

**The Interconfessional Conference of Religious (CIR) convened in Sweden (Alberga)
on 1st to 5th September 2023 at the Syriac-Orthodox monastery known as Korset Kloster**

For more information, you can visit CIR website at <https://ciirblog.wordpress.com/>.

In our UCESM General Assemblies and various meetings, synodal and ecumenical encounters frequently take centre stage. It is a testament to our desire and commitment to fostering unity and understanding among diversity in our world. One inspiring example of these dialogues in action is the CIR conference. It's heartening to witness the genuine exchange of ideas, beliefs and religious practices as it paves the way for a more inclusive and harmonious future. These encounters remind us that by coming together, we can transcend differences and work towards a world of greater mutual respect and cooperation.

CIR's primary goal is to foster Christian unity in religious life, promote meaningful encounters and friendships among attendees from diverse denominational backgrounds, facilitate mutual spiritual growth in following Jesus Christ, and celebrate individual Church traditions. This gathering brought together 49 participants from 12 countries, including England, Germany, France, Spain, Egypt, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Latvia and Scandinavia, representing 7 different Protestant traditions: Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Roman Catholics, Syriac-Orthodox, Orthodox and Coptic.

These conferences occur biennially and are hosted in various countries and religious communities to provide participants with a first-hand experience of different traditions. Beyond lectures and group discussions, a significant emphasis is placed on shared prayers and liturgy within different religious traditions.

The theme of this conference centred on the question: "How can our treasure become our gift?". Anglican Benedictine monk Charly Annis CR delivered a thought-provoking reflection on the topic "Light on the Hill: Community Witness in Society." In a world marked by chaos and division, the concept of community takes on profound significance. Communities are seen as beacons of hope, shining examples of harmonious and purposeful living. This concept draws inspiration from a biblical passage in the book of Matthew, where Jesus encourages his followers to be like a city on a hill, a beacon of light that cannot be hidden. Communities, whether religious or secular, are called to be visible sources of hope, love and unity.

A core aspect of this witness involves the community's relationship with society and its surrounding community. This relationship is built on mutual respect, understanding and shared values. Communities offer an alternative to prevailing individualism and divisiveness by exemplifying the importance of compassion, empathy, and cooperation in an interconnected world.

In the context of religious communities, the connection to the broader monastic tradition is particularly vital, especially in Nordic countries like Sweden, Norway and Latvia, as well as in newly established communities. The pursuit of community life sometimes leads to the misconception that growth in numbers equals success. However, communities have learned that it's not about quantity but rather quality.

As one observer wisely notes: "Sometimes we need to lose perceptions of the community in order to discover what we are as a community." This implies that a deeper understanding of the purpose and essence of community life emerges when preconceived notions and expectations are set aside. The true strength of a community lies in the authenticity of its relationships and the depth of its shared values.

Every religious community, regardless of denomination, possesses valuable treasures, not material but spiritual and communal. Just as Jesus encouraged his disciples to seek treasures in the field, communities can uncover valuable insights and practices that enrich their collective journey.

During the conference, Brother Charbel Rizk from the Syriac-Orthodox Church delivered the keynote address, challenging attendees to contemplate the theme of "Sharing a Wounded Heart: The Purpose of Monastic Life."

Monasteries, secluded from the noise of the external world, are sanctuaries where monks and nuns lead lives centred on contemplation and prayer. To an outsider, this existence may appear solitary and devoid of purpose. However, Brother Charbel Rizk reminded everyone that monastic life is dedicated to a profound purpose: the healing of wounded hearts, both their own and those of a suffering humanity.

Brother Charbel began by posing a fundamental question: "What is the purpose of this life, this monastic life that we are living?" This question lies at the heart of their journey. Monastic life is not an escape from the world but a unique path towards understanding and healing the human condition.

In a world often characterized by conflicts and disputes, Brother Charbel emphasized that humanity is not inherently evil but rather consists of individuals who are suffering. Drawing inspiration from the Bible, he asked "where do these conflicts and disputes among you come from?" His answer suggested that these conflicts stem from inner desires and cravings that often lead to internal wars, resulting in disputes and conflicts. Monastic life seeks to address these internal wounds.

Monasticism has, from its inception, aimed to heal these wounds. This noble cause is incredibly challenging, if not impossible, without the guidance of Christ's salvific teachings. Brother Charbel suggested that the heart, unable to love, can find healing through Christ's commandment to love. The greatest struggle lies in loving when one does not wish to love, and in putting others before oneself when it contradicts our natural inclinations. Keeping Christ's commandments becomes the ultimate battle, and success in this struggle not only heals one's own wounds but also extends healing to humanity at large.

Monastic life is founded on empathy and shared suffering. Brother Charbel eloquently explained: "The people who come to us with wounded hearts remind us of the purpose of our monastic life. We listen with our hearts, carrying their difficulties hidden within our own wounded hearts. Their wounds and ours meld into one heart – the heart of wounded humanity. In healing our own wounds, we mystically heal theirs too."

He astutely pointed out that hearts clouded by personal passions often tend toward judgment when confronted with the troubles of others, especially when those troubles appear to be self-inflicted. However, wounds are not healed through judgment but through compassionate care. Just as wise physicians prescribe treatments based on experience, monks and nuns, following Christ's example, carefully listen to the pain of humanity, empathize with it, suffer alongside it, and ultimately facilitate its healing. This requires constant vigilance and unwavering honesty to prevent falling into judgmental attitudes.

Brother Charbel also underscored the critical role of monastic life in the broader ecumenical context. He suggested that it plays a crucial part in healing the divisions within the Church. As monastics gather together, they uncover shared wounds. The Eucharist, central to the Christian faith, is prepared and celebrated by different traditions, yet it is not always shared by all. This division exposes a wound that needs healing, and Brother Charbel called for continued prayer, unwavering dedication to monastic life, and a steadfast belief in sharing a wounded heart as a means to restore unity within the divided Church.

In conclusion, Brother Charbel Rizk's insightful exploration of monastic life has illuminated the deep and meaningful purpose that lies at its core. Monks and nuns, by following the teachings of Christ and embodying empathy, serve as spiritual healers in the world, actively working to mend the wounds that afflict humanity. Their role in restoring unity within the Church is a testament to the transformative power of faith and compassion.

Moreover, the metaphor of being a guiding light atop a hill emphasizes the influential role that communities, like monasteries, can play in shaping our society and the global community. Whether they adhere to tradition, adapt to changing circumstances, or embrace their unique attributes, communities serve as beacons of unity, empathy, and optimism in a world often marked by division and uncertainty.

As we reflect on Brother Charbel's message and the example set by these communities, we are reminded of Jesus's timeless question, "What is your purpose for us today?" It is a question that challenges us all to consider how we can contribute to the greater good and shine brightly as symbols of illumination and affection in a world that greatly needs it. In these challenging times, the testimony of these communities is more significant than ever, inspiring us to strive for a better, more united world.

The next CIR conference is UK, 2025.