

Fruits of "Together for Europe" after 18 years

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On deep roots a fertile tree of unity for Europe is growing

Our togetherness has come from two experiences. On the Protestant side, the annual Meeting of Leaders (Treffen von Verantwortlichen, TvV) of communities, fraternities, Christian organisations, and free churches has been going on for some time in Germany.

On the catholic side, it started with the Pope's invitation to the new movements to celebrate Pentecost 1998 together at St. Peter's Square.

The first encounter of the two streams of life took place 1999 in Ottmaring in the context of the celebration of the “Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification” in Augsburg. They recognized the profound common ground of the communities present, being created by an initiative of the Holy Spirit.

In March 2000, Chiara Lubich came to TvV for the first time. The contributions of Chiara Lubich and Bishop Wilckens stimulated processes of repentance and a grace of reconciliation between churches and movements was given.

The first big shared experience with several thousand members of the movements and spiritual communities of both, the Catholic and the Protestant, sides happened on 8 December 2001 in Munich. Spontaneously a pact of respect and mutual love between leaders of the movements was made in the Evangelical Lutheran church of St. Matthew. In the afternoon, Munich's Catholic Cathedral was filled by a great celebration with 5000 participants.

The leitmotiv in this time was: **Together – what else**. It went on to discover **the wealth of the gifts of God** among us. Being concerned with the fear of god and human dignity was the connecting element..

A circle of leaders from the movements (Steering Committee) emerged as well as the desire to have a congress to bring together many responsible persons from our movements.

It was decided to hold a congress for leaders of the movements in Stuttgart (2004) and to invite more broadly to a final rally, which attracted 10 000 members and friends.

In the further progress, the question of the purpose of the “togetherness” arose. The condition of Europe came into view. Our togetherness should be a contribution to Europe, to strengthen the Christian soul of Europe.

This also reflected the style of our togetherness. Who are we, how do we work? The principles of co-operation and the attitudes that shape the togetherness were summed up by the Steering Committee in the paper “Foundations”. The text has been revised several times and was signed by all at the meeting of the Friends of TtE in Rome (2009).

It is becoming increasingly clear that the pact of respect and mutual love is a central theme in our cooperation. It carries us through difficulties and challenges.

For the second event in Stuttgart (Stuttgart II) in 2007, we decided to put a stronger emphasis on the impact on the churches and society: Together on the way.

For a kind of creed evolved of what we stand for; the **7 Yes-statements, the core values** we stand for and work for in Europe. As a result, cooperation in the different fields of the 7 Yes-statements began through projects, networking and congresses.

At the Ecumenical Church Day in Munich (2010) we occurred together. Since then, we speak of the 5 keys of unity: Jesus in the midst; The pact of mutual love; The Word of God; Reconciliation; Changed fraternal attitude.

Our view then turned even more towards society. We wanted to address politicians. Hence, we organized an event in Brussels in May 2012. At the same ~~time~~ weekend, there were meetings with political leaders in many European cities. However, this one day event did not have the expected impact on the world of European politics. Only a few politicians participated. We realistically reflected our possibilities and our impact.

Finally, we focused on the 2017 as a year of commemorating the beginning of the Reformation 500 years ago. The insight motivated us: 500 years of separation are enough. We sought contact with bishops of both denominations.

We held a third congress in June 2016 in Munich for leaders and members of our movements and communities with an Outdoor Rally on the Stachus (central place). We wanted help prepare for more togetherness in the year of Luther. We sought early contact with some bishops who seemed open to us and organized an ecumenical bishop meeting in Stuttgart. These encounters opened the hearts of bishops. One of the fruits of these encounters was the publicly expressed common agreement, the focusing on Jesus Christ and the request for forgiveness between the representatives of the two big denominations and the free churches. We celebrated in common our Lord Jesus Christ.

Different phases of growth of the tree of unity

The first years were genuinely inspired by the purposeful power of Chiara Lubich (Focolare Movement) and the deep friendship between representatives of other movements like Andrea Riccardi (Sant'Egidio), Helmut Nicklas (CVJM), Friedrich Aschoff (Lutheran Charismatic Renewal), Michael Marmann (Schoenstatt), and Frances Rupert (Cursillo). This period was a wonderful springtime for all involved. There were also times of ripening and autumn.

Through the death of Helmut Nicklas (2007) and Chiara Lubich (2008), the line structure changed, focal points shifted, as did the creative power.

Due to the stronger focus on ecumenism, especially when looking at the year 2017, Germany became even more the central country of living togetherness with the strongest manifestation of a national level of the TtE. Such a national level of TtE also came into existence in Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, and Italy.

We also experienced disappointments, such as the impact on political Europe being not as powerful as we had wished together. We understood that at this time God did not see us so clearly on this political domain.

Now, we are at the beginning of another phase, looking at the East of Europe.

Throughout all phases and in view of the future, the word “the score is written in heaven” applies to us (Chiara Lubich). This means, that we do not follow a strategic plan, but listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit together to discern the next bar of the score.

Growth from deep roots, this is where we see the basic principles for shaping the future. There our identity is to be seen. Now we are again in demand to provide a good climate of growth so that our tree of unity remains fruitful.

The fruits of TtE in our own community/movement

+ **Hospitality:** We experienced liberating hospitality and were allowed to host. It was a process of discovering many areas, in which the Holy Spirit works. Thus joy arose on things that were foreign before. Unexpectedly, we got new, very different friends. Prejudice turned to amazement, fears to trust.

+ **Opening from the outside:** It helped us to look beyond our own horizon. There was an opening of hearts and overcoming of prejudices.

+ **Fruitful dialogue:** We have learned that in dialogue we are not losing anything of our own, but it is a gain for both partners..

+ **Own identity:** Through the togetherness, we experience an enhancement of our own identity, who and how we are. The feedback was like a confirmation of the own charisma. Some have experienced being recognized by others in their own calling. Some tell of revitalization of their own charisma and of their own role in the great common organism of the churches and the “togetherness”.

The fruits of the TtE in the relationship between the different communities/movements

+ **Personal friendship:** We became friends because we became interested in each other and visited each other. A culture of hospitality came into being. Personal friendship prepared ground for more openness and affection even in matters of content, phrasing and use of language.

+ **Diversity is enriching:** We discovered the richness of the gifts of God, the charisms, among our friends. We look first at the charisma and not at the size and spread of a movement.

+ **Jesus in our midst:** We experienced Jesus Christ in our centre. The affection for him led us to a mutual affection to one another. We recognized many statements of Scripture as being said to us. That spurred the interaction.

We have very different styles of prayer and worshipping God. This was alien at first. We were taught by the Holy Spirit to **pray together and for one another**. We were able to experience the fruitfulness of this prayer in the preparation of the congresses, most recently in public prayer for Europe on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome (24 March 2017).

+ **Love gives us freedom:** Our relationship grows out of love and thus can give the other much freedom in reverence. I commit myself to the common only as far as I can now. I do not have to commit myself forever. Respect for each other always took precedence over everything else, even before any leveling. Not all members of our communities and movements are involved in togetherness in the same way. When individual members make themselves available to the TtE, we call this process a **second calling** (Chiara Lubich). There are different gifts in the body of the Lord. All along we have been holding onto being an **organism of friends and not an organization**. We have a very flat management structure that always wants to involve everyone without dominating through hierarchies or numerical power. In some countries **national boards of TtE-friends** were established. They developed in great autonomy, depending on the respective possibilities and needs.

+ **Pact of Respect and Love:** From this experience perspectives of a culture of covenant life have emerged, they are elements of a covenant culture.

+ **Paths of reconciliation:** In this attitude, processes of reconciliation between communities emerged to mutual forgiveness. We realized that God brings his people together and wants to add even more.

The fruits of the TtE in the churches

+ **Ecumenism of life:** Together, we were allowed to build bridges between denominations and to the free churches, which were previously unthinkable. They must be kept alive through cooperation. Ecumenism has to grow from the bottom up through friendships. We are guided by the biblical vision that God wants to bring his people together.

+ **Steps of reconciliation:** The commandment of brotherly love has found a tangible form and attitude within the pact of respect and love. In this pact, we were entrusted with processes of reconciliation as a precious gift of the grace of God. We speak of reconciled diversity.

+ **The charismatic is equally important:** We have learned that our charisms are equally important in an assignment to the officially constituted churches. This word from John Paul II on Pentecost 1998 has encouraged us. In it, we recognize an essential perspective of the ecclesiology of the Council. We maintain **closeness to the official Church** in all freedom and independence of our way. We do not live in opposition to the bishops, but cultivate a friendship and bring in our profile.

In the Catholic movements, one often likes to look at Mary, who was the first to open herself entirely to the will of God. Her attitude of always being open to grace is precious to all of us. We were allowed to know that we breathe in the church with the **Marian-charismatic lung**, which we are allowed to understand is of equal importance to **St. Peter's official lung**.

+ **500 years of separation are enough:** we are going into the future with the knowledge and the impulse that 500 years of separation are enough. But we do **not live a confessional mishmash**. We acknowledge and respect the grown tradition and the otherness of the

denominations. Some of us are in dialogue with other religions, especially the Jews and Muslims.

+ **An excellent case:** We are a small-scale resolution process (excellent case), a qualified minority in all humility and also with pride to be called for it. Above all, in the attitude of friendship and cooperation, we are called to be a leading sign of unity. We have become like a “sacred space” for others, e.g. for bishops, especially at the meeting in Stuttgart and in consequence at the congress in Munich and the celebration of the 500 years of Reformation, e.g. by the testimony in Hildesheim by Cardinal Marx and Bishop Bedford-Strohm.

Fruits of the TfE in the European society

+ **For Europe:** Our Yes to Europe ties in with the great historical commitment of the West. We are on the way to rediscovering the **vocation of Europe** for this time and the future. We are aware that Europe will leave the global stage without the unity it has lived (Andrea Riccardi). We had been touched deeply by the fact, that major European events took place close to important experiences of TfE: Eastern enlargement in 2007, our meeting “Friends of TfE” in the Netherlands and the Paris attacks, our congress in Munich and Brexit. Through the guidance of God and the connections with current contemporary history, especially in Munich, we became a **prophetic sign** in Europe.

+ **Fraternity:** In times of isolation, nationalist tendencies and populism, we live fraternity between the nations and the social classes (poor, reconciliation and peace). Instead of walls, we build bridges, instead of fear we are living trust.

+ **7 Yes-statements:** We have chosen 7 Yes-statements as our tangible contribution to the shaping of society in Europe (life, marriage, and family, creation, economy, the poor, peace, responsibility for society). Especially in the areas of **family** and **business**, projects and initiatives have emerged in which we support each other, but without creating a new superstructure.

+ **Ways of Reconciliation:** Some of us have walked on paths of reconciliation between peoples and their wounds from history. We live the conviction that much more **unity is possible** when we understand it – e.g. in Europe – as diversity and not as uniformity.

The TfE is also **publicly perceived and appreciated**. We had a good press at the congress in Munich. This was also done through two awards ceremonies (2008 Ecumenical Prize in Stuttgart, 2014 St. Ulrich Prize in Dillingen).

Translated from German by Dorothea Römer and Werner Hübner