

Report by the Presidency

Dear sisters and brothers, dear friends,

The famous poet Paul Celan was born to Jewish parents in Ukraine in 1920. His father died of typhus in the concentration camp in 1942. His mother was shot dead because she was considered unfit for work. Paul Celan survived under terrible conditions serving in a labour battalion. He spoke seven languages. His poetry reflects what he had experienced, often indirect but with the power of his language describing the terrible things he had to endure.

For just a few brief moments, we were witnesses to the incredibly terrible injustice that was done to this country which is our host country today. For this reason, I wish to open the General Assembly by reciting a short excerpt from a poem by Paul Celan:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

We drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland

We drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink

This Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue

He shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true

A man lives in the house your golden Haar Margarete

He looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air

He plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

(from: *Death Fugue*)

In the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Paul VI said that all of us have to recognise the dynamics and developments in our world and that men are growing more anxious to establish closer ties of brotherhood; “despite their ignorance, their mistakes, their offences, and even their lapses into barbarism and their wanderings from the path of salvation, they are slowly making their way to the Creator, even without adverting to it. This struggle toward a more human way of life certainly calls for hard work and imposes difficult sacrifices.” (no. 79)

It is the mission of our Conference to continue on this path. In this spirit, I wish to open the General Assembly 2007.

True democratic practices require that we start with a review of the past year and an outline of the principles of our common action. This is why I wish to mention some points which were important to us in the past year.

We are looking back on a dynamic year.

At the outset we had a meeting in Belfast. I shall never forget the animated General Assembly and the moving workshop. We took the ambitious decision to take our first concerted action.

At that time in Belfast, I was very glad to notice that there is a growing will to cooperate. And the subsequent months have shown that this will was actually put into action. I do not want to anticipate the discussions about our concerted action on “migration”. We will have enough time to talk about this tomorrow. But it has become clear that we were able to gain valuable experiences and to manifest our common commitment to justice and peace. While this is a reason for joy, it is still uncertain whether we will be able to stay on the path. We will decide on two new concerted actions tomorrow. The proposed initiatives prove that we have confidence in ourselves. It is up to us to take honest and reliable decisions.

We have ambitious plans for the future.

Encouraged by our discussions in Belfast and in close cooperation with the ExCo, we have drawn up a discussion paper on the prospects for a Permanent Secretariat. We are well aware of the fact that we will have a long way to go until this project becomes a reality. The discussions we had during the meeting of general secretaries in Verdun were very enriching and encouraging in this respect.

It became clear that the European Conference is required and is actually prepared to pursue a new path. Tomorrow we will have the opportunity to discuss the results of this debate in more detail. Let me just say that I am very pleased that we are going to talk about a specific proposal for strengthening our capacity to act. It is necessary to improve our legal status which is an important requirement for our capacity to act in the European political sphere.

A noticeable consolidation of Europe

My impression is that the European Conference continues to grow closer together. To say it with the words of a former Chancellor: “What belongs together now comes together.” This was clearly noticeable during the meeting of general secretaries in Verdun. We enjoyed the hospitality of the French commission and of the Local Bishop. The meeting of Europeans and the celebration of the Holy Mass on the battlefields were important moments for many of us. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the French commission for this. The success of the meeting was essentially owed to the warm-heartedness of our hosts.

The general orientation of the European Conference is good. The Romanian and the Lithuanian commissions are going to join us today. The consolidation process is going on. Our variety is growing, which does not necessarily make our lives easier. We experience the European unification process in very practical terms – with all ups and downs.

It is indispensable for our credibility at European level that we take an active and constructive approach to the existing differences in Europe. The future of Europe depends on our ability to cooperate at the same eye level. The variety of our experiences and points of view is a treasure which we will have to raise for the good of all.

This is precisely what we have experienced during our workshop in the last few days. For many of us this is the first visit to a post-soviet country. Although the realities, the life stories of the people we have met here, are often so different from our own stories, it has become clear that the experienced grief and suffering brings us together. I am personally filled with pain and shame. Cardinal Kasper recently said in Sibiu: “The pain suffered by my friends is my pain.”

This is how we feel. And I wish to add: “The joy and hope of our friends are our joy and hope.” I believe, we have been able to make a small contribution to overcoming the division of Europe between East and West.

Thanks

I would like to thank very much the Ukrainian Commission, the Greek-Catholic local Church and especially Dr. Lesia Kovalenko and Dr. Ihor Shaban. Without their commitment, their hospitality, their profound Christian openness and willingness to share their pains with us, this workshop and this General Assembly in Kiev would not have been possible. This is a valuable present. From the Third Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu we know, how difficult it is to work through the ecumenical field. But we have also learned that it is worth taking the courage to build paths in this difficult terrain. The experience we have made here in Ukraine encourage us not to content ourselves with the status quo and not to impatiently ask the impossible.

Let us walk together, steadfastly but not rigidly, patiently but not sluggishly. Thank you very much for the many encouraging words on this path.

Challenges

Our joy at all the positive developments must not conceal the challenges we are still facing. Despite the great efforts, we have failed to strengthen the integration of Poland, Slovenia and Croatia into the European Conference. The latest regional meeting in Hungary was a moment of great honesty in this respect.

This failure has to do with the unclear future structure of the Catholic Church at European level. It is certainly also owed to the question as to which is the right way to

proclaim the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church. In any case, we continue to face the challenge to search for a truly European identity of our Conference. We should not become discouraged.

Despite the great support provided by Renovabis, quite a few Commissions struggle with financial and personnel problems which inevitably have an effect on their activities at European level. But I think, all of us will be well-advised to resist the temptation of neglecting the European activities in the face of short resources. This might be a short-sighted thing to do.

This year, we had to learn once more that we cannot realize all our plans as it would be desirable. We had planned to do a European exposure programme in Albania last May. It failed because there were not enough participants for the scheduled period of time. But I am confident that we will be able to realize the Albania exposure programme in October. The programme has been designed to celebrate 40 years of *Populorum Progressio* which continues to require the active witness of the Church. It is not appropriate for us to show solemn triumphalism, but to act as modest and reliable workers in the vineyard of the Lord. God is the one who acts through us.

Résumé

Looking back on the second year of our presidency, I would like to emphasize once more that the potential of the Conference is based on the national Commissions' willingness and capacity to cooperate.

In the course of the past year, this cooperation has taken shape and has been further strengthened. This is a reason for joy. It is also encouraging to see that the national commissions make reliable contributions. But I am particularly glad that we have been able to find a good candidate for the next presidential term of the European Conference. The French Commission has agreed to take over responsibility as from October 2008. I am looking forward to welcoming His Excellency Gérard Dufois, the Archbishop of Lille, to our meeting tomorrow.

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions has been able to shape its identity this year and set up its own internet presence.

In future, it will be indispensable that we continue to act as honest and reliable partners. We need to be patient and considerate and we must avoid false politeness. I am glad to be able to contribute to the renewal of Europe in this forum together with you. I am confident that the Lord, through the intercessions of the Patron Saints of Europe and the Ukrainian martyrs, will continue to bless our work. Thank you.

subsequently: plenary discussion