

Subversive leaven dynamics in Ottmaring

For the "Ottmaringer Days" (1-5 July 2019) religious orders and spiritual communities of different Churches meet



Icon in a chapel in Ottmaring (D): "For me, this encounter is an interesting way of dialogue among all of us, among the historical charisms, and this way can bear fruit for us and sweep away the ashes from the embers", said Cardinal João Braz de Aviz

Around 100 religious and members of various spiritual communities from 50 different orders, communities, congregations and institutes met in Ottmaring near Augsburg from 1 to 5 July 2019. Represented were religious from many European and non-European countries. The organizer was the working group "Together of the Orders" of the Focolare Movement; DOK (the German Conference of Superiors of Orders) and the Austrian Conferences of Superiors ("Ordensgemeinschaften Österreich") supported the event.

Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, also participated.

"For me, this encounter is an interesting way of dialogue among all of us, among the historical charisms, and this way can bear fruit for us and sweep away the ashes from the embers", Cardinal João Braz de Aviz began his introductory address. He placed the event in the context of current challenges and made it clear what he sees as its positive function: "Here we see that diversity does not take away anything from unity, it makes it stronger! We must build relationships of mutual love among ourselves and together witness that we are disciples of Jesus". The ageing of the religious orders, the lack of new vocations, the various forms of abuse challenged the communities. It is now necessary to put many things to the test and to go new ways together: In strengthening the collaboration between men and women, in understanding authority and also in the witness power of spirituality in the field of economics and finance.



Cardinal João Braz de Aviz (right) with DOK Chairman Sr. Dr. Katharina Kluitmann OSF and violin maker and author Martin Schleske

Sister Katharina Kluitmann, President of the German Conference of Superiors of Orders, emphasized the important function that the coexistence of the Orders has in the Church: "I am convinced that we, who live different forms of communion, have an important leaven function for the Church". But the first thing to do is to take care of people - of all people: "If the church revolves only around itself, it loses its right to exist". She spoke of successful examples of a new interaction of orders and movements and presented ecumenical experiences that enable the coexistence of different confessions as well as ways of life that develop into spiritual families.

In particular, voluntary celibacy in religious orders and communities is something different from compulsory celibacy: "I now believe that the duty to celibate darkens rather than illuminates the beauty of celibate love of God". The chairwoman of the DOK encouraged us to cross borders in view of the challenges of the present: "Let's try out, let's test the limits of what is possible, let's venture into a field that is seemingly unthinkable or even a little forbidden". Spiritually, we need God's Spirit, a healthy gift of discernment, trust in God, humility that is ready to fail, and the "unrestrained desire to be leaven for God's will".

As an example Sister Catherine mentioned the question of men and women: "Our communities give us a certain freedom and the chance that the genders meet in a new and different way". To realize equal rights remains an important task, also and especially in the Church: "There is still something going on when men and women stick together, in such a way that not only women are consecrated, but that the whole power structure changes, which in many places contradicts the Gospel". What is important in all - also political - commitment is networking: movable, flexible in all its diversity. Sister Katharina called for more courage, risk-taking and tolerance for breakdowns. To do this, "communication, communication, communication" is needed.

The Tuesday afternoon was dedicated to the topic "Praying as a resonance experience". The violin maker and author Martin Schleske showed with examples from his personal spiritual and professional life how for him a connection between words and works and the inspiring power of God permeates life and work. "Faith does not have to be great, it is enough that we begin to use it," he encouraged those present. He experienced a tremendous longing for God in people, even if they often had nothing to do with the church.

A concert reading based on a text by Martin Schleske rounded off the first afternoon. Two speakers and four musicians of the ensemble "Die Saitenwanderer" from Austria brought the text "Die Verwandlung" onto the stage in an aesthetic synthesis of the arts of light, word and sound.



Sister Marjolein Bruinen, Dominican of Bethany and Secretary General of UCESM (Union of the European Conferences of Superiors of Orders) in Brussels, spoke in the evening about (networking) work at the European level.

Renata Simon and Annette Gerlach, one Catholic and the other Protestant focal point, gave a co-lecture on the theme "The Holy Spirit and the Church".

"The Holy Spirit is the life principle of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit appears 68 times and therefore it is also called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Mission and healing are spirit-worked". Precisely in ecumenical terms it will be a matter "of familiarizing oneself with the strangeness of the other, with the other testimonies. It is precisely in the interplay of the various orders and movements that it will be possible to bring love and more love into circulation in this world. Especially at a time when the churches have massively lost credibility and people are searching for orientation, for a meaning in life, the historical and the new charisms could be water donors of life. "The charisms of the Church are a kind of 'fresh cell cure' for the Church, which gives her new freshness and youth".

Metropolitan Serafim Joantă of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Germany, Central and Northern Europe then opened the ecumenical dimension to Orthodox spirituality. In his remarks it became clear that Orthodoxy is much more heart-shaped than head-shaped: "Theological concepts about God are important, but we must not imprison him in such models of thought. The whole mystical theology is full of fire and spirit - in the Orthodox Church every prayer begins in the liturgy and also the personal prayers of the faithful with the calling down of the Holy Spirit". The connection of head and heart is essential and prayer and fasting are important elements: "Orthodox spirituality concentrates on the heart, the mind is an energy of the heart, it must descend through prayer into the heart. Fasting is an ancient practice that supports prayer. The unity of body, soul and spirit presupposes the participation of the body in all acts of the spirit. The Fathers of the Church say that no one can pray with a full stomach".

Another important face of ecumenical expansion was Georges Lemopoulos, former deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. He gave an insight into the work of the international body, to which more than 350 different ecclesial and confessional communities belong, and then, using some illustrations of Pentecostal icons as examples, showed the characteristics of ecumenical work: being rooted in the Church, the presence of Christ in the centre, the common calling down of the Holy Spirit and the joy of diversity, openness to the gifts of all and to the whole world.

In the afternoon, the entire group moved to Augsburg and helped to shape the "Day of the Consecrated Life" during the Ulrichswoche. About 60 religious from Augsburg and the surrounding area joined the group, and Cardinal João Braz de Aviz encouraged everyone to also engage in the experience of communion among the charisms. "The experiences we have in this communion confirm what the signs of the times suggest: We can only tackle the great challenges of our time together". Then he showed how religious and the local Church could work together fruitfully. "Together they can bear witness to the fact that in the Church there are two dimensions which are on the same level, equally important: the hierarchical and the charismatic level". He called for a constructive dialogue and a constant search for ways to reconcile the needs of the local Church with the possibilities and needs of charismatically inspired religious communities. Orders could become schools of spirituality at the local level and bring new impulses to society if they joined forces with other communities or initiatives for individual projects.

The day ended with a solemn Vespers in the Ulrichskirche.

On Thursday 4 July, two religious then described four pictures of the Church in a co-lecture: Redemptorist Father Hans Schalk described the picture of the wandering people of God, of the body of Christ with many members, the picture of bride and groom. "Church is where people come together in the spirit of Christ. It is always about Jesus and...", he summarized at the end.

Father Sascha Fr. Geissler then concentrated on the understanding of the Church as Mother and described her essential characteristics: Church gives life that she has received, she promotes communion, she serves life in diaconia and charity and she admonishes for life in the sense of prophecy. "The Church is not intended for eternity, it has an expiry date. It paves the way for the Kingdom of God, which begins here but is not yet complete," he concluded.

In his last contribution to the "Ottmaringer Days", Cardinal Braz de Aviz outlined four points which he recommends from the impulses of Pope Francis for the life of religious and consecrated persons from spiritual communities: It was a question of opening processes and not of asserting spaces. He also recommended that reality be given more weight than ideas and conceptions. It is advisable to start from what is, from the forces that are now available. Thirdly, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the whole goes beyond the individual parts and, finally, it is important to preserve diversity in unity.