity. For the sake of Europe there's a need to build up together a Christian life that is more soul than institution, more testimony shared than conflict resolving, more dialogue of life than calculation of convergence.

We do not "make unity happen". That's why we need to rediscover always that ecumenism has been set in motion by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> In referring to ecumenical spirituality, Bishop Huber observed how "the word spirituality is increasingly finding an echo in people, is gaining popularity, and is a rising star." And this is true particularly in ecumenism.

A vague or private spirituality is not enough. That's why something new is emerging ecumenically in terms of the role of monasteries, communities and movements in the Ecumenical Movement. A few months ago the Evangelical Church of Germany called Protestant monastic communities and other spiritual communities a "treasure of the Protestant churches that needs to be promoted and strengthened". In Stuttgart in May this year up to 9000 members of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox communities gathered for an initiative entitled "Together for Europe", seeking to form together a spiritual network that contributes to offering witness to Christ the Light in the darkness of Europe today. The "Together for Europe" initiative was linked up via satellite to cities across Europe, from Belfast to Brussels, from Moscow to Rome.<sup>3</sup>

There's a need to focus on a therapy of renewed relationships within a spiritual ecumenism that is based on what it is we hold in common: the Gospel, the life of grace, charisms, and above all, love, mutual love. Communities, be they large or small, are places where people learn and practice old and new workable forms of spiritual life that can unite in the various ways of koinonia that are available to us even while still not fully united. And every community, if it is

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1 and 4.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriella Fallacara, *Together for Europe 2007* (Rome: Citta Nuova, 2007).

alive, contributes to a living ecumenism that makes a difference. Already we can be bound together in so many ways in Paul's conviction that If Christ's love can unite us, who can divide us (Cf. Rom 8). The Sibiu Assembly became an opportunity to experience that and set out once more with renewed commitment, enthusiasm and perseverance.

The post-Assembly starts, however, with each individual person. In the words of Andrea Riccardi of the Sant'Egidio community, "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".