



THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY

Sibiu, Romania

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10:15 to 13:00 hrs, The Tent

Opening Plenary

OPENING OF THE ASSEMBLY

His Eminence Cardinal Péter Erdő, President of CCEE

I am very pleased to be opening this Third European Ecumenical Assembly, along with the President of the Conference of European Churches, Pastor Jean-Arnold de Clermont. I greet every one of you on behalf of the Council of bishops' Conferences of Europe. Thank you very much for accepting our invitation to attend.

Our journey as Christians of Europe has begun again. This new Assembly has been conceived as a process, a European pilgrimage. Our path follows in the footsteps of our two previous Assemblies. When we met in Basel in 1989, Europe was still divided by a tragic wall. Romania, the country hosting us today, and many other of our countries in Central and Eastern Europe, still bear the marks of those times. But, though there have been political and economic changes, we have obviously not come to an earthly paradise. In any case, this kind of utopia is foreign to our Christian faith, which awaits the encounter of the whole of humanity with the Lord at the end of time. This does not mean that we do not have the concrete task of making the world around us a more just and fraternal place. The justice issue, in particular, has not been resolved. We met in Graz in 1997 in a new Europe, which was on the way to freedom and unification. But new challenges soon appeared on the horizon: the globalisation process on our continent goes hand in hand with the mobilisation of peoples and the not always harmonious encounter between religions and cultures. The bipolar system of world powers seems to have given in to the prevalence of a single power, which requires of western man a particular responsibility. The most recent phenomena include the appearance of the great countries of Asia on the world geopolitical stage, justice or injustice at an international level, despair, terrorism, the environmental crisis, the spread of secularisation, the unheard-of development of science and technology – particularly biotechnology – which questions what human beings themselves are and requires

serious ethical consideration. Human and Christian values, above all, face a great challenge. Contemporary Europe is no longer the Europe of Basel, nor that of Graz. In this Europe of ours which, on the one hand, appears to be drifting without goals or ideals, but which, on the other hand, feels an ever-increasing urge to renew its search for meaning, we have the great responsibility of 'bearing witness to the light' (*Jn* 1:9). The light that comes from the age of Enlightenment, which in its origins was not culturally very different from our Christian heritage, and which gives pride of place to scientific reason, no longer seems bright enough for our journey.

I am convinced that, during these days, we need to take the theme that we have chosen for our assembly particularly seriously: *The Light of Christ Shines Upon All. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe*. This theme is deeply biblical because, as we read in the prologue of the Gospel of St John: 'The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world' (*Jn* 1:9). This is why the Oriental liturgy rightly sings: *The light of Christ is light for all*. Our contribution to the success of the Sibiu meeting depends on our ability to read the different issues that we face with the light that comes from the Gospel. In other words we must raise our heads because, as Christians, in baptism we have received the light of Christ. But we also need to be very humble, because what we offer to the world is not something we have produced. As Christians we are servants and messengers of the Gospel. And we must open our hearts, so that the light and the love of Christ may truly embrace all men and women through us.

The Christological symbol of light traces the guiding thread of the great story of creation and salvation. The creating word of the beginning breaks the silence and announces: 'Let there be light. And there was light' (*Gen* 1:3). In the fullness of time, 'the true light' (*Jn* 1:9) comes into the world, and is made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:7,14). At the end of time, Jerusalem, the Holy City, 'has no need for the light of the sun or the moon, since God's glory is its light and the lamb is its lamp' (*Rev* 21:23)¹.

The second Vatican Council has already taught us that, as a consequence of the separation of Christians, 'it becomes more difficult for the Church to express the fullness of catholicity in every aspect of the reality of life' (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 4). The promotion of the holy cause of full unity of Christians should therefore also contribute to the renewal of European society in its identity, in true human and Christian values. Benedict XVI, speaking about the person and the work of St Gregory of Nazianzus, in his catechesis on 8th August 2007, quoted the words of this bishop saint who, in the context of conflicts regarding himself at the Council of Constantinople in 381, said: 'We have divided Christ, we who love God and Christ so much! We have lied to one another because of the truth, we have hated because of love, and we have separated from one another!' (*Oratio* 6:3; SC 405:128). In fact, although those statements concerned a specific occasion, they shed light, through a kind of analogy on one aspect of ecumenism. It is the aspect of love among Christians. Sometimes it really is fair to say that Christians who are very similar in faith and in popular religious traditions look fearfully at each other, with mistrust and bitter memories of serious past grievances. So one of the main problems is reconciliation in the hearts of Christians. This seems to be particularly relevant among Catholics belonging to different rites and the Orthodox in Central and Eastern Europe, a region where populations have already suffered so much and are today in great need of Christian inspiration for society.

Yet the unity of Christians is not only a sentimental issue, because there are also divisions between confessions on the truth of faith. Deep theological dialogue on these

¹ P. Coda, *La luce di Cristo illumina tutti*, in EEA3 Working Paper.

questions is not generally multilateral, but takes place among particular Christian communities. So naturally this meeting cannot undertake to solve these problems.

Once again here in Sibiu we want to look at Christ together to find in Him the only true perfect light. In this way we can proceed towards unity, which is and will always be a gift of the Almighty and merciful God.

There is no space for triumphalism or easy enthusiasm. The ecumenical journey entails the harshness of the cross. But the perseverance of Christ teaches us to be faithful and consistent in every good thing, including ecumenical efforts. As we read in the letter to the Romans: 'Do not let yourselves be shaped by the world where you live, but rather be transformed through renewal of your mind. You must be able to discern the will of God: what is good, what pleases, what is perfect' (*Rom* 12:2).

But the path of ecumenism is also the place where we can meet the Risen Christ face to face. He promised to be with us 'always until the end of this world' (*Mt* 28:20). In these last decades we have got to know each other, learned to respect each other and to esteem each other. We have learned to express the communion that already exists between us – albeit not yet complete – in concrete actions of co-operation. Some of the fear has disappeared.

Now is the time to deepen all this.

Our first task even here in Sibiu is that of deepening and living out Christianity. We often need to acknowledge painfully how little Christianity is known in its true essence in Europe today. There are many masks of Christianity, and they are often knowingly false. I believe that the first great obstacle to ecumenism is ignorance of Christianity and the superficiality of Christian life. It is urgent for the path of ecumenism to become the place for a spiritual and theological analysis. If we wish to be authentic missionaries of Christ, we need to be His true disciples. By learning the Holy Scriptures and the truths of our faith we can grow in our Christian identity. Forgetting our own history and reality, the doctrine and faith of our own community is certainly not the right way to unity. The road to unity is via truth and charity. St Gregory of Nazianzus, quoted above, in his parting letter to the Church of Constantinople, gives one last suggestion: 'My sons, I beg of you, keep what has been bestowed upon you' i.e. faith (*Oratio* 42:27; SC 384:112-114).

Another urgent ecumenical task is that of facing modernity and secularisation. Experiences differ between the Christian communities of the East and of the West. There is something to be learned from each other. It is our duty to show together that the Gospel is able to hold a dialogue with every culture and has the strength to enrich every culture. In the current historical context, when subjectivism seems to almost prevail in our continent's way of thinking and when, especially in the post-communist world, there is a cultural and moral void which is so deep that it threatens to criminalise society and even to destabilise public order, it is important to reassert the meaning and objective value of many things and many forms of human behaviour. We need to renew the awareness for rules that are derived from the reality of nature and the human person, in order to protect and safeguard the whole of creation. Otherwise we – the 'powerful ones' – put at risk the very possibility of human life on this planet. Natural human reason must be enlightened by faith, by the light of Christ. The world needs Christ. And it needs us too, inasmuch as we belong to Jesus Christ.

In the end, the Sibiu Assembly aims to deepen and expand European ecumenical relations. As delegates, we come from every Country in Europe and are called to be 'multipliers', and to be the 'living message' of Sibiu, or better messengers of the Christian faith, 'sparks of the light of Christ'.

I would like to express my thanks to the Churches and the city of Sibiu that are hosting us. We have arrived here after the meetings of Rome in January 2006 and

Wittenberg in February 2007. Moreover, we have come here after many national and local encounters. The ecumenical experiences that the Holy Spirit has given Europe in these years are a great enrichment to our journey. They encourage us to know that in every Country of Europe a chain of prayer accompanies our meeting. We are particularly happy to be able to meet in this historic land, in this ancient city. This region, Transylvania, and the whole of Romania, is enriched by the living heritage of Orthodox Christians, Latin and Byzantine rite Catholics, but also of Protestants. The entry of Romania and Bulgaria in the European Union at the beginning of this year seems to us to be a sign of the times.

Even if the Union as such, from this point of view, is only a framework that makes reconciliation and fraternity possible for many peoples and many ethnic groups, this enlargement is a challenge for us Christians. The challenge is to fill this picture with contents coming from the wealth of our faith. In homage to the spirit of this place I cannot fail to mention the memory of the Christian martyrs and confessors of this land, among whom are many great bishops, and I must pay tribute to the memory of the Patriarch Teoctist, who passed away not long ago. Thanks to his personal meetings with John Paul II, he was able to take important steps along the path of Christian unity.

We are also deeply grateful to those many people, communities and institutions that have been the tool of God's Providence in making our meeting possible. May the Holy Spirit assist us during these days!