

27 May 2006 17.00 Conclusions and evaluation

You are looking at a very tired but also a very happy woman.

When I came here it was with mixed feelings.

I strongly believed in the experimental methods that we introduced in this forum, but I asked myself whether the participants of the Forum, especially the older and experienced ones would be as enthusiastic as I was.

By joining the Katholikentag and inviting the European Priestcouncil we would abandon the familiar path of a meeting among each other of national delegations, in one place and without outsiders.

Joining Katholikentag and inviting a larger group of guests on the one hand would offer more possibilities to get to know new items and persons but would on the other hand reduce the possibilities of interpersonal meetings and contacts of members of the European Lay Forum as such.

As soon as possible, within a few hours, I felt that it was a good choice that we made for this Forum of 2006. From the first minute our delegates arrived I sensed a feeling of joy, of interest, of positive commitment and curiosity to get to know the possibilities this new form offered.

That we can not live and work at the same place, eat everywhere, travel a lot, I see and hear: people accept it and make the best of it. Even when it's raining!

It was a very good thing that for the first time in history representatives of all the other Ecclesiastical European Councils were present. And I dare to say that in this it may have played a role that during the last two years I invested a lot of time and energy in attending in an active way in their meetings and conferences. Also the presence of bishop Clemens of the Pontifical Council of the Laity was a sign of new developments in the communication and synergy between the catholic structures on European level.

During the opening evening, with the spontaneous and cordial presence of auxiliary bishop Brahm, it was clear that the participants out of 17 countries were in a high and positive mood to make a wonderful conference of this Forum 2006. The international buffet, that we prepared for each other by bringing our gifts from our countries confirmed this positive attitude.

The welcome-addresses of members of CCEE, CPEE and UCESM deepened our conscious that we are partners in and parts of the same church. That we are in the same boat, like father Voith told us during the opening Mass. That we have the same perspective, the same mission: to make the church a dynamic and inspiring power in an Europa that still so desperately needs social justice, humanizing ethics and the implementation of christian values in daily and political life.

Alois Glück introduced to us the central theme of our conference and the theme of the Katholikentage. He offered a vision of a new social order in Europe, in which the weak and excluded have the possibility to live and function according to their longings and talents.

It was very impressive to hear the testimonies about justice in the various regions of Europe. The testimonies of Malcolm Forster from England and Wales, of Paul Löwenthal from Belgium and Katarina Hulmanova from Slovakia confronted us with the specific problems that arise in specific cultures and because of specific historic developments. In the workshops we worked out this visions and related them to the experiences in our own countries.

We felt the fortitude and value of meetings like this, because they give us the possibility to broaden our vision, to deepen our understanding, to open our spirit and hearts, to enable our creativity to look for and find ways to overcome social and religious problems.

The sun that already was in our heart also was shining during the opening ceremony of the Katholikentage that most of us attended on Wednesday-evening in Saarbrücken. The sun had gone the next morning during the Mass for Ascensionday, and we were invited by bishop Marx to feel the rain as a blessing of God, extensive and everlasting!

In the afternoon we joined the Katholikentag discussion about the possibilities to renew the European Welfare State. Although on some moments it was difficult to stay awake (but we could see that also the members of the forum had problems with that) in the end we all went home with the feeling that new perspectives and possibilities were offered.

In the evening we returned to the Lernzentrum to have dinner together and exchange the experiences until now. The plenary discussion about the future of ELF I found very inspiring and even at moments moving. It was so good to see and to feel that we, in spite of all the cultural differences, are united in finding ways to make our national committees but also the European Forum function in an optimal way. So many strong and good ideas came up. I've got several pages of written notes of it. I hope that the Liaison Committee, together with all who offered their help, can realize many of them the coming years.

On Friday, yesterday, we had our dialogue-meeting with delegates of the CCPE, the European Priestcouncil, about the possibilities and the difficulties regarding the cooperation of laity and priests in church and society. I want to thank Birgit Lechat and also Lorenz Voith, although he already left, for the open and constructive way in which they presented their vision and gave a positive impulse for an intense and effective discussion about the tensions but also about the dreams we have regarding the two types of oarsmen and women we have in the boat of the church. A long list of possible ways to optimize the cooperation was the result of this discussion.

In the afternoon we had another possibility to hear from the experiences of experts from all over the world regarding European and worldproblems on behalf of questions of social justice. We attended at several forums of the Katholikentag: 'Global Governance – Rezept gegen Armut?' and 'Nachbarn in Not (Frieden in Europa nicht ohne Sicherheit auf dem Balkan)' It was a form of social justice (©) that the European Lay Forum in the evening was a prominent guest at the reception for the international guests of the Saarländische Landtag. This reception was a good occasion for our participants to meet a lot of people who play important roles in the church and the society of Europe.

This morning I felt we had a very positive and constructive Statutory Assembly.

The suggested changes in the statutes were accepted.

As new members for the Liaison Committee were elected Monika Fässler, Katarina Hulmanova, Jan Degadt and Maria Draaijers.

The financial reports of 2004 and 2005 were approved, and suggestions were made to improve the financial situation of the European Lay Forum.

A number of possible locations were offered for our next meeting in 2008. It's good to know that so many people are willing to invest time and energy in organising such a big event.

Also could be collected a list of possible topics to discuss then.

We have decided that we will continue and intensify the dialogue and the cooperation with CCEE/ComECE, UCESM and CCPE in many ways.

And we will investigate the possibilities in reactivating the website-possibilities.

We will continue the discussion about necessary changes in the structure of the Lay Forum in order to let it function better for the benefit of the national Committees and the church and society of Europe.

Out of the dialogue we had with CPEE was formulated a statement by the delegation of England and Wales, that played a very visible and constructive role in this Statutory Assembly.

And the Liaison Committee received the mandate of the Statutory Assembly to write a letter to the PCL and CCEE (with copies to CPEE and UCESM) with the results of our conference.

The lecture of and the discussion with bishop Kenney this afternoon was another highlight of this forum. He confirmed and deepened a lot of the insights we discovered and discussed during this week. 'Could we in our country have only half such a bishop' was the significant reaction of one participant.

Now we have come to the end of the official meeting of the European Laity Forum 2006. Tonight many of us will celebrate together the end of this meeting in a restaurant. Others already are leaving or have left. The ones who will stay until tomorrow will attend at the main Eucharist of the Katholikentag in the Ludwigspark. After that all of us will return home.

I, and I think I speak on behalf of all of you, am grateful to all who made it possible that we had this nice and inspiring meeting.

Some persons I want to mention personally.

I want to thank sister Annick, Thierry Bonaventura and father Lorenz Voith and his colleagues for their active presence at this meeting.

I want to thank the people of this house who took care for our meetingplaces, the coffee, the tea, the drinks and the meals during these days.

A special thank you for the staff of interpreters. They did a wonderful job. The last years I have been at several meetings with interpretation, but I think this was the first time that I heard no complaints in any way. Thank you for all you did, even go with us to the Katholikentag to give our English speaking participants the opportunity to follow the lecture.

A very special thank to Angelika Röser and her staff. Without the creativity and flexibility with which they did their work and reacted to the sometimes unexpected needs of our meeting it would not have been such a success.

In Holland I bought a special gift for Angelika for this occasion. A handmade candle with a special technic to connect all kind of colours, by a German artist. For me it represents the colorful way in which Angelika does her work. With a lot of hospitality, openness, creativity and dedication.

Thank you all for your devoted and warm-hearted presence! See you all again in 2008!

Maria Draaijers
(re-elected) president of ELF