

2 Session of 14-16 April 2008

2.1 Meeting of the OIC of 14 April 2008

Meeting of Catholic INGOs in Centre Emmanuel Mounier, 42 rue de l'Université, Strasbourg

Gabriel Nissim presents three issues, proposed by those present, to be discussed in view of future agenda:

1. the right of asylum-seekers to be granted asylum
2. Christian identity in a pluralistic world
3. Intercultural dialogue to intensify the results of Colloquium 3I

1. Richard Fischer informs the assembly about an ecumenical letter with which Caritas and CEME (a refugee aid organisation) as well as the Conference of European Churches (KEK) and the representatives of the European Catholic Bishops' Conferences (COMECE) attempt to influence a directive with which the European Union is planning to regulate the repatriation of illegal immigrants.

2. Helga Zurek of Catholic Women of Europe calls for an answer to the often repeated question what characterises the efforts of Christian organisations compared with those of others. It is desirable for Catholic NGOs to be more clearly in appearance. This could be done, among other efforts, by press activities and by joint declarations addressed to the Council of Europe, without, however, appearing as a Catholic lobby.

3. As the Council of Europe has proclaimed 2008 to be the Year of Intercultural Dialogue the obvious answer seems to be the further promotion of intercultural and interconvictional dialogue. Unfortunately the white paper dealing with this topic, in the writing of which a group of Catholic NGOs collaborated, has so far not been published as it has not yet been approved by the Council of Ministers. It is hoped that it will be available at the session week in June, in which case it will be an item on the agenda. Otherwise the meeting will work out its own guide lines for an intercultural dialogue.

Richard Fischer reports on the initiative of KEK (Council of European Churches) against the imprisonment of asylum-seekers who are to be repatriated.

Gaston de la Haye / Belgium, President of a European umbrella organisation of teachers, reports on a conference dealing with 'Enseignement des faits religieux' (General knowledge about religion's facts) in Strasbourg on 8/4/2008. 17 representatives of different religions and 7 representatives of non-religious organisations (Christians, Jews, Muslims and also

Humanists) call for education for tolerance and awareness of civic responsibility. Knowledge of different religions is expected to lead to a better knowledge of one's own religion. The aim of such instruction is not proselytizing but objective knowledge. The report is given by Professor Jean Paul Villaime. The interreligious training of teachers in Norway, which does not exclude active members of different faiths, is considered exemplary.

During the informal evening meal Helga Zureck speaks of the great hope that the 'Church from Below' has inspired her with. (She evidently means the entire base movement, including our European Network.)

2.2 Conference of International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) accredited to the Council of Europe 15-16 April 2008

The President of the INGO Conference, Anneliese Oeschger, reminds members of the elections in October (for the liaison committee ?) and in January for the presidency.

Vice-president Jean-Marie Heydt presents the project of a memorandum for the closer cooperation of INGOs with local authorities, who are to be offered the advice of INGO experts. This leads to the question of the democratic legitimacy of the INGOs. The reason for this discussion is a 'Congress of Local Authorities' which will take place on 29.5.2008 in Strasbourg. In the course of this discussion it is reported that some local authorities, e.g. town planners, are against codifying the right of INGOs to participate in their projects, arguing that their own democratic legitimacy gives them the exclusive right to set standards. The project is accepted by a majority vote.

Marie-Jose Schmitt points out that the 'Agence des droits fondamentaux' (Agency for basic rights) is collecting information and advice until 1/6/2008. The INGOs are expected to check constantly how courts implement the principles of the Charter of Human Rights and be a motor of the further realisation of basic rights. Gabriel Nissim of the 'Association mondiale pour la communication', who is also the president of the INGO working team for basic rights, considers this to be a step towards a better recognition on the part of the Council of Europe and the European Union of the work done by the INGOs. He is sorry that, so far, there has been no structured cooperation between the INGOs and the EU. Richard Fischer of the Conference of European Churches feels that the quality of our work is the best way to convince the authorities and refers to the Human Rights Network in Brussels with about 40 member organisations. (Personally I feel we should join.) A unanimous vote is passed in favour of a permanent cooperation with the EU Agency for Basic Rights.

Discussion of the proposed reorganisation

The commission of elected members of the different INGOs is to be replaced by a permanent commission of the presidents and vice-presidents of the member organisations. Counter to the objection voiced by one delegate that this would mean a concentration of power I Annelise Oeschger argues that she has hitherto had considerable power due to the information that has been available to her. This power will now be shared by a number of persons. There seems to be consensus that this is an improvement that makes sense. A formal vote is not taken.

Michel Muller, vice-president of OING Service, reports that 84 % of the information is given in oral or written form. No one objects to the external contacts of the service, which was originally constituted for internal communication. This means, for example, that documents could be passed on to the administration of the Council of Europe or to the media if they are asked for. - Contributions are voluntary. (treasurer' s comment: This was not clear when contributions were asked for.) The election of an OING president is due.

Gaston de la Haye reports once more on a meeting dealing with interreligious education, which took place in Strasbourg on 8/4/08. (Vide his report on the meeting of Catholic INGOs). Victor Kamizanov of the International Federation for Peace and Conciliation reminds the participants of meetings in countries of the former Soviet Union, viz. in St. Petersburg, Moscow and, the last one, in Kazan ('Islam, Conflicts and Peace-keeping'), serving also intercultural understanding.

Francis Rosenstiel, Council of Europe Good-Will Ambassador and founding president of the European Forum for Democracy, proposes a day of remembrance of the 'Just', i.e. those who risked their own lives to save Jews from the Holocaust. This proposition is passed. There are two abstentions. F .R. points out that this forum is supported by President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel. A declaration to this effect was signed by members of the European Parliament of different parties on 18/4/2007.

Maritchu Rall, president of the working group 'Great poverty and social cohesion', proposed a declaration dealing with the acute world-wide food crisis. It was accepted unanimously- The next general INGO conference will be on 25/06/08.

The afternoon session was devoted to numerous activities of human rights organisations in countries of the former Soviet Union, supported by the INGO conference. Annelise Oeschger reminds the assembly of the critical situation in Russia, where many NGOs have lost their licence. At the same time so-called 'Gongos', directed by the state, have been licenced.

Working-Group Sessions

One of the working groups deals with gender equality .

This final working group departed from a practice that has been adhered to hitherto: for the first time it appoints a man to report on its proceedings: a parliamentarian from the Green Island. The Council of Europe's program against the discrimination of women will reach its termination in two years' time. There have been conferences everywhere, but the results are rather meager. : There are new laws in Monaco, Slovenia and Azerbaijan. There has also been a report on the position of Muslim women in Europe. The question is why the program is to be terminated and when the UN campaign dealing with the same topic will be opened. Some topics must be more closely examined, viz. 'gender budgeting', i.e. a just share of public funds allocated with due consideration of gender equality , and the problem of violence inflicted on girls and women.

Working-group Education and Culture

In future, priority is to be given to human rights education. A Diplôme de Citoyenneté Européenne will be awarded in Strasbourg and Stuttgart. An Anglican warns the assembly not to regard religious and cultural factors as synonymous. The considerable increase of Anglicans in Africa produces cultural but not theological tension. One drawback of the interreligious dialogue is that it is carried on almost exclusively between male participants. A further problem is that the 40% non-believers in Europe are not considered. Georg Platz of Catholic Schools of Europe points out that there is a university exchange program for interreligious teaching.

In the lunch break a human rights exhibition is opened, produced by elementary school children, who explain their contributions to the numerous JNGO representatives present.

Working-group European Social Charter and Social Politics

Jean Marie Heidt reports that 39 out of 47 European states have ratified the social charter. For the INGOs the main point of interest is the right of legal action by an association, which will be made use of above all by trade unions. On the other hand, we find that many countries do not react at all or try to draw out the procedure over years. Nor do they deliver the annual reports requested.

Working-group Human Rights

The supreme decision-making body of the Council of Europe, the assembly of foreign ministers, will be represented by permanent members accredited to the Council of Europe, the 'Comité des Ministres', who will be advised by eleven groups of experts. The Comité des Directeurs will meet every six months. Latest topic: Access to public documents. So far, there is no instrument for enforcing this access. Gabriel Nissim reminds the group of Chernobyl. The French government had kept a great deal of information to itself. 150 NGOs have signed a document insisting on progress in this matter. All NGOs are requested to exert pressure on their governments.

The Human Rights Court of the Council of Europe has received 80 000 submissions. This accounts for the long delay in decision-making. Several groups have tried to speed up the procedure. The general impression is that some countries are impeding the work of this court. For this reason there are recommendations to approach the plenary assembly of the Parliament and to inform the public. Johannes Heller of the Committee against Slave Trade reports that attempts have been made to find qualified and independent experts. The monitoring body includes Amnesty International. A meeting of the World Forum for Democracy in Kiev, attended by 600 participants, passed a motion to this effect, which, however, was not published in many countries and therefore remained largely unknown. This seems to be a general practice.

Gerd Wild 12/5/08

Translated in to English by Oswald Stein