

24 May 2006 10.30 OPENING SESSION

Official opening of the studyassembly

Informal we welcomed each other already yesterday evening, with a short presentation of the members of the 13 national delegations gathered here from national pastoral councils, the representatives of CCEE, CCPE and UCESM. After that we had a very nice international buffet in which we could intensify our acquaintance. Late in the evening and during last night 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 complete we can officially open this study-assembly of the European Laity Forum 2006.

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 bishop about the main topics of church and society of our time.

On national level also all kinds of national pastoral councils exist

In western Europe most of the times these are autonomous lay-organisations, recognized by their bishop conferences, 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 organisations.

A national pastoral council can become a member of the European Forum of the Laity when they are officially recognized as such by their bishop conference and when they pay their yearly contribution. At this moment we have 25 full members and 14 so-called observers. The last group existing mainly out of pastoral councils from countries like Bielorussia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Romania who have either not been recognized yet by their bishops or can't pay the contribution.

All of the structural organisation of this European Forum of Laity you can find on the website (www.europ-forum.org)

The EUROPEAN FORUM OF NATIONAL LAITY COMMITTEES is an organisation the purpose of which is to promote regular contacts in Europe between the National Committees and Councils of the Laity, or the bodies that can be seen as National Committees.

Purpose: 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.
- The booklet with names and addresses should be a valuable aid to national laity committees.

In the last two study-assemblies, in 2002 and 2004 we were primarily focused on the contribution that the church, and especially the laity can make in the Europe of the 15, and since 2004 of the 25 countries united in Europe.

In 2002 we asked ourselves: what can the contribution of Catholics be to building a Europe of values. A Europe that does not revolve around the well-being of the Euro but a Europe whose first concern is how to realize the welfare and good future of all her inhabitants, especially the poor and vulnerable among them.

In 2004 we asked ourselves: what are the spiritual and ethical roots out of which we live and act.

Those who were there know that in the lectures and the discussions we had, both in Erfurt as in Fatima two themes seemed to be important for a humane and united Europa: to overcome the fear and mistrust between nations and people coming from different regions of Europe by developing structures and methods for dialogue in a respectful and constructive manner, on many levels.

The second theme is the need for social justice, special care for the poor and excluded people everywhere in Europe.

Therefore it was with pleasure that we joined the theme of the Katholikentage 'justice in the sight of God'

Important events since Fatima 2004

Like I told you one of the issues of ELF and other ecclesiastical councils is to cooperate with the other councils.

Cooperation with CCEE has resulted in a prominent role of ELF in the third Ecumenical Process, that after Basel and Graz in 1989 and 1997, started last January in Rome and will end in September 2007 in Sibiu in Romania. The theme is 'the light of Christ shines upon us'. The most important part of this process are the national meetings and activities that will be developed, and are already being worked on in the period of September 2006 till September 2007. In Spring 2007 there will be another in-between meeting in Wittenberg in Germany. Last week I received an invitation to nominate a delegation of 8 members of ELF to join the assembly in Sibiu.

Cooperation with CPEE has resulted in an ongoing discussion about the cooperation of priests and laity in parishes, in Catholic organisations and movements.

What are the possibilities, chances, but also the difficulties and problems among these two types of Catholics? The results of this discussion is the programme of next Friday.

Cooperation with UCESM has resulted in the idea to speak during one of the next study-assemblies of ELF about the need and involvement of many Catholic Christians in so-called new movements like Sant'Egidio, Focolare. Among lay-people there is a great need for inspiring communities, practices of lived spirituality.

In the meeting of UCESM in Fatima an important issue was the development of lay-associations by the traditional religious orders and congregations, in which the laity can join and integrate the spiritual way of an order or congregation in their own way of living and working in the world. It would be a good thing, I think, to share with so many national delegations of the laity, the results of this development. In order to get them better known among ordinary believers.

An activity planned for the near future is a meeting of representatives of the several ecclesiastical councils with the president and team of ComECE in order to coordinate and make more effective the ideas and visions of members of the Catholic Church on social and

ethical themes discussed in the European Parliament. A date is going to be fixed with mgr. van Luyn, the new president of ComECE.

So, although everybody involved in ELF has to do the work in his or her free time, I think a lot has happened and is achieved during the last two years.

The coming days we will discuss further the themes that emerged from the recent history. I hope it will be very inspiring and encouraging.

This Study-assembly in many aspects will be different than former meetings. During the meeting of the heads of delegations in Gdansk we decided to come together in Saarbrücken in the week that here the Katholikentag and the Semaines Sociales de France will gather. We hope to develop some synergy by inviting our participants to attend at some activities of the Katholikentag, and from the other hand can the visitors of the Katholikentag learn something of the existence and functioning of the ELF.

Another new aspect is the cooperation with members of the European Priest Council in the programme of next Friday. They will participate in the whole of the programme of this Study-assembly, but will be especially active interlocutors in the dialogue about the possibilities and difficulties in the cooperation of priests and lay-faithful.

These two experimental methods require some flexibility, cooperation and creativity of our participants. We will not, like up to now, live, work and recreate in the same place. Some of you will stay in a hotel, others with guest-families. We have to travel to and from to meet each other here and on several places in Saarbrücken.

This Lernzentrum will be our daily home, in which we come to eat, to exchange, and also to have our own activities.

I thank you in advance for the inconvenience that this new formula will bring.

But I hope and trust at the same time that it will prove to be worthwhile.

I wish all of us some very interesting and fruitful days!

I thank you for your attention.

Maria Draaijers
president ELF