

THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY

The light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe

Sibiu, Romania, 4-9 September 2007

A report by former Moderator of the General Assembly, Dr Alison Elliot OBE, who was one of the 12 Church of Scotland representatives at the Assembly

Exchange of gifts: the Sibiu process

The Assembly in Sibiu was the fourth stage of a process that had started in Rome, continued in Wittenburg and had been shadowed by parallel regional events. The choice of centres of Roman Catholicism, Reformed Christianity and, finally, an Orthodox country, emphasised that the ecumenical journey was entering the phase of the “exchange of gifts” (Kasper, quoting Pope John XXIII) whereby the traditions were open about their differences, rather than pointing to the convergence of traditions. The planners of the Assembly therefore were assiduous in offering space to Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant contributions (plus Anglican), which did mean that the smaller churches were poorly represented in formal papers.

Keynote papers

The Assembly received several excellent keynote addresses, including one from José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, whose text will be available later. This report draws on papers by

- Cardinal Walter Kasper
- Metropolitan Kirill (Russian Orthodox Church)
- Bishop Wolfgang Huber (German Protestant)
- Archbishop Dr Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania
- the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres

All reflected on the Assembly theme, drawing out its centrality in the Gospel. Certain other themes were addressed in most of these papers, with slightly different emphases depending on their traditions.

Faith and reason

Kyrrill drew the distinction between the light as grace and the light as the word of truth, only to affirm that it was one light acting in multiple ways. “The true light is also the word addressed to human reason.” Faith and reason had to be held together and the church had to claim its right to defend its eternal truth.

Richard Chartres spoke of the glare of a contemporary culture “grown old and fearful” and drew a distinction between problems to be solved and mysteries to be honoured. The church should be a light for all people, “no longer labouring under the delusion that her structures are co-existent with the Kingdom of God or that she possesses the truth in the way that one possesses an object”.

Anastasios explored the insights about the scientific nature of light that could be elaborated theologically. Given that white light is a synthesis of seven colours, he identified seven lights to which we were called to witness as children of the light – the light of peace, justice, truth, creativity, hope for unity and reconciliation, love and the Paschal light.

European Values

The speakers identified the need for Europe to have a clear set of values (“Europe cannot be just an economic and political unit; if she is to have any future, Europe needs a shared vision and a shared set of basic values”, Kasper). They generally saw these as arising from the European Christian tradition (“God’s light and truth are not in contradiction to the modern world but are its deepest foundation and ground”, Huber). The dignity of the person was a particular Judeo-Christian value, which led on to respect for human rights. Freedom of religion, the democratic state, social responsibility, justice, solidarity, respect for the family, humility and reconciliation were variously identified as having Christian roots.

Kyrrill was less impressed by the Christian basis of many of the characteristic norms that he saw in Europe. He pointed out that one could not simultaneously recognise “the value of life and the right to death, the value of the family and validity of same-sex relations, the protection of child’s rights and the deliberate destruction of human embryos for medical purposes”. He saw evolving moral norms as incompatible with Christianity because “discussion on what the human being is ended 2000 years ago”. He made a plea for a single public morality and called on churches to work to achieve this end with people of other faiths and none who agreed with them.

Ecumenical journey

Cardinal Kasper affirmed that divided churches were against Jesus’ will and an expression of sin, so there was no responsible alternative to ecumenism. Progress was being made. “Cosy ecumenism and fake ecumenism, which are all about being nice to one another, do not get us very far” (Kasper). The time had come for the purification of our memories, through “dialogue in truth and clarity”. This could be painful, as had been seen with the document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. However, he pointed out that the document had also affirmed that Jesus Christ is salvifically present in churches and ecclesial communities, something that could not have been said a decade ago.

Bishop Huber reported on the occasion in Magdeburg on 27th April 2007, when German churches had expressed recognition of each other’s baptism. Several Baptist and Pentecostal churches who had not been able to agree to this expressed their apology and committed themselves to further reflection. He looked ahead to the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 and indicated that it was important to be honest about our history, and to acknowledge that our roots stretch back more than 500 years. The Protestant emphasis on faith and individual conscience should not crowd out the importance of recognising that faith needs the community of the faithful. He recommended attention to spirituality as a counter to materialism and regretted the neglect of the tradition of Protestant monastic communities.

Peace Forum

Each afternoon, there were three fora held concurrently, each on a different theme from the Carta Ecumenica. I was asked to respond to the forum on peace, of which Matthew Ross was co-Moderator.

There were three presentations within it – one from Northern Ireland, one on the Decade to Overcome Violence (which Shona Fisher of the Church of Scotland presented) and one on Bosnia Herzegovina. What was unusual was that these presentations were actually about peace, no longer about handling conflict, since Ireland and Bosnia had come through their

periods of conflict. The slowness of peace was emphasised by Geraldine Smyth, and Johnston MacMaster spoke of how hard it was to relinquish the mind-set of conflict. Tony Farquhar noted that it was easier for the churches to speak loudly in times of conflict and that an absence of religious commitment was now being seen as a contribution to peace. The people representing the three communities in Sarajevo were similarly reflective about the nature of reconciliation. The Catholic theologian said that they needed a theology of being together. The Orthodox priest emphasised the inner process of reconciliation and the futility of assuming that it could come about politically. The Imam spoke about how there had been 600 years of no conflict and people then had been taught to hate each other. What was needed were words to teach people good things about their own and other people's religions.

The Message

A Message Committee was appointed at the first session and they brought an initial draft to the Friday plenary, which was then redrafted in the light of comments. It is longer than normal and there was no clear process to guide what it was appropriate to include and what to leave out. The young delegates and stewards produced their own message, which was appended to the main one. The main area where there was a wish to strengthen the document related to its recommendations on creation and environmental responsibility. It was recommended that there should be a season of special attention to creation in our churches throughout September.

However, a more telling comment was made by one delegate to the effect that much of the language was out of touch because the crisis was so far advanced. What the churches should be looking to were ways of accompanying people through this crisis, not ways of staving it off. This echoed the Bishop of London's paper, where he referred to a book written by the British Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, called *Our Final Century* – without a question mark! Similarly, migration is not an exceptional case or something to be anticipated: there is a school now in London of 720 pupils who speak 69 languages between them.

Worship

There was a small worship book produced and the worship was led each morning by an inspiring Danish couple, supported by a choir. In the evenings, there was denominational worship in the city, which has a remarkable number of churches and cathedrals of different traditions. Saturday was the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary so there were special services held for that.

Ian Galloway, one of the Church of Scotland delegates, had been asked to prepare an Iona Community liturgy. The one chosen centred on the building of the wall in Israel. The text was powerful and the Danish couple helped beautifully with the music. During the liturgy, a wall was built, dividing the congregation, made out of 200 cardboard boxes. Members of the Scottish delegation took part in this – a great privilege for us and an eye-opener to delegates who were not familiar with Iona worship.

Comments on the Assembly

I enjoyed the Assembly and I liked Sibiu. The organisers had expected to be like swans, paddling furiously, but they generally managed to appear calm for the delegates. There were frightful stories of travel problems and accommodation not being available and this was a problem for some of the Scottish delegation. Most of us were in a pleasant and friendly hotel near the centre and the spirits of our delegation were generally high. Our bus journey on the way to Sibiu was badly delayed, which made us anxious about the return trip but that turned out to be fine.

The main criticism of the Assembly was that there was not enough opportunity for delegates to participate or have their voices heard. The idea was that this ought to happen during the fora, but most of them had been designed with far too much input for this to be done effectively. There was really no space in the plenaries for more than token participation, organised by means of Tribunes of the People, who collected and summarised comments from the floor.

The Assembly was terribly top heavy. The plenaries spent far too long listening to greetings from sister organisations and churches. The people invited to give keynote speeches were all men. Each session had two co-Moderators, who were all women (myself, Mary Tanner and Margot Kassemann from CEC, each paired with someone from CCEE), obviously chosen as an attempt at overall gender balance, which simply exposed its lack.

I suspect the main tension that was not resolved was whether this was meant to be a gathering, where people met and learned from each other, or a deliberative assembly that made decisions. It was structured to be the former, but I doubt whether that satisfied many of the delegates. The process for producing the message was inadequate, so I'm not sure what kind of status it can have. It certainly did not represent the views of the delegates, since there was no process to allow this to be established, but it looks as if it does.

Meeting other people is often the high point of these assemblies. Many Scottish friendships were strengthened but you had to make your own opportunities to meet people from other countries and churches. Donald Reid (of the Scottish Episcopal Church) suggested that we could have been assigned to base groups that cut across these categories and would have widened the range of contacts.

Should there be another Assembly? It would have to have a clearer focus. I felt that the formula of Basel has been tweaked in Graz and now Sibiu and it comes over as feeling tired. Basel was historic and exciting even before it happened but meeting together is no longer enough. I hope that many of the delegates to Sibiu discovered some of the thrill of encountering new people and different traditions but we need to have a clearer purpose to justify an EEA4.

Alison Elliot
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