



SDE gathering in Snagov, Romania
FROM WANDERING TO PILGRIMAGE
3 – 8 April 2019

Our chair Rafaël Maria already shared in her letter of May 2018 a profound preview of our annual Meeting in Romania. It would be a special meeting, because of the situation in the Romanian Church where around 78% of the Romanians belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church and a minority of 5% is Roman Catholic.

As one of the consequences our 'traditional' SDE ecumenical eucharistic celebrations were not possible, respecting the sensitivities of our Carmelite hosts and the local church.

What made this meeting special, too, was that we were celebrating the 20th anniversary of SD-Europe, with the three founders present: Maike Ewert, Peter Ball and Johan Muijtjens.

We were warmly welcomed by the sun when arriving at the Carmelite Manastirea Catolica in Snagov and this made up for some negative experiences with taxi drivers at the airport. It was a joy to see familiar faces and to meet new participants, even from outside of Europe: Patrick Parham and Debbie Wehking from the USA and Jeannette Stigger from Canada, who are now the first non-European associates of SD-Europe.

So all 55 participants together formed a colourful group, coming from 17 different nationalities and different denominations.



After another warm welcome, this time by our chair Rafaël Maria, we had a good meal, before proceeding to the hall, where the opening meditation and the presentation of the locals took place. Father Antonio Prestipino, superior of the Monastery, addressed us with friendly words. Unfortunately he could not join the meeting, due to his other tasks and also because of the language barrier.



After having prayed to the Holy Spirit we were called forth by countries to introduce ourselves by our name, and placing what we brought along from our direction space at home to a prepared centre piece.

Little by little this 'holy space' became filled with precious symbols of our practice of spiritual direction and remained there during the whole of the meeting.

Each day started with body work (optional) and a morning prayer, prepared by participants. On the first day the morning prayer was dedicated to the Holy Spirit, which was focussed again on the invocation of the Holy Spirit, as the breath of our life.

The Going Deeper Process brought us by a guided meditation to inner silence and openness for the present moment. Being invited to sit with closed eyes and open hands, we were told that some of us would receive a gift. When opening our eyes again, to our surprise, not only some of us, but all of us held a gift in our hands: a small tiny feather. In the hall were some spaces prepared: the space of gratitude, the space of joy, the space of longing, and we were invited to walk around and to place our received gift where we felt that was most fitting to us at this moment.

Some of us, opening our eyes, found themselves with nothing in their hands. And this was a special experience, too. Why am I the one who received nothing? Or, are my empty hands the gift I receive ...?

It took some time before the realization came, that really all of us received a feather, so we looked for it, and, indeed, the gift was found. It has been put in our hands, but maybe because of our breath of a little movement it was blown out of our hands.



In life, it is like this, too: sometimes we think we have received little and compare ourselves with others, while, when looking carefully, to our surprise we discover our own giftedness ... a small tiny feather in our hands, when we are open to receive it.



In the second part of the morning fr. Marius Talos sj took us along to the Romanian landscape of spiritual direction. He used the "Table of Silence", one of the famous sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, located in Targu Jiu. Around the Table of Silence, Brancusi arranged 12 symbolic chairs, at an equal distance one from the other. The name of chairs actually hides a sacred reality: the hourglasses, one for each Sun Sign, are measuring the flowing of time. According to the exegetes

of the Brancusian art, the Table of Silence represents the table around which gather the soldiers before confronting their enemy. At the same time, the chairs stand for the time disposed in hourglasses. Some make an analogy with The Last Supper of Leonardo da Vinci.

This table of silence stands also for the importance of the liturgical year as a therapeutical system. Thus you can say that Romanian Spirituality is a highly liturgical spirituality. The table stands for the unity of

the country, made out of many diverse traditions and groups. How to merge the political, ethnical, and religious differences without edging is not easy.

Spiritual direction is still highly considered as task of priests, not of laymen, and certainly not of women. Sr. Mary Murphy fcj, an English religious, assigned to Romania already for some years, shared her experiences in retreat work. She stressed the hunger and searching for most of all young people for spiritual direction, - their joys and difficulties.

In this way we were given a small glance on the situation of the Romanian church and the meaning of spiritual direction. Way too short to give us a picture about it, but at least we could have some impressions of the country where we were right now.

The afternoon was filled with a number of workshops and, like always, it was not easy to make a choice. 10 workshops were offered, given by participants in two rounds. The topics of the different workshops can be found on the website.



One of the highlights of the day was our evening prayer service.

We gathered for our evening prayers in the beautiful chapel of the monastery where the architects by their sensitivity and competence knew how to blend harmoniously many Romanian styles with the western monastic tradition.

In the space behind the altar, in front of the altar and at the back of the church there are huge mosaics by Fr. Marko Rupnik sj in collaboration with the team of the Aletti Centre.

On the first evening we started our liturgical pilgrimage in front of the mosaic of the “washing of the feet”, remembering Jesus inviting us to serve each other in love and care. Our three founders presided this touching liturgy, where we did not wash each others feet, but Johan, Peter or Maïke washed our hands. Literally and figuratively this was a deeply touching moment.



During the socials we could meet informally, deepen our contacts and come to know each other more, while enjoying delicious treats from different countries.

In the morning prayer on Friday we were invited to look in a mirror. For this we could use our cell phones or go to our rooms and take some time for a long loving look at ourselves, with three questions in mind: *I appreciate myself for ...*, *I forgive myself for ...*, *I commit myself to ...*

It was maybe initially a ‘strange’ thing to do, but in doing it, - even every day, it can change the way we are looking at ourselves.

The first part of Friday morning was filled with the first part of the AGM, moderated by Johan Muijtjens. (The minutes of the AGM you find on the website). We were touched by the honest and sensitive report of the chair, showing and reflecting pains and struggles of working together, and at the same

time mirroring the sincere commitment of all to form a team and standing for the values and goals of SD-Europe.

In a remark to the report Maiké Ewert stressed how important it is not just to present a story of successes but also to remember that in recent history there have been wounds, painful conflicts and tensions, which could not be completely resolved. There are also wounds, which are not yet healed. And this, too, belongs to our story and deserves to be looked at with care and compassion.

Earlier than scheduled we left at 11 am for our pilgrimage. The bus brought us right through the capital city of Bukarest, where we learned from fr. Marius, our witty guide, among other things that Bukarest traffic jam is no marmalade and that on the left side nothing is right and on the right side nothing is left ...

We saw a big city with a lot of old and historical buildings, and at the same time much of poverty in the suburbs and even more in the countryside..

Finally we reached our destination, the prison of Jilava. We were not allowed to enter right away. All our cell phones and passports were collected and we only received them back when leaving the prison again. It was somehow a strange feeling to give away your passport in a foreign country. At least I myself strongly felt my vulnerability at that moment.

We learned that the reason why we were brought to this prison was, that there is an old part, Fort 13, where political prisoners have been jailed and brutally tortured, among whom **Vladimir Ghika** (25 December 1873 – 16 May 1954), a Romanian diplomat and essayist who, after his conversion from Romanian Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism, became a priest. He was a member of the princely Ghica family, which ruled Moldavia and Wallachia from the 17th to the 19th century. He died in this prison in May 1954 after his arrest by the Communist regime. On 27 March 2013, Pope Francis declared Vladimir Ghika had been a martyr. He was beatified on 31 August 2013.

We were brought to this old part of the prison by a guide who told us the history of this dark place, still witnessing to the abysses of our human existence and what people can do to each other – and how even at such evil places some persons remained a sign of hope and light, witnessing of a power stronger than all evil and death, the power of faith and love.



In silence we walked through this Fort, praying for all who died here just because they stood up for truth and justice. It was a beautiful and sunny day, a tree was flowering just outside of the Fort, forming a strange contrast to the experienced violence and brutality. Still, maybe this is the message of the place: not death has the last word, but the power of love. We left, with somehow mixed feelings, but also grateful to have been brought to this place of Romanian history. It is a place to remember, and to know that our presence and our prayers contribute to the healing of the wounds of the past.

In the bus we received back our cell phones and passports. It was quite an endeavour, because materials all were mixed up in plastic bags. But with joined forces finally everyone received back his/her own “identity”.

Our journey brought us now to the small orthodox church St. Nicolai in Drăgănescu, south of Bukarest. The inside of the church is painted by Fr. Arseni Baca, who in a special way integrated aspects of today in his wall paintings.

We had a long explanation about the wall paintings by the orthodox priest of the parish, who made a big effort, even though we were a bit late and there was a celebration going to happen. A touching moment was our praying together at the end, and receiving the blessing of this dedicated priest. Once more it made us aware that in the depths of our heart we are all one.

After supper we had our evening prayer, this time in front of the mosaic of the Anointing. Highlight of this prayer service was the ritual of the anointing. We made groups of three and each group received some fragrant blessing oil and a prayer of anointing. In taking turns- one was the lector, reading the prayer, one was the one to be anointed, and one was the one anointing according to the prayer. So we anointed each other in a prayerful atmosphere. At the end of the service we received a gift of a small tube of blessing oil to take along home.

Thus a special day came to an end and it was good that the next day was the silent day.

On our silent day we received a number of suggestions. Among others there was the possibility to watch the documentary *Untamed Romania*, about the wild nature of Romania and also to watch a permanent running PowerPoint with pictures and topics of the past 19 annual meetings.

(You can find all the Silent Day reflections on the website.)



This blessed day was concluded by the evening prayer service around the mosaic of the *Descent into hell*. That mosaic is situated in front of the altar on the floor of the crypt which extends to the altar walls. You look into the crypt with its mosaic from above while standing on a thick layer of glass. When approaching the altar space one consciously has to walk across this mosaic as though it were a bridge allowing us to reach beyond our limits. We remembered around this mosaic the death and resurrection of Jesus, repeatedly singing "Christ be our Light, Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness, shine in your church gathered today.", while passing on the light to each other with small little candles: "I will hold the Christ light for you in the night-time of your fear; I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear." [??]



After the evening prayer service the silent day came to an end and we proceeded to supper and later on there was again the opportunity to meet again for the socials.

In the morning prayer of Sunday the focus was on being a pilgrim and what it means to be a pilgrim and not just a wanderer. In a body prayer we reached out to God for healing, in the awareness of our own brokenness and the woundedness of our world, entrusting ourselves to the transformative love of God. Then we formed one big line, holding each other by hand, and with the simple steps of a pilgrims dance, expressing our journey through life together, we walked, respectively danced out of the hall to our dining room.

In the second part of the AGM a new treasurer was elected. There were 2 candidates for the post of the treasurer:

Zsuzsanna Laczkó was nominated by Magdolna Kővári, and seconded by Judita Stankunaite.

Teemu Salminen was nominated by Una Agnew, and seconded by Sisko Laitinen.

Teemu Salminen was not present at the meeting and couldn't sign, but he had sent his agreement by mail. In his function of moderator Johan Muijtjens asked to vote if Teemu Salminen was accepted to be a candidate as absent. The majority voted in favor and nobody against.

The result of the election followed was that Teemu Salminen was declared as Treasurer of the EC for a term of next three years (see the minutes of the AGM on the website).

After a short break we came together again to share about the mission and vision of SDE. Our three founders started to share about the original intention and vision of SD-Europe and the SDE core values (see document on the website).

Then we gathered in small groups and shared what touched us in the sharing of our founders and what is our vision or desire for the future of SDE.

In a short plenum we gathered first fruits of our sharing, but the time was too short and the executive committee asked and invited us to send them our further suggestions and thoughts. The development of SDE's vision and mission will be an important point of interest for the next years.

After a short introduction to the Triads in the afternoon we were divided in groups of three. The triads are an opportunity to offer spiritual direction to one another. It is always a bit exciting who will become one's triad partners. But trusting in the Spirit it remains an important part of our annual Meeting.

For the final eucharistic liturgy we all gathered in the chapel again. We started together at the back of the chapel, having the liturgy of the Word there. Then we proceeded to the front, where on the right side Elemer was presiding the Roman Catholic rite and Aija on the left side the Lutheran rite.

The pain of division was palpable in this way but very meaningful and honest, mirroring the reality of our being divided by doctrine, but not by heart.

It has been a very wordy liturgy, and one could ask whether it was somehow artificial and whether a common prayer service like on the other days would not have been better ?

And yet – we were confronted with this part of our reality and to endure the pain, enforcing our prayer for unity and mutual acceptance and tolerance and equivalence, walking together as disciples and witnessing in all diversity Gods unity.

Even though it still may be a long way.

And, speaking with the wisdom of the pilgrim: the final destination is not so important, but the way itself is what is most meaningful. It is not so important to know a way, but to walk it. By walking the path it is created.

Grateful for all what we have received in these days, on Monday we left the place to go back to our home countries. This time without the fear of unreliable taxidrivers. Fr. Antonio saw to it that all of us reached the airport on time and without worry. We were taken care very well by all the staff of the monastery, and we expressed our gratitude to them by thanking them personally, and singing for them on our last evening.

This encounter has left traces in our hearts and surely in their hearts, too.

The Snagov Carmelite Monastery has been a pilgrimshelter for us for some days, and now we have to continue our own way again, strengthened by our sharing, praying and encounters. The way continues, and even if not yet one, we are united in His Spirit and Love.

Claudia Theinert

