

## Conference of International Interconfessional Religious

# A Seed of Hope

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*Ecumenism does not often seem to be an official part of the life and purpose of men and women religious. Hence the importance of an initiative that bears the acronym, CIIR: Conference of International Interconfessional Religious, which held the most recent of its 22 annual conferences in Nykoping (Sweden) last August 2023. Father Conrad Sciberras writes about the ecumenical spiritual experience among various charisms.*

I first heard about the Conference of International Interconfessional Religious (CIIR) in January 2015. Pope Francis had established 2015 as a year dedicated to consecrated life, and in his Apostolic Letter for that occasion wrote, among other things: "I warmly encourage such meetings as a means of increasing mutual understanding, respect and reciprocal cooperation, so that [the connection between] ecumenism [and] the consecrated life can prove helpful for the greater journey towards the unity of all the Churches."<sup>1</sup> (21 November 2014).

In the light of that, one of the first events of the Year of Consecrated Life was a January 2015 ecumenical symposium for men and women religious from various Christian traditions that concluded with Vespers on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. It took place in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome.

During the symposium, Fr. Nicolas Stebbing, president of the Anglican Religious Community of the Resurrection, presented the history of CIIR from its inception in 1976 at the initiative of Martín de Zabala, a priest from Bilbao who had a deep passion for unity. Since then, a group of delegates from this Congress have organized conferences every two years. The primary aim is not theological discussion but rather a sharing in ordinary religious life for a few days, hosted each time by a particular religious community. These conferences offer a unique opportunity for participants to come to know one another as people, to pray together for unity, to share meals and to visit a significant place together.

Since 1971, I have embraced the spirituality of the Focolare Movement and unity has become an integral part of my spiritual journey. This prompted me to participate in CIIR meetings, including the 22nd, which took place in September 2023 in Nykoping (Sweden), at a monastery then under construction by the Syriac Orthodox Church. We were sixteen European Catholic religious, seven British Anglicans, fifteen Evangelicals and five Orthodox: one from Bulgaria, two Egyptian Coptic nuns, and the two monks who were hosting us. The rich, and sometimes dramatic, history of the Syriac Orthodox Church was told to us by Fathers Charbel and Gabriel. We prayed vespers with them daily and on Sunday attended the Syriac Orthodox Eucharistic parish celebration.

The theme of the Congress was 'ecumenism as an exchange of gifts' and therefore "how to give our treasures to others". As an example of treasure to be shared, Fr. Charbel identified the willingness to listen to the many people who come to confide in them. This is a demanding mission for the monks who were still working to complete the building of the monastery. The challenges facing those who come to speak the monks are often the same ones that they, too, are experiencing and requires empathy and a non-judgmental attitude. Fr Charbel said that the suffering being endured must be transformed into prayer for the salvation and sanctification of the world and of the Church.

With centuries-old doctrinal misunderstandings about Christ's humanity being finally overcome, Fr. Charbel also spoke of this moment as a time to bear witness to the Gospel together and to celebrate the Eucharist together.

Fr. Jonathan Cotton OSB from England also shared, via recorded audio, his personal experience as a Catholic. He told the story of his vocation to the Benedictine monastic life and how, thanks to the spirituality of unity which he started by listening to, accepting and living the Word of God, he developed a more vibrant faith and a new relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, with Mary, and with the Pope and bishops. He spoke of overcoming the temptation to proselytize and of learning how to create deep personal relationships with people of different charisms and Churches, different faiths, and those with other sets of beliefs.

Fr. Charlie Annis, an Anglican monk of the Community of the Resurrection, spoke of the early experience of consecrated life which started in 1625 in Little Girding, near Cambridge. It was founded by an Anglican deacon together with about thirty others, including family members, relatives and collaborators who committed themselves to living a life of prayer and community witness. Founded a hundred years after the suppression of all English religious communities, which were quite numerous and flourishing at the time, this community lasted for only about thirty years. It was, nonetheless, a fruitful experience, because two of the greatest English poets received inspiration from it, which injected a Christian spirit into English culture. That experience became the basis for the rebirth of consecrated life in England two hundred years later.

Sr. Annette and Sr. Dorothee of the diaconal religious community of Riehen (Switzerland) presented their way of life both at the personal and community level, a life marked by the Word of God. Their mission, previously at the service of the mentally ill and elderly, is now characterized by a welcoming of anyone who presents him or herself to them. Their community is also focused on liturgical and community life, embracing various ancient and new styles of prayer that characterize the evangelical Churches from which they came.

Prayer with God and these relationships played key roles in this 22nd Congress. The moments of dialogue, mutual knowledge, and true friendship that resulted were also decisive. Each time that I participate in a CIIR meeting, I leave with the awareness that it is still a seed, but a hope-filled seed because it responds to the prayer of Jesus: "That all may be one". (*Jn 17:21*)

<sup>1</sup> [Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life \(21 November 2014\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)