

**2008-07-02**

## **9.00 OPENING SESSION**

### *Official opening of the studyassembly*

Informal we welcomed each other already yesterday evening, with a short presentation of the members of the 15 national delegations gathered here from national pastoral councils, the representatives of other European organisations

After that we found our ways in and around the house, and hopefully we had a good, and refreshing night rest.

Late in the evening some other participants arrived. We are very happy they joined us and will present them here and now to you all. Last night arrived.....

So now that we are almost complete we can officially open this study-assembly of the European Laity Forum 2008.

A very welcome especially for those who are here for the first time.

For them it is good to start this meeting with telling something about the history, the place and function of the European Laity Forum.

### *For those who are here for the first time a small history of ELF*

There are four types of catholics: bishops, priests, religious men and women, and the lay faithful. Nowadays the last group counts in Europe almost a 300 million members. After the second Vatican council was decided that for each group there should be a communication structure. Since then the ideal is that every parish and every diocese has a pastoral council in which the laity from parishes and organisations speak with their priests and their bishop about the main topics of church and society of our time.

On national level also all kind of national pastoral councils exist. In western Europe most of the times these are autonomous lay-organisations, recognized by their bishopconferences, with their own activities and consultation-structure with other organisations, within and outside the church. In central- and middle Europe there are often bishop-referents and commissions concerned with the questions of laity, that function as national laity organisation.

On European level these national pastoral councils come together in the European Forum of National Laity Committees, shortly called the European Lay Forum

Purpose of the EUROPEAN FORUM OF NATIONAL LAITY COMMITTEES is: to facilitate the exchange of experiences and information between the members on questions of European importance, especially in relation to problems on the Church's mission in the world and on pastoral work.

In order to achieve this purpose the Forum aims:

- to promote studies on present day problems in the Church and in the world. Study Meetings are organised every two years, with different themes and experts invited to share their expertise on specific problems.
- to maintain contacts with the Councils of European Episcopal Conferences (CCEE, CCPE, UCESM), Organisations of the Church at European level (COMECE, EZA, Deutsche Katholikentage, Semaines Sociales), the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Catholic International Organisations (CICO), Churches and Organisations of other Christian traditions and ecumenical movements with structures on European level.
- This booklet with names and addresses should be a valuable aid to national laity committees. We have given the latest version last evening to every head of delegation. So if you want to know more about place and function of the Forum you can read there more.

### *Our mission*

We are here united as Christians who are active on local and national level in order to fulfil the mission that was giving to us by God and Jesus Christ himself.

'Go out, and spread the good news, of the coming of the Kingdom of God' Jesus said to his disciples. And as their followers He says it also to us.

This was again underlined by pope John Paul II in his writing 'Ecclesia in Europe' in 2003 where he says that the Gospel also for the modern Europeans has a good and liberating message.

Redemption and liberation are still needed, maybe today more than ever.

Traditionally this redemption primarily was thought as liberation from, as forgiving of sins.

Nowadays liberation and redemption are seen in a more broader perspective.

Not only from sin, but liberation from all kind of other barriers. Liberation from fear, from poverty, from injustice, from our inner blockades.

Emphasized is that we by Jesus are not only liberated from but also liberated to, free from evil things, and therefore free to live a live in trust, in hope, in justice and peace.

Free to live as resurrected people, who believe and live that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death.

Living a resurrected, a liberated life Christ means living with an eschatological view on life and world. Eschatology is a difficult but very important word. It does not only say things about the far future, but also about our life today, here and now.

To live life out of an eschatological view means : we may have the hope and trust that this world has not the last word, that another world is possible and will come, a world of love and justice.

In order to reach that world Jesus has taught us how to live. In his famous sermon on the mountain he has given us the basis ethical rules, according to which we as Christians want to live. In his beatitudes He shows us his view on humanity, his perspective for a good life in the eyes of God.

During the centuries, and also today there is much resistance to the message of Christ and of Christians.

Some people don't need God. They can look after themselves. They turn their heart and head from Jesus, from God, from the good news that came.

Often people have trouble with the ethical rules: Why turn your other cheek when you are beaten, why take the wounded from the street when you have better things to do, why care for the wellbeing of others as you yourself does not have everything you desire.

The cross is nowadays a controversial sign: nobody wants to suffer. Why suffer if you can avoid it. How can it be that you have to die in order to live, like the grain in the earth.

Also the history of Christianity is in many ways not attractive: there was a lot of violence and bloodshed in the last centuries in the name of God and Christ.

So, it is not easy to spread the good news, to fulfil the mission Jesus gave us.

Every time asks another approach, every time has other needs, other questions. So every time asks other answers, other methods to reach our goals.

To know what our mission is on a certain moment, on a certain place, we have to analyse the situation in a very open and objective way. We have to ask ourselves: what is happening, what are the questions and needs of this concrete group of people, how can faith, how can Christ be a life-giving power in their lives? Is here at the first place a message needed of comfort and consolation, or can we challenge people to look in another direction and build up a new life, a new world?

We have to be openhearted to every crisis that comes on our way, and ask ourselves: what would Christ answer to this, what does God want us to do? So we have to evaluate a crisis with the values the gospel gave us.

And when we know what is needed we have to develop methods to realize the changes, to build up another and better world.

The main reason that we come together here from all over Europe is to learn from each other, and to inform each other about the situation in our countries, in Europe.

By investigating, by talking with each other we understand better what are the questions and needs of our time.

And understanding the situation, we know better what our mission, what our message, what the good news in this situation can be.

Because as Christians, as church, we want to be salt for the world, a light for the people. In order to give them new taste in life, in order to lighten the darkness in and around people.

In a time in which we as Europe try to unite, it becomes every day more obvious that there are great differences between countries, between regions, between individual people, on almost every level of life.

As Christians we live in and with all those differences, the political, the social, the cultural, the spiritual differences. And we have to find ways to deal with them. What to think about all those differences, how to appreciate them in the light of the gospel, how to handle them in a Christian way.

Therefore the presidents-meeting, that took place in Bratislava in 2007, decided to make 'religion and diversity' the general theme for the study-assembly of 2008.

We will work this out in three sub themes: political diversity, social and cultural diversity, and spiritual diversity. Today and the next two days one of these sub themes will be the central issue.

The program will be in big lines the same.

We start with an expert who can tell us more about the situation as such.

Because the aim of our meeting is to find ways how to deal as Christians with these situations, we have asked people from among our national committees to tell us something about the 'good practices' they have developed in their context.

Discussion among all participants can open our minds and hearts to find new ways ourselves to deal with these questions on our local and national level.

I wish us all a very fruitful and nice days to come,  
and I would like to end with a – german – song of hope.

Ein Hoffnungslied

Unsere Hoffnung muss Phantasie bekommen,  
die diese kranke Welt neu entwerfen kann,  
die das aus-malen, aus-denken, aus-deuten, aus-breiten kann,  
von dem wir jetzt nur träumen können:  
den neuen Himmel und die neuen Erde.

Unsere Hoffnung muss Hände bekommen,  
die Hand anlegen an dieser kranken Welt,  
heilende Hände anlegen,  
die die Tränen abtrocknen  
und sich nicht abfinden  
mit der Un-er-löst-heit dieser kranken Welt.

Unsere Hoffnung muss Füße bekommen,  
die sich wundlaufen für das Heil der Welt,  
denen kein Weg zu weit und zu schwer ist,

zu den Menschen zu gehen,  
die den Weg Jesu Christi weiter-gehen,  
die Gott hier auf Erden in Gang bringen.

Unsere Hoffnung muss Worte bekommen,  
die die Menschen verstehen,  
ein rechtes Wort zu rechten Zeit,  
Worte, die Trauer tragen,  
Worte, die trösten,  
Worte, die Freude schenken.

Gott hat damit den Anfang gemacht  
in seinem geliebten Sohn Jesus von Nazareth,  
in ihm hat die Hoffnung der Menschen,  
die Hoffnung dieser kranken Welt,  
Hand und Fuss bekommen,  
und das im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes.

Gott hat damit den Anfang gemacht,  
wir müssen es weiter machen.

Maria Draaijers  
president ELF