

DIALOGUE



A school of life

Cathy Beer reports on the International School of Ecumenism, at the Focolare Centre for Unity in Welwyn Garden City, from 27th April – 1st May 2018.

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Maria Wienken and Diego Goller from Centro Uno

'Ecumenism doesn't mean just being nice to each other or when we are doing some activity together. Ecumenism is a way of life that I can live every day and in every moment. I have to be empty and to love not just the person in front of me but his or her Church. And I really felt this when we were praying together in Westminster Abbey... We were one and I felt the Anglican Church was my own Church.'

This is the impact that just over 4 days together had on

the almost 60 people from all corners of the globe – Australia, USA, Argentina, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Cuba, Philippines, Germany, Croatia, Romania, France, Italy, Malta, England, Scotland, Ireland and Holland. This was the 23rd International School of Ecumenism which began in 1987, organized by Centro Uno, the Focolare's Centre for Ecumenism based in Rome.

The Christian Churches represented were Byzantine Catholic, Serbian and Greek Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, United Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic, and there were five simultaneous translations – Spanish, Italian, Romanian, English and Dutch.

I asked **Maria Wienken** and **Diego Goller**, the Directors of Centro Uno, to provide the context for this School in Welwyn Garden City.

Why did you have the School of Ecumenism in England?

Today we talk a lot about needing to dialogue, which is so necessary in a world that is becoming more and more multicultural and globalized.

Centro Uno is the secretariat for Christian Unity in Rome and was founded by Chiara Lubich before the Second Vatican Council. It promotes regular formation courses in ecumenism. These courses, or 'schools', are held in different places to help people deepen their knowledge of different Churches, not only theoretically, but mainly to have real living contact with that Church. In the past, we've been to Istanbul to immerse ourselves in the life and the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. On other occasions we have had a school at Ottmaring (Augsburg) in Germany, to get to know the Lutheran Church. On the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation we promoted a seminar to visit the places where the Reformation began. So... to get to know the Church of England better we decided to have the school here.

However of course the School encompassed a much wider spread of Christian Churches that exist here, above all in England and in Scotland. We visited local churches for their Sunday worship where we were welcomed warmly by Baptists, Anglicans, United Reformed Church members and Roman Catholics. This experience was a highlight for many, discovering the richness of other denominations and evoking the desire and enthusiasm to take back those spiritual gifts to one's own Church.

Why are these schools important?

What hinders the progress of Christians towards unity is often just ignorance. After centuries of not speaking to each other, things have moved on and now is the time for us to get to know each other properly, to talk to each other in order to understand each other. These schools offer Christians of various Churches this possibility at first hand, to discover how the other Church prays, what their liturgy is like. Even when we can't share in the same Eucharist, we can pray together, we can read and live the Scriptures together, we can collaborate and this helps us to build relationships of friendship and reciprocal understanding in Christ.

The charism of unity

The special characteristic of the schools that 'Centro Uno' promotes lies in the fact that the participants have a basic thing in common: besides the common patrimony that already unites all Christians, we are also united by the spirituality of unity, born from Chiara Lubich's charism. We want to live it and to share our experiences of living the Gospel. We discover the richness contained in the Gospel and we realise that there is so much more that unites us than what divides us.

Two Pillars

In particular, in the spirituality of unity we find two 'pillars' that are really essential to ecumenical dialogue: Jesus crucified and forsaken and Jesus in our midst, according to Jesus' promise 'where two or more are united in my name, there I am in their midst' (Mathew 18: 20). When we have mutual love, then Jesus is present amongst us and we experience that we are 'one Christian people', because it is He, the Risen one amongst us, who unites us.

Westminster Abbey

Chiara gave birth to these schools of ecumenism, with a

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motto: 'to get to know each other more in order to love each other more'. And this is exactly what we experienced so strongly in London: we got to know the Anglican Church in particular, in its heart, in Westminster Abbey. We were welcomed with exquisite hospitality into the Jerusalem Chamber, a place where official ceremonies take place, we were able to participate in the beautiful Evensong – the daily vespers – we visited the tombs, memorials and statues of so many famous people who have made England famous, like the tomb of William Wilberforce who put an end to the slave trade... But in particular we were able to pray round the tomb of Edward the Confessor, a saint of the undivided Church. We asked him for unity among Christians and many other things.

Rev. Dr. Nicolas Sagovsky welcomes participants to a private tour of Westminster Abbey



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Tom Masters, from the USA outlined some of his 'personal highlights' of the school:

'The conference proved to be richer and deeper than I had imagined. At this "school" I found myself within an "ecumenical family" that came to life over four and a half days, sharing stories, prayer, meals, songs, tears, and laughter. Some particularly powerful moments were the witnesses of lived Christianity, for example David Burke recounted his experience as a street pastor in Banbury. Baptists and Catholics from Cuba shared how they helped build unity among Churches in Havana and two members of the Greek Catholic Church of Byzantine rite, one member of the Orthodox Church and one Roman Catholic shared their experience together of ecumenism in Romania. There was a thoughtful presentation of the challenges and successes of Churches Together in England by Rev. Dr. David Cornick, and Fr Harry O'Brien from Scotland shared his insights in a meditative talk "Towards a Common Vision"'

An integral part of the programme was the often moving experiences of dialogue of life from the various countries present, as well as from Bishop Robin Smith who shared the life and unity of the Bishops Friends of the Movement

who come from many different Christian denominations. Many of the experiences were eye-openers and broadened our horizons to see how much ecumenical dialogue is influencing society and the Church as a whole worldwide, contributing in a real way to 'that all may be one'.

Pilgrimage to London

On our last full day, we all boarded the coach for a day of pilgrimage in London. At the Methodist Central Hall, we immersed ourselves in the gifts that Methodism has given to the Church. Undaunted by the driving rain we visited Westminster Cathedral, honouring the memory of Archbishop Heenan, Cardinal Hume and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, all very supportive of Focolare and its ecumenical activities.

The final stage of our pilgrimage, a visit to Westminster Abbey, facilitated so expertly by its former Canon Theologian Rev. Dr. Nicolas Sagovsky, was the culmination of a day where mutual love was expressed in our common prayer around the tomb of a king and saint revered by all traditions since the 11th Century – St Edward the Confessor. It was a very powerful moment. While in the Abbey we were invited to tea in the Jerusalem Chamber, where Chiara Lubich had been awarded the Templeton Prize in 1977. We felt we were not wandering around a building as tourists, but continuing our pilgrimage in a house of prayer, and as One Church we were fulfilling Chiara's dream. This tangible unity was expressed also through our participation at Evensong.

The unity felt and expressed in Westminster Abbey left an indelible mark in our souls. Entrusting our commitment to living and working for Christian unity, we concluded the 5 days of the school together at Welwyn Garden City with a commitment to live Jesus' New Commandment by signing a pact of mutual love.

Impressions from some of the participants:

'When I arrived at the School, the thing that impressed me most was the warm way that everyone treated each other, even though they had never met before. There was a smile on every face and we behaved like brothers and sisters that have not seen each other for a long time; that is exactly what we are, brothers and sisters united through Jesus Christ. Even when we did not speak the same language we understood each other because Jesus was among us. Just like at Pentecost we were all together and in the same spirit. I'm returning home a totally different person. I know now that God wants me to



Photos (2): © Ecumenical School 2018

All the participants signed a commitment to living mutual love between their Churches.

learn how to see him and seek him in my brothers and sisters...' (Esther, Cuba – Baptist)

'It has helped me to put on new glasses that allow me to look at the beauty of our diversity like a great rainbow; and instead of listening to a monotonous melody, I have listened to music with different nuances and different rhythms that speak to me of love and service in communion.' (Midiam, Cuba)

'I felt that I've had the experience in the last few days of encountering different Churches in a new way, through the eyes of Jesus... I also realized that as these Churches encounter this charism of unity – for them it sheds light on themselves too and it sheds light on me, on who I am.' (Scotland – RC)

'I really liked the invitation on the first morning here to "empty our suitcases" in the sense of emptying ourselves of our prejudices, our expectations and so on – I did have expectations, so this was really great – and so I was open to everything and I learned to appreciate each one of you.' (Baptist minister – Italy)

'Before, I had the Church in my heart. Now I have the joy of having the Churches. This is my conversion.' (France – RC)

'I arrived as one person and I am leaving as a completely different person. I have no words to express what

these days have been. Above all, seeing this path that we have to walk along together, with the other Churches. It's a culture of ecumenism. I have to make it mine first before I can help others to enter into this reality which is truly the will of God. It has always existed but now it's even more important, to see the others as brothers and sisters. God wants us to reach this reconciliation of the world, beginning with the Churches, with ourselves.' (Argentina – RC)

'I feel we were one big crowd of diversity – of different Churches, of different nations, different cultures but one family, and I have to thank each one of you because here our diversity has become a gift, unity amongst us.' (Germany – Lutheran)

'What I will be taking back is joy. This joy that we have all experienced here. But where does this joy come from? It comes from Jesus among us and Jesus crucified and forsaken, these two pillars. We have experienced first-hand here that they are the way, the pillars for all the Churches.' (A priest of the Greek Catholic Church of the Byzantine rite – Romania)

'Chiara Lubich said that the richness of the Gospel could not have emerged if the division had not taken place. This struck me a lot. I saw the beauty of the Anglican Church in these days and this has enriched me. I have to admit that if I had some kind of prejudice before, now it has all gone away and I have learned the culture of dialogue and how it can be put into practice.' (Malta – RC)

'I too feel that I am a changed person. I said at the beginning, you will see how this school changes us, and this is exactly what has happened – not only from the point of view of increased knowledge, which certainly is true, we do have a wider knowledge of England and of its history too, and of the ecumenism here, and we have a new insight into the reality of Scotland too, which I didn't know at all. But it was not only a getting to know you on an intellectual level, it was a very deep knowledge, of the soul, you could say. Before it didn't exist, now it does.' (Diego Goller – Centro Uno)

'It's wonderful when you come to a stage where you don't see the denominations as a problem to be solved, but rather as a wonderful gift. Just as every nationality is a gift. I think the biggest hurdle for us as human beings is to truly love diversity, to fall in love with it.' (Scotland – RC) ■