

Looking back at the

Second meeting of Spiritual Directors International - Europe

De Oude, Abdy. Drongen, Belgium, 23-26 February, 2001

Walking the road to Emmaus

As disciples walking each our roads to Emmaus, twenty-five of us gathered for the second meeting of 'Spiritual Directors International - Europe' in the historic setting of "De Oude Abdy ('The Old Abbey') at Drongen, just outside Gent in Belgium, from Friday the 23d of February to Monday the 26h. We came from Belgium, USA, England, Germany, Finland, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark and the Netherlands, belonging to the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and Presbyterian traditions of the Church. We were particularly pleased to welcome Ann Dwyer and Jeff Gaines of the SDI executive in the USA. Their presence linked us in a special way with all members of SDI all over the world.

The old abbey had originally been a Premonstratensian foundation dating from 1138 and has been a Jesuit house since 1838. In his welcome address Luk Coppejans introduced the theme of our gathering: "Walking the road to Emmaus". He reminded us that, gathering at this old abbey we had entered sacred grounds and were invited to join the long tradition of prayer and spiritual accompaniment of those,"who had come to the abbey for almost nine hundred years.

A listening and contemplative experience

The program was designed to allow the participants get to know one another, listen to our experiences, exchange information and resources, pray together, and to reflect on some topics relevant to the ministry of spiritual direction. Each day began with prayer and we came together to break the bread in the middle of the day or in the early evening, plenary meetings, small group meetings and plenty time for personal encounters filled our days.

Most of Saturday was spent in plenary sessions in which participants had the opportunity of sharing their stories and concerns. In the evening Ann Dwyer and Jeff Gaines gave substantial inputs on new developments in the life and vision of Spiritual Directors International. Their suggestion, that participants in this meeting should henceforth call themselves Spiritual Directors International - Europe, was acclaimed unanimously.

There were also short inputs on 'With what worldview are we working in spiritual direction?' from Christa Gaiser and 'How does religious fundamentalism affect spiritual direction?' from Paul Kelly.

From her experience in spiritual direction Christa shared three questions often encountered: Why am I sick? What is sin? and Why does that happen to me? Christa showed in each case the difficulties that can arise when a director's worldview in relation to medicine, psychology and theology is not shared by the directee and in how connections she made can affect the spiritual direction process.

The second sharing was on various images of fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism can make quick and easy sense of complicated situations. Maybe that is its attraction in an increasingly complex world. However, experience shows how in spiritual accompaniment we need to be aware of the fear of complexity and messiness and be wary of simple explanations. Often, fundamentalism is a way of avoiding the messiness of our lives - the messiness of reality. The way forward is to discover that being in touch with the mess is O.K.

On Sunday morning the time was spent in small groups of three or four, where there was the opportunity for deep personal sharing - to give and receive spiritual direction. Maybe as a result people were seen to be more at ease with each other afterwards; there was more laughter by the latter part of the day.

Outside the weather was deteriorating markedly - snow was falling and temperatures were close to freezing. Undeterred, this gallant band of spiritual directors was led by Maureen in the afternoon in a meditative walk outside in the grounds of the Abbey, where participants were invited to join in the Prayer of the Six Directions of the Native American Tradition. The weather notwithstanding, most found this a powerful and rewarding exercise.

The following session was spent in interest groups - the interests being determined by the choice of participants: sexuality and spiritual direction; dying ecclesial structures and new spiritual life; contemplative attitudes; collaboration among spiritual directors in Europe and new communication technology and spiritual direction. We shared our findings in plenary session.

Next year: SDI-Europe 2002

SDI-Europe is a very young and informal group. It was felt that, while wanting to keep the element of sharing among spiritual directors, drawing more from the giftedness of the participants, the group could deepen certain aspects of the chosen theme or have a greater emphasis on spiritual direction skills, such as dream work, active imagination and bio-spiritual focussing. It was also noted that participants were exclusively from Northern Europe. Therefore a special effort could be made to invite colleagues spiritual directors from Southern and Eastern European countries for a next meeting.

At the end we all agreed that the group should meet again at about the same time next year. Our Finnish friends kindly proposed to host "SDI-Europe 2002" in Finland. Frances Hurley, Emma Martensen, Seppo Hayrynen, Sisko Raitis, and Heikki Kotila agreed to organise it, while Johan Muijtjens, as the SDI contact person, will stand by them for any help and advise they may need.

Quality time and and mutual support

Participants remarked that the ecumenical atmosphere and attitude, the ambience of listening, openness and sharing were values that forged a group that was safe, full of wisdom, healthy and warm. The common prayer and liturgies, personal witnesses on common concerns, the meetings in groups of three or four and interest groups and a flexible programme let the process have its way. Thanking the steering committee (Maureen Farrell, Eike Uebe, Martica van der Meer, Luk Coppejans and Johan Muijtjens) for organizing this life giving experience, we departed grateful for having met the Lord on our roads to Emmaus !

Fr. Paul Kelly

Glasgow, 18 March 2001