



europäische allianz katholischer frauenverbände  
european alliance of catholic women's organisations  
alliance européenne d'organisations féminines catholiques

## **Andante Study Days**

### **Different – Together – Strong**

### **Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue from a Woman's Perspective.**

### **To understand each other, we must know each other.**

Exerzitenhaus St. Paulus, Leitershofen, Augsburg, October 25<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> 2023



### **Introduction**

On a rainy evening in October 2023, more than forty Catholic women gathered at the Exerzitenhaus St Paulus just outside Augsburg for the Andante Study Days on the theme of interfaith and interconvictional dialogue. We had travelled from all over Europe to meet and share our experiences of encounters with people of other faiths; and to learn more about the challenges of living well in a continent that is now home to people of many religions, and in a world riven by religious conflicts.

Augsburg is a city where peace between those of different religious convictions has a long history. The Peace of Augsburg, agreed in 1555, was the first step towards a Europe where religious differences were tolerated. Only one step, but it established a principle that had far-reaching consequences for the whole continent and its peoples.

Since the Second Vatican Council and the Declaration *Nostra Aetate On the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions*, issued on 28 October 1965, building good relationships with people of other religions and worldviews has been central to Catholic social teaching and practice. Our Study Days offered a deeper exploration of the diversity of religious life in Europe, and of the ways in which we can learn about and support each other as women finding our voices in a multicultural and multireligious environment.

We were conscious that we were gathering at a time when war is raging on the borders of Europe. As Ukraine resists a Russian invasion, the nations bordering Ukraine fear being dragged into the conflict; they are also caring for refugees from Ukraine and supplying humanitarian aid to victims of bombs and drone attacks. In the Holy Land an attack by Hamas on Israel had exploded into a war in Gaza.

It was a providential time for us to study the things that make for peace.

## Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> October

On behalf of CoCoA, Sabine Slawik welcomed us to Augsburg and to Andante. She reminded us of the Peace of Augsburg, still celebrated with a festival on 8<sup>th</sup> August each year. We offered Sabine birthday greetings, singing 'Happy Birthday' in our many languages.

Sabine introduced Joan Elkerbout, an Interfaith Minister who would be our spiritual guide through the Study Days.

Together, we offered the Andante prayer. We remembered the Synod and Sr Patricia Murray and other friends of Andante who had taken part in the synodal conversation. We prayed for peace in Ukraine and the Holy Land, and for women and children caught up in war and conflict.

The Andante member organisations present at the gathering introduced themselves and told us a little about the work that they do. The organisations are very varied in terms of size, membership, their resources, and their capacity for action. The Swiss and German organisations emphasise rights and equality for all, and campaign on women's issues in the Church and also in public life and in the workplace. The Netherlands have an open network that is focused on 'listening on the way' and engages with other women's organisations, and seeks acceptance for marginalised women. The UK is working on a strategy for the future looking outwards, not inwards, and being advocates for women in Church and society. The French organisation has a helpline for women caught up in domestic violence, staffed by volunteers. The organisations in Albania, Latvia and Poland are still small and finding their way, and value the international support they find in Andante.

Vroni Peterhans welcomed three women from Ukraine, now living in London, to Andante, and thanked the Renovabis Foundation for providing bursaries to enable their attendance at the Study Days.

The session concluded with a reminder that the World Day of Prayer for 2024 is being prepared by the women of Palestine.



## Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October: First Session

The day began with a prayer led by Joan. Joan spoke about her own journey into interfaith spirituality, which draws on the wisdom of all religions and wisdom traditions. Joan reminded us of the long history of human occupation of the lands we live in, and invited us to honour the memory of the ancestors who settled in Europe many thousands of years ago, recognising the transience of our lives and the debt we owe to those who went before us. We joined in singing *One by India Arie*.

**Dr. Christian Hartl**, the Director of the Exerzitienhaus St. Paulus, dropped in to welcome Andante and introduce us to the Centre. He invited us to experience it as a sanctuary, and a refuge, and reminded us that peace is Jesus' gift.

## **Keynote: Professor Dr. Dorothea Sattler: Theological and Anthropological Foundations**

Our keynote speaker, Professor Dr. Sattler, gave a wide-ranging talk offering much food for thought. Reflecting on her own life journey, she noted that we do not choose the place where we are born, our family, or the times we live in. We are all sinners, lost at times, and we are all in need of one another. Our faith offers us hope.

In our time there are many dialogues taking place, women are taking on responsibility for leadership in the Church around the world. New charisms, new tasks and new forms of service are emerging, as we move towards a new kind of Church. Dr. Sattler noted the richness of ecumenical encounter, opening up new worlds of music, art, and poetry. She noted that we can learn from the witness of Protestant women in ministry and leadership. She reminded us that young people today distrust institutions. They trust experience rather than authority in their quest for authenticity.

She reflected on the persistence of the polarising, gendered anthropology that has been taken for granted, the stereotypical idea that 'men think, women feel'. This is rooted in traditional readings of the book of Genesis, which are now being questioned. In the Christian tradition, as in other traditions, women have been confined to the private sphere and excluded from the public life. It is time to reconsider women in scripture! In the gospel of Matthew, the women included in the genealogy of Jesus give a theological message of openness to the wider world beyond Israel.

Be thankful for new theological thinking! The synodal way being pioneered in Germany is attracting worldwide attention. It is a response to the betrayal of the gospel by abusive clergy, and the shock and shame felt by Catholics as the abuse came to light. The need for the Church to be open to the charisms of women became clear.

It is important to ask who may interpret the scriptures? Intercultural exchange is valuable, within as well as between religions. In the past male voices have predominated, but it is time to hear women's voices, and the fruit of women's experience, in biblical studies as well as in sacramental and liturgical theology.

The charisma of listening, of protecting life, caring for what is vulnerable and endangered, are all talents women bring to the Church. And in the tradition Jesus has been called our Mother:

*Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you: You are gentle with us as a mother with her children; You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds: in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.* [Prayer of St Anselm c1100].

## **Patricia Stoa: Engagement at the grassroots [1]**

Patricia spoke of the importance of interfaith and interreligious dialogue at the grassroots, on the street, where the dialogue is part of everyday life. Meetings between community leaders, and structured dialogue are valuable, but when we meet each other as friends, colleagues, neighbours and passengers in the tram we begin to build a real interfaith community.

She offered example. Her own community in Nottingham came together after the Hamas raid on Israel to draft a shared interfaith declaration committing themselves to working together for peace in the city; and in the 1990s the women of Northern Ireland played a key role in preparing the ground for peace through their many small, local, peacemaking projects.

In 1998, just before the Good Friday Agreement brought peace to Northern Ireland, the Catholic theologian Hans Küng called for peace between the world's religions. He said there will be no peace between the civilisations until there is peace between the religions; and no peace between the religions until there is dialogue between the religions. Patricia argued that this dialogue must take place also at the grassroots, where the religions are entangled with everyday life. She concluded with Hans Küng's "4 commitments", and suggested that the discussion groups might reflect on these:

- To a culture of non-violence and respect for life
- To a culture of solidarity and economic justice
- To a culture of tolerance and honesty
- To a culture of equal rights and partnership

### **Discussion groups**

The discussion groups brought participants together by language, with French, German and English-speaking groups meeting to discuss topics of concern arising from the talks. Feedback from the discussion groups included the observation that these are commitments to a process, a different way of doing things. This different way of doing things requires open and honest dialogue. Sharing our stories is an important way of making connections. Weaving was suggested as an image for story making: the warp is the tradition we receive; the weft is the thread that we add. We were asked, what responsibility does each of us have for handing on the story?

### **Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October: Second Session**

#### **Keynote: Ayşe Coşkun: Muslim women in Interreligious Dialogue in Germany**

The focus of Ayşe's talk was on Germany and was practical rather than theological. She spoke about the experience of Muslims, especially Muslim women, and about how Muslims are perceived by their German neighbours. She addressed issues of expectations, personal and cultural bias, and the importance of not making assumptions. Ayşe's three key themes were: perceptions of Islam; 'the headscarf' and its meanings; and good practice in dialogue.

Perceptions are shaped by the environment, and the images of Islam most frequently encountered, in cartoons, the media and the press are the terrorist, linking Islam to violence; the veiled woman, silent, hidden and without rights; and faceless men prostrate in prayer, a crowd without names. These images suggest the "mountain of problems" faced by Muslims in interfaith encounter. Islam is seen as a hostile ideology, a threat to cultural and social values, rather than a way of life and faith, a religion.

About 6% of the German population is Muslim. As in the rest of Europe, many people overestimate the size of the Muslim community. Ayşe explained that about one third of Muslim women in Germany wear the typical headscarf, while only a tiny number wear the full face veil. The headscarf may make Muslim women the target of discrimination, mockery and even violence. The headscarf is most often worn by women who are engaged Muslims, for religious rather than cultural reasons. The headscarf identifies them as Muslim. Muslim women are now becoming more visible, speaking out, claiming agency, and participating in civic life.

The challenge of developing good practice in dialogue is considerable. The negative images, metaphors, and cultural assumptions made about Islam can be barriers to communication. Ayşe argued that we must become aware of personal bias and prejudice, as well as subconscious bias, inbuilt cultural bias, and unspoken assumptions. We must ask ourselves what is *said* in interfaith dialogue, and what is *heard*, and not be afraid to ask questions. We must become good listeners. We come to dialogue from different positions, with different expectations. Whether we are paid to be involved, are volunteers with many other claims on our time, are theologically educated or just want to be better neighbours, we must try to be skilful listeners.

Ayşe introduced us to modern Islamic feminism: young women are rereading classic texts, and reinterpreting texts, through feminist lenses. They are challenging traditional patriarchal attitudes, and creating new networks of learning and action in cities such as Hamburg, Berlin, Halle.

#### **Discussion:**

Artificial Intelligence [AI] is used more and more in public services, banking and finance, education and healthcare, and human resources, to guide decision making. It is important to ensure that the algorithms used in AI systems do not reflect the assumptions and prejudices of the mainstream culture, but are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

It is important that we learn to see and understand our own prejudices. What are the aspects of myself that I do not recognise, but that everyone else does?

Some religious women's groups focus on women's issues, some on interreligious issues, some on issues internal to their faith community. Different organisations have different priorities. We need to communicate better, share what we know, and keep open minds.

#### **Workshops in language groups**

The workshops played an important role in the Study Days, enabling participants to gather in small groups and go deeper into issues of concern.

### **Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October: Third Session**

#### **In Conversation with Tanya Smolianitski, Chair of Rabbi Henry Brandt e.V., Augsburg, about Jewish life in Augsburg from a woman's perspective: yesterday, today, and tomorrow**

Tanya led us through a lively and wide-ranging account of Jewish life, beginning with her own story. She spoke of what she's learned in her long experience as a Russian émigré, a Jew in Germany, a historian and a teacher.

Tanya came to Germany from the USSR, and then travelled to South Africa. There she experienced the time of political change and transformation before returning to settle in Germany. She noted that Jewish congregations in Germany are small, and very diverse, and may include Jews from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, even Kazakhstan. Integrating such diverse congregations has been a challenge! Many of the Jews who join the synagogue have had little experience of Jewish culture and practice, and face formidable challenges as they have to master a new language as well as learning how to belong to a Jewish congregation. This is especially demanding for women, who in the Jewish tradition are at the heart of domestic liturgical life. In this context, Tanya found a new career teaching Jews about their history.

Tanya told us about Rabbi Brandt, a pioneer of interfaith dialogue. Born in Munich, he grew up in Tel Aviv, and served as a rabbi in Leeds in England, and Zurich in Switzerland before returning to Germany and serving several German congregations, including the congregation in Augsburg. He recognised the need for learning, and initiated many different educational events and classes. He considered dialogue the most important task, between Christians and Jews, and between Muslims and Jews. Dialogue for Rabbi Brandt meant meeting face-to-face, encounters between persons.

In Judaism asking questions is understood as a religious duty, as it is through asking questions that we learn. Difficult questions should not be avoided, for example questions about death and dying. Women's groups and organisations such as Religions for Peace are important in this respect.

Teachers need to be aware of religious issues and be able to guide their students in discussion of these. Tanya stressed the importance of culture, of books, art, and music, and of introducing children to their own culture. Her congregation has been a leader in the development of daycare services, initially for Jewish children, with their mothers (and sometimes grandmothers). The congregation now offers education at all levels, open to Jews and non-Jews.

The message? There are many different kinds of Jews but all read and trust Torah and each week all Jews everywhere read the same Torah portion. Their shared stories extend into everyday life. Tanya noted the importance of being confident, of standing tall. Don't be afraid!!

### **Discussion**

There are Jews living all over the world, and for Jews, living in a non-Jewish environment is normal. "We cannot ignore the world". Yet Jewish life is shaped by the liturgical calendar: Shabbat to Shabbat, holy day to holy day. Rituals and ritual celebrations help Jews to feel at home wherever there are Jews, and this is understood to be God's will. Tanya told us: "The psalms are always in my handbag".

### **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October: First Session**

Our spiritual guide, Joan, led us in our opening prayer for Friday, a reflection on the Four Directions.

**Eva Weber, the Mayor of Augsburg**, sent us a video message welcoming Andante and affirming our commitment to interconvictional dialogue and encounter.

We were reminded that Pope Francis has asked that today be kept as a day of prayer and fasting for peace in the Holy Land.

### **Keynote: Gabriela Frey: Buddhist Women: With perseverance and solidarity for more equality**

Gabriela spoke of her discovery of Buddhism as a young woman following a family breakdown. She has visited India, and has met the Dalai Lama and other teachers.

Buddhism is a spiritual way that rejects gods and deities and instead offers a path to freedom from suffering that is open to anyone willing to follow it. Buddhism teaches that suffering arises when we are trapped in dualism. This is *samsara*. Following the Eight-Fold Path set out by the Buddha leads to non-duality, or *nirvana*, liberation. Buddhas and bodhisattvas cannot liberate us, but may inspire and guide us to liberation, by their example and teaching. Sangha, the Buddhist community of monks and nuns, is dependent on almsgiving.

Gabriela explained that while there is in principle no hierarchy of gender in Buddhism, Buddhist nuns are often poor and marginalised. For 2500 years women Buddhists were under the guardianship of men [as in Hindu culture where Buddhism originates]. Female independence was seen as dangerous. Of the six recognised monastic lineages only one admits women to full ordination. Gabriela has been instrumental in setting up the International Association of Buddhist Women, *Sakyadhita*, which raises funds to support a nunnery in Tibet, as well as offering opportunities for education and development for Buddhist women, and supporting work for peace and justice.

Gabriela belongs to the European Buddhist Union and is co-ordinator of the European Affairs team, with a mission to contribute to European public life: “Our mission is to facilitate international exchange and promote spiritual friendship amongst European Buddhists, to support social action and ideas motivated by Buddhist values, and to amplify the voice of Buddhism in Europe and worldwide.”

As an NGO the EBU engages with the Council of Europe and the European Union. Gabriela spoke about her engagement in the Council of Europe working group on Intercultural Cities. The common experience of Europe’s multicultural cities is of precarity, poverty and stress among many communities. This leads to the temptation to look for scapegoats, giving rise to racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia, and the marginalisation of refugees and “others”. Buddhism challenges this by offering paths to inner wisdom, insight and understanding using methods which can be taught. Change is the reality in which we live; all is transient.

In 2022 the CoE Committee for Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue was set up, with a focus on freedom of religion and living together well in a democratic society. Dialogue is the path to overcome fear, not just dialogue between leaders but inclusive dialogue. The Committee works on training and education for dialogue, and living together with dignity. Gabriela stressed the importance of working together towards a universal ethic. (See Andante Statement)

### **Discussion**

The discussion centred on the importance of the Council of Europe Platform for Dialogue and the need to keep advocating for this with MEPs.

The work of Dr. Carola Roloff at the University of Hamburg, Academy of World Religions was discussed. [She is a Buddhist nun]. She argues that human rights are not a ‘Western’ invention but are rooted in nature and in the concept of balance.

Agreed, that religious people must come together and resist war and violence.

### **Patricia Stoa: Crafting Interfaith Friendship [2]**

In her second talk, Patricia introduced us to a variety of projects and initiatives through which people of different religious beliefs and worldviews can meet and get to know each other.

She offered examples of people of different faiths cooking together, playing football together, walking together, making art, and crafting. Through these side-by-side activities, friendships are formed and people learn to trust one another, and be comfortable with difference.

Patricia then explored ways of diving deeper into spiritual friendship. She described the practice of scriptural reasoning, sharing our scriptures with one another with open minds and with a focus on listening and understanding. We may also explore different spiritual paths through art, and through silent meditation together. Dancing together is our final destiny.

## **Discussion Groups**

Some key points from the Discussion Groups:

Dialogue is recognised as vital in interfaith and interconvictional relations, but there is a need for clarity about what dialogue is intended to achieve. Dialogue must take place at every level: the Council of Europe is important, but local dialogue groups are also necessary. Organisations such as Andante are also important influencers.

There is a need to bring the spiritual element into social and cultural deliberations. The beginning and end of life are moments of spiritual intensity and this should be respected. We need to learn to 'dream together'!

Training for community interfaith work would be welcome.

## **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October: Second Session**

### **Zuzanna Radzik: A Polish Catholic in dialogue with Jews**

Zuzanna's talk had a double focus, her work as a theologian on the dialogue between Catholics and Jews, and her development as a Catholic feminist. Zuzanna described growing up in a Catholic monoculture. Young people were counselled against antisemitism, but she discovered a church bookshop, Antyk in the basement of All Saints church in Warsaw, selling antisemitic literature. The bookshop was closed as a result of her campaigning. She learned that priests and bishops could not silence her: there is no sanction available against a lay woman.

From 2001 Zuzanna researched Polish collaboration with the Holocaust, facing and exploring Poland's complex past. Polish people were victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and often all three. Zuzanna suggested that people in Poland ask the question: where was your grandmother?

Zuzanna studied in the USA, and encountered a very different kind of Jewish community there. Learning about Jewish life in Chicago, and meeting a woman Rabbi, was a stark contrast with Orthodox Judaism in Poland. Zuzanna then spent three years in Jerusalem with the Sisters of Zion and encountered more women in leadership and women pastors, and gained insight into domestic liturgy, and hospitality as liturgy, all important aspects of learning from and with Jewish culture.

Being in dialogue means facing the past, finding your place in the narrative. As time goes by there is less urgency about this but the task of remembering and mourning, of naming our pain, must go on because this is at the core of European heritage, including the heritage of the Church.

Being a Catholic feminist in Poland was challenging because there was no infrastructure to support feminist theology and practice. Zuzanna has contributed to creating this infrastructure, with books on power in the Church, and women in early Christianity.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine heightened tensions between Poles and Ukrainians. Zuzanna is Vice President of the Forum for Dialogue, which organised school trips for young people from the Polish and Ukrainian communities, creating a space for them to tell their stories and listen to each other. It was necessary to create a platform for dialogue. Zuzanna noted that constructive dialogue does not simply happen, it requires people to lead it, and training and support for the leaders.

In the Church, Catholic feminists have struggled with issues of clerical sexual abuse and the confusion and conflict to which it gives rise. Women realised that they had grown up among sexual predators,



some of whom were priest friends, and lost trust in the clergy and the Church. Confession to a priest, a man who might be an abuser, became impossible. This brought many issues into the open that women had not spoken about in the past. The feminist infrastructure is necessary to offer safe spaces for women to speak their truth and heal. In Church and society, women still lack agency.

### **Sybille Bader: Report on Andante at the Council of Europe, Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations**

The Council of Europe includes forty-six nations [Russia is now excluded] and its work focuses on values, human rights and democracy. The Conference of INGOs enjoys participatory status with the Council of Europe, alongside the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The European Convention on Human Rights and the Social Charter are key documents. The INGO Conference has setup a Commission on Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue. The Commissions work together on gender equality and women's rights but progress is slow.

Across Europe, the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are all being challenged. The task of Andante is to consult, co-ordinate and inform its members. Members must reflect on where we stand, and the difference we wish to make. Sybille noted that 22% of people in Europe live in poverty. Migration, asylum, and modern slavery are difficult and contentious issues. Europe has 'frozen conflicts', for example in Armenia, and the western Balkans, which could flare up at any time. Members of Andante are asked to spread the word about the Council of Europe. (See Andante Statement)

### **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October: Third Session**

On Friday evening we gathered for an intercultural social event with music, an online interfaith quiz, and delicious food and drink from our home regions.

### **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> October: First Session**

#### **Round Table Discussion : Joan Elkerbout, Zuzanna Radzik, Gabriela Frey, and Dorothea Sattler on Zoom, Chair: Patricia Stoat**

The panel were asked what progress has been made in interreligious and interconvictional dialogue in the 50 years since *Nostra Aetate*?

The panel noted that the Church is now two generations on from the Council. The Council coincided with the beginning of the Anthropocene, and yet the danger of climate collapse is still not taken seriously. It was noted that that of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation for All, is where the least progress has been made. Clean water and sanitation matter to women. It was suggested that water may be the next point of global conflict. Welcoming refugees and offering asylum were also identified as areas of concern where people of faith should work together for change.

The panel stressed the importance of sisterhood and solidarity; of getting interfaith dialogue out of the ghetto and making it part of the everyday life of the Church, and of each parish, and organisation. Small dialogue groups enable women to make time and space to talk to each other.

The rise of the populist right, of “false pied pipers”, represents a threat to women’s rights and dignity. There are many areas of policy where it is important for women to be heard: life issues, valuing mothers and mothering, trafficking and sexual exploitation, violence against women. We must be aware of developments in AI and digitisation, which may be an opportunity, or a threat.

The ‘othering’ of religion in contemporary discourse is a serious concern. The panel asked, how do we work with people of no religion who do not respect or acknowledge religious values?

*“We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.” [Dorothy Day].*

### **Andante Statement**

We considered the Draft Andante Statement. The Statement is attached as an Appendix to this Report.

### **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> October: Augsburg tour**

Taking the tram from Exerzitenhaus St. Paulus, we travelled to the centre of Augsburg to visit Diako, an evangelical centre for social care. We were welcomed by the Rector, Dr. Jens Colditz.

After a pause for cake at the Café Zeitlos, we visited a number of churches and other landmark sites in Augsburg before moving on to the Ahmadi Mosque for dinner. We were made very welcome and enjoyed a very lively question and answer session with the women of the Ahmadi community.



*Bait Un Naseer, Augsburg*

### **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October**

**We celebrated Mass together before departing for home.**