

## The Charta Oecumenica: towards Soul for Europe

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For many years now we have been speaking of Europe, usually meaning the geographical Europe, the political or economic Europe, or the Europe of the euro. 'But now in our hearts, and in the hearts of many, there is an insistent thought, almost a dream: that is to see a resurgence of a Europe of the Spirit, in order to offer an essential contribution towards the growth of our continent, confident that by developing its spiritual aspect the countries which form Europe will grow closer together.' (C. Lubich) This provides a context in which to understand the significance of the *Charta Oecumenica* (CO).

The CO is a text, a process and a dream brought on by the Holy Spirit and by what he is saying to the Churches in our times. However, the CO can be none of these, and will be none of these, unless it is received. That, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit who brings to mind all that our Saviour has said, makes it alive in our lives, and inspires us to translate it into the life of our communities.

My comments will focus on:

- A. The history of the CO;
- B. Its basic structure;
- C. The keys with which to read the CO.

### **A: History**

More and more people are convinced that an initiative of the Church will be fruitful in the measure in which prayer and suffering, communion and life are the ingredients of the initiative. The CO is the fruit of a joint work, of meetings, of dialogues, of fatigue and of hope. The sign of God's blessing on the CO may perhaps be discerned most easily from the fact that it has had, and is still having, quite an impact on Churches, communities, dioceses and ecumenical life in general. Indicative of that is the comment made in Strasbourg by an Orthodox Metropolitan from Rumania on the day in which the CO was officially signed, the 22 April 2001, 'The cloudy skies of these days have pulled back to reveal a blue sky overhead: it is a sign that God is blessing what we have done.'

The CO emerged after the Second European Ecumenical Assembly where it was decided to write a brief document on the principles and practice of ecumenism in Europe, a kind of 'Constitution for Ecumenism' if you like. That second EEA took place in Graz in 1997. KEK and CCEE put the responsibility for drafting the text into the hands of a joint committee. Subsequent meetings of that committee carried this text forward, trying to suggest clear guidelines for the collaboration of the Churches in Europe. In May 1999 a fresh draft was produced and sent to the members of KEK and CCEE in order to elicit the widest possible response from the communities. A third draft was ready by January 2001. This draft was then voted on at Strasbourg on 22 April, 2001. Very significantly, a large number of young people were present for the occasion.

## **B: Basic Structure**

The document is a short one probably because the time invested in its production was long! It has three parts:

The first part formulates the theological basis of the ecumenical imperative: *We believe in 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church'.*

The second part names the steps to be taken to promote visible unity and practical co-operation among Christians and their Churches: *On the way towards the visible fellowship of the Churches in Europe.*

The third part, which is the largest, names the fundamental gifts the Churches are called to contribute to Europe: *Our common Responsibility in Europe.*

A quotation from the Scriptures follows the title of each section and provides the basic vision and inspiration of each part. The point is that the CO wants to hear the Word of God with reverence and to obey it scrupulously. This fact is also a key to its interpretation. As a shared patrimony of Christians, whether Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant or Catholic, the Word of God unites Christians among themselves since it is a treasure held in common providing clear light for our steps on the ecumenical journey.

## **C. Interpretative Keys for understanding the CO**

1. The CO is the first document of its kind. However, it does not have doctrinal or juridical authority. It does not oblige any of the Churches or ecclesial communities. However, it enjoys a very strong standing on the pastoral level. It is offered to the Episcopal Conferences and the member ecclesial communities of KEK to be read, assimilated and acted upon locally.

2. The CO is the work of the great Ecclesial Traditions of Europe: the Catholic, the Orthodox, and Protestant. It is not the fruit of bilateral conversations between two Churches (e.g., ARCIC). It is the chance rather for each local church or community to become protagonists of the total enterprise of reconciliation between Christians.

3. The *tone of the whole text* is set in the second paragraph of the preamble which quotes Christ's prayer, 'May all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also *be in us*, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' Let's stop here for a moment. The text is clear: the credibility of Christianity depends on the unity of Christians. As John Henry Newman saw in the middle of the nineteenth century, 'the division of Christians is the corruption of hearts.' The EM is therefore central to the new evangelization that Patriarchs, Popes and Church leaders are calling for in the Europe of today.

4. A second point stands out: the unity of Christians is a sharing in the very unity of the divine Persons! 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you.' Here we encounter the heart of our Saviour's Gospel. It's worth looking at it however briefly.

When a man emigrates from his own country and immigrates into another, he has to do two things. First, he must adapt. Without adaptation it will not be

possible for him to live well in his new surroundings. However, the immigrant brings with him the life of his homeland. Now, at the heart of our faith there's the fact of a Divine Immigration: one of the Three Divine Persons 'emigrates' from heaven and 'immigrates' to earth. In doing so he 'adapts' to our human condition completely, becoming like us in all things except sin. But, secondly, he brought with him the life of his Homeland, the life of infinite mutual love among the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This gift he brought down to earth, he lived it himself, and when he was about to die he gave it to his followers at the Last Supper...

5. However, we are divided. The text of CO is unequivocal, 'Fundamental differences in faith are still barriers to visible unity. There are different views of the Church and its oneness, of the sacraments and ministries.' (I,1) Yes, sadly, there are these mountains between us. Of course, faith renewed by the Holy Spirit can move mountains.

6. The text names the malady of our disunity, yes indeed, but it points to the antidote in the very same breath, 'Jesus Christ revealed to us on the Cross his love and the mystery of reconciliation.' (I,1) Jesus crucified is the secret, the source and the model of reconciliation. In the moment of his suffering he enters all suffering and lacerations in human history to the point of crying out in abandonment, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This is the unexpected and scandalous fountainhead of reconciliation.

7. From Jesus crucified and now glorified we can learn the steps to take in order to become instruments of reconciliation and builders of unity. 'Jesus Christ, the Lord of the one Church,' the text concludes, 'is our greatest hope of reconciliation and peace.' (12) We can in fact imitate his ways of building unity which are contained and summed up in the culminating moment of the Lord's abandonment on the wood of the Cross.

Here are some of the steps:

a. **The first step** of reconciliation is to have the courage *to love everyone*. On that Cross Jesus died for all, not only those who followed him like Mary, and John and the Holy Women, but for all.

b. **The second step** is to be *the first to love*. Again Jesus Crucified shows this primacy: he died for us while we were still sinners, that is, people who did not love him. He loved us first (I Jn 4:19)

c. **The third step** in bringing about the unity that Jesus wants is to love with deeds. Jesus loved us with the great Deed of the Cross. 'Your love must not be mere words, but alive and practical', says St John. The love that Jesus brought is not sentimental or idealistic, made up of words only. It needs to be expressed with deeds and it requires facts. And this is possible if we make ourselves one with people: sick with those who are sick, joyful with those who are joyful, feeling in ourselves what they feel and then acting to carry their burdens (Gal )

The love that Jesus brought from his homeland in heaven, the love that he lived to the end on the wood of the Cross, is indispensable if we are to build a

Europe that will become a family of nations. And it is to this love that our Churches are called. And not only the Churches, but the ecclesial movements, the cities and the regions. Our times require that the disciples of Jesus acquire a 'social' awareness of Christianity. Thus it is more than ever necessary that we love the other Churches as we love our own, that we love other countries and the people from them as we love our own country and its people... that we love the UK as we love Spain, Northern Ireland as we love the Republic.

### **Not remaining on the level of Vision**

The CO is a text, and it is a vision; it is also a process, or rather it envisages a process of action. That's why the second and third sections stress the life of ecumenism as 'the way towards the visible fellowship of the churches in Europe'. In the third section, CO outlines 'our common responsibility in Europe.' This section proposes practical ways we can work together for the reconciliation of peoples and cultures in Europe. It names the measures by which to 'strengthen community with Judaism.' It suggests ways of cultivating relations with Muslims and with other religions. This is dialogue to the tune of 360 degrees!

### **Reception:**

Two things can happen to a document, even to one as significant, and as short as the CO: it can either be left on the proverbial shelf to gather dust or else it can be received by believers and their Churches and acted upon. The CO is happily in the second category. Within seventeen months of its publication, a *Consultation* took place near Augsburg. Among other things, that Consultation heard reports from appointed delegates of the Churches from all the countries of Europe on what was happening to the CO. It was clear that there are different speeds in the process of reception. However, it was also clear that there was a growing realization of the significance of CO 'as a tool which is honed for the needs of [each Church's] particular circumstances.' In fact, the CO could be read as 'the Churches in Europe issuing their call... to act, pray and continue to dialogue together so as to participate in the building of a just Europe...' (*Letter from Ottmaring*, 10<sup>th</sup> Sept 2002)

In conclusion, one may say that we need a '*Europe of the Spirit*' to offer a contribution to the development of the Continent. We Christians carry that responsibility. Of the very first Christians in the Roman Empire it was written, 'They are to the Roman Empire what the soul is to the body.' (*Letter to Diognetus*) It is the task of the Churches at the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity to be this soul for Europe. The CO attempts to blueprint that soul. It envisages a Europe more united, more welcoming, more open to God and to his Gospel, in short a Europe with soul. The CO mentions concrete ways of building a more human and Christian Europe.

It is more than significant that founders of the EU, who set about the rebuilding of Europe after the catastrophe of World War II, were people of great initiative, indeed, but were also people of spiritual stature: Adenauer in

Germany, De Gaspari in Italy and Schumann in France. CO invites us all into the divine adventure of contributing to the building of a 'Europe of the Spirit.'