

Sermon by Archbishop Vercauteren

Opening Service Triennial General Assembly May 8-10 2005

Encourage and Build up one another!

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Let me first say how grateful I am, having the opportunity to deliver this sermon for you during this opening service of your triennial General Assembly. I feel honoured to be here with you and to bring you greetings and best wishes from fellow-Christians from the northern part of the world. On this particular moment, now your General Assembly is starting with prayer and sharing the holy gifts with one another, indeed it is a great pleasure for me to share with you the sympathy and the solidarity of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht as well.

This year, on September 22, it will be forty years ago that the agreement of full communion between the IFI and the Union of Utrecht was signed in Vienna (Austria). This communion is a gift to us and it is a challenge as well. As it always is: the Lord gives us so many gifts in order to show us the many opportunities to put his love into practice.

What's love?

We may not forget that the love of the Lord is that love of someone who surrendered himself because of his allegiance to the sake of the poor. Our Lord Jesus was the victim of those who thought that they were being so mighty that they could decide about who is worthy to take part in human society and who is not. Our Lord was the victim of those who see creation as a battlefield where only the strongest can survive. There are plenty of them, until nowadays! On the opposite, our Lord brought the message that creation, as it is seen by the Father himself, is an opportunity for human beings to become free and really happy. And He also showed us the way to realize that aim. Domination, increasing own property, violation of rights for own benefit are not the keys to that way. No the key is taking care of one another. And our Lord gave the example how to do so. His attitude of companionship and solidarity with those who were marginalized is our point of orientation. His compassion is our compass to find out how we can contribute to the aim the Creator had given to the creation.

Because, as a matter of fact, the poor and marginalized make clear that the creation isn't completed yet. Moreover they show that the real aim of the creation is darkened by egoistic structures. And - in consequence - they make clear that it remains our own responsibility to cooperate with the Creator in order to realize Life and Abundance for all, as Saint John put it in the fourth gospel.

God's beautiful creation, including his human beings, is violated by the fact that plenty people have to live under inhuman conditions. And therefore the involvement with the poor and the

commitment to the liberation is a commitment to restore not only the dignity of the marginalized, but that of all human beings and of the whole creation. Taking care of one another is the way on which we may encounter our Father-Creator and on which we learn to cooperate with Him in order to reach the aim that He laid down in His creation. The way to God leads us through the fertile valley of companionship with fellow-human beings.

The day of the Lord.

I think that is meant when Saint Paul speaks to the Christians of Thessaloniki - and to us - about the Day of the Lord. It must be the day that Life and Abundance for all human beings is realized. It is the day that it will be possible for everyone to find genuine happiness.

There was a lot of concern about the coming of the Day of the Lord among the Christians in Tesseloniki. They believed that that day would come in a sensational way, as a miracle that would change the world totally and ultimately. The Christians of Thessaloniki are a little bit confused about how things will happen. They know from religious groups that have their secret rituals with which they are able to get in communion with their god. But the witness of Jesus Christ makes clear that communion with God isn't realized by wizards or magicians, but by the dedication of one's heart to a very concrete practice of love.

And there is another misunderstanding among the Christians of Thessaloniki as well. It is the opinion that if peace and security reign, the Lord would be near. It may seem possible that peace and security reign, but – as a matter of fact – you have to conclude it is a very false and deceptive peace, a would-be peace that hides a lot of injustice. Saint Paul challenges the Christians to be critical citizens and to investigate their situation. Peace and security are merely realized if there are no more people who are marginalised, no more people who are hungry for bread and for justice. And therefore it is necessary to destroy the fairy tale of a false security in the name of love and respect for human beings. The pain that is caused by those actions of destruction of the evil, is as labour pains that come upon a pregnant women, tells Paul the christians of Thessaloniki. Yes, it is the pain of the new life that will be born. That new life is a sign of the day of the Lord that is coming.

So the Christians of Tesseloniki learn that the day of the Lord neither depends on a sensational return of the Living Lord on earth, nor does it depend on quiet and stillness as such. It goes the opposite way, the day of the Lord will dawn as they give themselves – sometimes with pain - for building up another future, the better future for Gods creation. That's the future of people taking care for one another. It is the future of communion and friendship.

Communion

Communion among people can only build up in an endless succession of acts of concrete love – both small ones and great ones. Those acts make the world being a place where all human beings can feel themselves at home.

Paul gives the Christians in Thessaloniki, in other parts of his first letter to them, very concrete suggestions about building up the communion with one another. Communion is a question of faith that is translated into practice. Faith can't be only passion, it is also discipline, namely the discipline of fidelity and devotion to friendship and solidarity. Communion can't be built up without patience and tolerance, without joy and thankfulness for one another. Building up communion is a question of responsibility. If communion is built up with those materials it becomes a space of holiness, the space where human beings encounter God himself, yes (more than) a little bit of heaven on earth. Or to speak with the images that Saint Paul uses himself: within that communion the new day dawns and all those who involved in that communion share the new born light. Those who share that communion are children of the light and children of the day.

Children of the day

There is a beautiful Jewish story about the difference between dark and light. A Rabbi asks his followers how they can see a new day had really begun, in other words what makes the difference between night and day. One of the followers tried to respond to the question of his master and said: when you can see the branches of the trees on the background of the sunrise. And another suggested that, when you can see the difference between a horse and a donkey, it would be already clear enough to speak of a new day. But both answers were wrong. The rabbi gave the right answer: the new day has really begun if you can see in the eyes of the other human beings that they are your sisters and brothers.

Indeed: the new day has dawned for us when we received one another as a gift of our Creator to us. As a matter of fact it is the most beautiful gift we ever received, because in the care we can take for one another, we also are born again as a fellow human being. We are no longer only an individual who has to defend him- or herself and who has to struggle for his place on this world. We are born again as human beings whom it is given to know how to love one another.

To put it in the words of Saint Paul again: we are not created as objects of the wrath of one another or of God himself, we are created as subjects who do have the possibility to take care of one another. When we can understand that wisdom with the whole of our heart we will be saved and liberated, not by wizards and magicians, but through His calling that we can discover in our own hearts.

The awareness of that calling is the equipment we need in order to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ: the one who was victim but was saved by God's solidarity and love. God's

love is in our hearts and it equipped us with a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet of salvation – in other words – it makes us soldiers of an alternative army that is called to change the logic of violence into a logic of love and genuine peace.

Let us encourage one another to be attentive to the calling of the Lord and let us build up one another with patience and love. The Lord wants to make us a token of hope for the many who have to live without. The Lord wants to make us proclaimers of the good news the new day has dawned!

Amen.