

Together for Europe

Frank Johnson reports on a truly remarkable ecumenical congress which took place in Stuttgart last month.

A vast hall packed with 10,000 people was the launching pad for an impressive appeal to all the Christians of Europe to pledge themselves to giving a 'soul' to our continent, by strengthening the spiritual values on which it was founded and seeking to build fraternal relationships with all. There were representatives of 175 different Christian movements and communities from different churches and traditions and, unlike the majority ecumenical gatherings, there were many young people from all over Europe present in the Hans Martin Schleyer Hall in Stuttgart. Besides the 10,000 in the hall, there were another 100,000 people in more than 150 other venues around Europe, where they had gathered together to be part of the congress via satellite TV. And for those unable to get to receive the TV broadcast, there was the possibility of following the proceedings via Internet.

The 'founders' of modern Europe

The date for 'Together for Europe', 8 May, significantly marked the 50th anniversary of the ending of hostilities in the Second World War, and came just a few days after the admission of 10 new members into the European Union. Also, we were reminded, it was on 9 May 1950 that Robert Schuman announced what became known as the Schuman Plan, which formed the basis for the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner of the European Union. In fact, tribute was paid to these great 'founders' of the 'new Europe': Konrad Adenauer, Jean Monnet, Alcide De Gasperi and Robert Schuman. In Britain these great men are less well known than in continental Europe, but it was they who were determined that European nations should never again go to war with one another. Theirs was a vision of a Europe living in peace and harmony and founded on Christian values.

Land of Glory

The congress started with an inspiring anthem sung by the Focolare international groups Gen Verde and Gen Rosso, entitled 'Land of Glory' with verses in English, German, Italian and French. The lyrics aptly reflected the spirit of the meeting:

Land of hope, Treasures of gold, Ring full of diamonds, Of shining stars in a blue velvet sky. Land of harvest All year around, Your roots are in Heaven In a God who gave his life, In the Risen one.

The scene was then set for Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, and Friedrich Aschoff, an Evangelical Lutheran pastor and leader of the Charismatic Renewal in his church, to introduce the day. Pastor Aschoff recalled the dark days of the Second World War and reminded the audience that it was on 8 May 1945 that the leaders of the German Evangelical Church had come together in Stuttgart to acknowledge publicly their share of guilt. He went on to trace the birth and the growth of the new movements, many of which sprang up during the war, and which have been active in renewing the churches and in promoting ecumenical dialogue. He also recalled an important meeting entitled 'Together, how else?' that took place in Germany on 8 December 2001 with members of Roman Catholic and Evangelical movements which ended in the making of a pact of mutual love and respect.

A 'dream' for Europe

In her opening address, Chiara Lubich spoke of the 'dream' in the hearts and minds of many for a resurgence of a Europe in the spirit in order to be able to offer an important contribution to the development of our continent. She spoke about Europe's strong Christian roots, referring to saints such as Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna. She also mentioned more recent holy people such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Tichon, the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia; George Bell the Anglican Bishop of Chichester and Patriarch Athenagoras I, all of whom have made their contribution to the Christian soul of Europe. Chiara too, spoke of the important role of the movements in building fraternal networks, and concluded: 'Now we are convinced that if the gifts of the Spirit of the various Christian movements and communities are better known by Europeans through, for instance, initiatives like today's event, it really will be possible to cooperate in making our continent richer spiritually, more united in itself and more open to the world'.

Messages of encouragement

The scene having been set, Archbishop Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, delivered a special message from Pope John Paul II. This was followed by messages from various important political and ecclesiastical figures: Dr Erwin Teufel, Prime Minister of Baden-Wurtemberg; Johannes Rau, President of Germany; Dr Walter Schwimmer, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Bertie Ahern, Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland and currently President of the European Union; the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Dr Samuel Kobla, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury.

The congress had quite an intense programme of talks and experiences and yet, thanks to the artistic interludes, one never had the impression of being 'overloaded' by the input. After each talk, there was a song, a musical presentation or a dance, designed to reinforce the message of the congress. As well as contributions from Gen Verde and Gen Rosso, there was a chamber orchestra

and youth choir, a Russian orthodox choir, a German evangelical band and two captivating contributions from the Cosi-Stefanescu ballet school. These artistic moments brought a harmony and an integrity to the congress which would have been impossible to achieve through the spoken word alone.

A Vision for Europe

In the morning session, Andrea Riccardi, founder of the St Egidio Community, gave a talk on the history and the spirit of Europe and shared his vision for the role of the movements in Europe and in the wider world: 'We believe that a force for good and a barrier against evil can surge forth from the unity among the various movements, different from one another but also in profound communion of sentiments and faith. Shared prayer with one another can flow into a force of love'.

The next speaker to step on to the stage was Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, and someone who has been very open and honest about his own personal commitment to the idea of a Europe with a 'soul'. In his talk, entitled 'Young People and Europe', he said: 'Young people have learnt faster than us that there is no future without peace, and that war produces hatred that tends to multiply the violence in a never-ending cycle'. He outlined the challenges facing young Europeans as being made up of the following: the need to understand society starting with the smallest and weakest; the need to recognise the rights of others; the need for reconciliation; and the need to overcome fear.

At the end of the morning session, Chiara Lubich gave a second talk, this time on the subject of universal fraternity. She reminded the audience that of the three great principles of the French revolution, the first two, liberty and equality, had, at least to some extent in democracies, been achieved, but that fraternity had never been seriously tried. She then went on to explain how, by loving each one of our brothers and sisters, no matter where they come from, unity can be achieved in Europe. She said that Jesus was the model for this kind of love which 'requires us first of all to love everyone, therefore, not only relatives and friends. It asks that we love the pleasant and the unpleasant, our compatriots and also foreigners, the European and the immigrant, those of our church and of another, of our religion and another'. She concluded by saying that the movements, when they live the Gospel, generate fraternity and nurture it; they help to heal families, thereby repairing the fabric of our society.

Hopes for the future

The afternoon session was dedicated particularly to witness. It started with a group of young people, who exploded on to the stage dancing and singing, until the music faded away and they began to share some of their ideas and feelings about how they would like to see Europe develop. 'I do not want to build my well-being on the sale of arms', declared Francesco from Italy, 'And I would like to utilise the same quantity of natural resources that other peoples utilise in the world, not 20 or 50 times more'. Maja from Slovakia explained how the prospect of belonging to the EU had at first filled her with fear: 'However,' she said, 'I discovered that my identity and therefore, the identity of my people, can be a gift for others'. Rebecca from Germany said: 'If we begin today, in our own small way we can accomplish great things'. And Clara from Spain told her experience of taking part in the Focolare's Higher Institute of Learning, where young people from all over Europe, as well as some from other continents, come together for two weeks in the ecumenical town of Ottmaring in Germany, to study in the atmosphere of Jesus in the midst. The young people were followed by representatives of just a few of the movements present in the hall who gave brief accounts of their work. These included: Cursillos de Cristiandad, Focolare, the Charism of Orthodox Youth from Finland, FCJG Liidenscheid, Family Live Mission, Equipes Notre Dame, the Selb-itz Fraternity of Christ, Schonstatt, YMCA, Teen Challenge and St Egidio. Nicky Gumbel, founder of the Alpha course, told of his non-Christian upbringing: his father was a German Jew and his mother not a church-goer and he came to faith in Jesus at the age of 18. He said that Alpha courses are now running in 147 countries and 30,000 churches around the world and that in Britain, 30,000 of the 70,000 prison population have done the course.

From Europe to the world

By now one felt that everyone in the hall and all those watching on television, were united in a special way: they were all convinced of the point of a united Europe, not necessarily from a political point of view, but from the point of view of a common soul, with the desire to love our fellow Europeans and to welcome strangers. So, Chiara Lubich's words, which took us from a united Europe to a united world, fell on very fertile ground and were greeted with a long and truly heartfelt applause.

Then Helmut Nicklas, secretary of the Munich YMCA and one of the co-directors of the event, invited everyone present and all those watching to make a commitment, which he said 'is not meant simply as a statement of intent, but as a witness to something which, although just beginning, is already a reality among us'. Kitty Arbuthnot of Catholic Alpha read out the final declaration: 'We who are gathered together in Stuttgart and linked up with parallel meetings in more than 150 cities throughout the continent, wish to work together with all men and women of good will so that Europe may be a place of love and fraternity, that it may be aware of its responsibilities and show itself to be open to the whole world'.

Then Herr Nicklas invited the Church leaders present in the audience to come on to the stage and each read a sentence of Jesus' prayer for unity from St John's Gospel. Finally, he spontaneously invited Queen Fabiola of Belgium, who had been present throughout the day, to come up and lead them all in praying the Our Father. And as Gen Rosso and Gen Verde returned to sing 'Land of Glory' once again, as a conclusion to the day, there were many in the hall and elsewhere who felt they had taken part in a truly historic occasion, one which, in years to come, may be seen as a landmark in the journey towards a united world.

You can find further information on the following website: www.europ2004.info

Above: UK participants in the Hans Martin Schleyer Hall, Stuttgart.

Below: Nicky Gumbel, founder of the Alpha course, told of how he came to faith in Jesus.

Above: Many young people from all over Europe were present at 'Together for Europe'. **Below:** 10,000 people pledge themselves to giving a 'soul' to Europe.