

# **Communities Together on an ecumenical spiritual path, Neresheim**

**Ecumenical meeting of religious orders,  
communities, brotherhoods, religious  
communities and movements.**

**21-23 October 2005**

In May 2002 the Benedictine Abbey of Neresheim issued the first invitation to members of Roman Catholic orders and congregations, members of Protestant communities and brotherhoods, and members of new religious movements and communities – also to the Orthodox and Free Churches – to join together in an ecumenical encounter. The theme at that point was “Breaking through to the centre – the spiritual dimension of ecumenism”.

Men and women from more than 30 different communities took up the invitation to participate. They came together to exchange experiences, to listen to presentations from one another, to pray and to worship together. They experienced a shared sense of community and unity at the central point of their faith.

This experience was an encouragement for further meetings. This is not a new departure for Neresheim. Ecumenical seminars in different formats have a long tradition there. There is, for instance, back in 1968 in *Erbe und Auftrag* a report by Father Michael Seemann from Beuron of a meeting of Roman Catholic monks and Protestant Brothers in Neresheim under the leadership of Father Beda Müller. Already then there were representatives of communities that have joined again in the new meetings together (see *Erbe und Auftrag* 1968, pp. 230 ff.).

Happily the circle has grown much wider in almost 40 years. A great number of new movements and communities have joined the older brothers and sisters. Both young and old among them share in the conviction that they should build up their community path together and that they have a special responsibility for the goal of Christian unity, to work and to pray for it.

A second meeting took place in October 2003 on the theme “Word of God – source of unity”. The contribution of spiritual communities towards the approaching unity of the Church is revealed in a life grounded in God’s word: “In their life directed to Jesus Christ religious

communities go above and beyond their religious division as they recognise and cherish one another. Their focus on Christ binds them together,” as Bishop Joachim Wanke of Erfurt said then in the paper in which he laid down the basic principles.

From 21-23 October the theme “Prayer – source of unity” brought together over 70 participants from 35 different communities in a third meeting. Preparation for this was done in a planning group; planning group members were Abbot Norbert Stoffels and Father Beda Müller from the Benedictine Abbey of Neresheim, Dr Annette Gerlach from the Focolare Movement, Pastor Gottlob Hess from the Brotherhood of community life in Ottmaring, Sven Sonne of the Johannines and Dr Hildegard Kasper from the Unity of Christians.

As at the previous meetings, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome had taken on the role of patron. Cardinal Kasper and Bishop Frank O. July sent their greeting to the participants, underlining the central significance for ecumenism of prayer. Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Maria Renz took part representing the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart and in his role as having Episcopal oversight for Orders, secular institutions and religious communities; Bishop emeritus Dr Christian Zippert of Marburg took part in his role as carrying responsibility for relationships within the Protestant Church in Germany with the Protestant communities. The participation and reporting by Monsignor Antonio Sebastiani, charged with responsibility for ecumenism in the Archdiocese of Trent, ensured that views were not restricted. It was in Trent that the division of the Churches after the Reformation was sealed (Council of Trent 1545-1563). Today coming together is possible and now almost taken for granted.

The programme included short presentations: the Schmitts, an ordained married couple from the Christian Centre in Nuremberg on “Listening Prayer”, Prioress emeritus Gabriel Cosack from the Benedictine Abbey of Engelthal on “Prayer – source of Unity” (paper setting out the conference theme), Prior Brother Franziskus Joest from the Jesus Brotherhood of Gnadenthal on “Prayer in the life and work of Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1767)”, Bishop Dr Christian Zippert on “Unity through Singing”. A path of prayer with Sister Eustochium Bischopink OSB from the Venio community in Munich led the Communities Together through the autumn surroundings of the Abbey of Neresheim and left them spiritually and meaningfully fed with meditative texts by Roger Schütz. Prayer hours and worship put together by the participants (Compline, Lauds, Vespers, celebrations of the Lord’s Supper and Mass) were central in the proceedings of the conference. An especially beautiful high point was Vespers in the Abbey church, filled with the autumn sunshine, celebrated by the Benedictine Abbey, all the conference participants and the boys’ choir founded in 2004 (Director Prior Albert Knebel OSB).

If women and men of prayer not only open their hearts to God, but are also ready to exchange their experiences of prayer with one another, then an especial depth of mutual listening, sharing together and experience of grace happens. This experience became possible for participants during the final session on “the ecumenism of prayer”. The exchange was an experience of great enrichment because of the variety of prayer traditions that had been brought together. Praying for one another was very extensive and was recognised as, ecumenically, a particularly integrating and powerful bond. Praying for one

another leads us towards one another; it fosters sister hood and brotherhood and loving concern.

The days of meeting together in Neresheim strengthened faith in the power of prayer. Prayer is undeniably the forerunner that holds together all other ecumenical endeavours and activities sustains them. If ecumenism makes this its starting point as it approaches the themes that are still unresolved and divide the different traditions, then there is hope that these walls too will eventually fall. This then will be to hand over to God's will the means and the timing of the unity we long for, not trusting in our own action and resources but relying on Him and praying for His strength. Prayer, particularly in Jesus' name (John 14,13; 15,16; 16,24), is above all the primary mover of the ecumenical movement. Promise that this prayer will be answered is certain.

The next meeting of Communities Together on an ecumenical spiritual path, Neresheim, will be in two years' time, 12-14 October 2007. For the meetings that are to take place in the meantime, especially for the Fellow Workers' Congress and the second European meeting of Religious Communities and Movements in Stuttgart from 9-12 May 2007, the invitation is now issued, with a request for others to join the work.

*Hildegard Kasper*