

Andante General Assembly

Sharing life – Working Together – Building Strength

High Leigh Conference Centre

Notes from the Study Days, 14th – 16th April 2016.



[1] Thursday 14th april 2016 – An Introduction

Mary McHugh, President of Andante, welcomed participants and introduced the members of CoCoA [the Co-ordinating Committee of Andante]. She introduced Fr Joseph O’Hanlon. She thanked Maureen Meatcher of the National Board of Catholic Women [England & Wales] for the generous financial support that the Board given to the Andante General Assembly.

Gaby Belz was introduced as the consultant who had guided Andante’s development as an organisation, and who would be leading Andante through the Study Days especially in developing the strategic plan. .

The focus of the evening was telling the story of Andante through the memories of those who were there, from Budapest in 2006 to High Leigh 2016. Many women told of their memories. High spots were the drafting of the Andante prayer in 2009, which has now been translated into nine languages; the recognition of Andante as an international NGO by the Council of Europe in 2012; Renate becoming a member of Andante in 2014, with a new focus on the issue of trafficking and modern slavery; the admission to membership of Albania and Romania.

Andante ‘con brio’ is the next step.

Gaby asked, what matters to Andante? What do we carry in our backpacks? Some responses were:

- ‘Andante encourages differences and controversies to be raised and discussed’
- ‘East and West hear and learn from each other’
- Diversity and dialogue, sharing experiences, education and learning were all mentioned.

Marie Louise and Claire spoke of their joy in Andante and of the satisfaction with which they have seen it develop.

Vroni Peterhans led night prayer at the end of the session.

[2] Friday 15th April

The opening talk of the Study days was given by Julie Clague of the University of Glasgow. She spoke on [‘Women, Church and Change’](#), and began by inviting us to this about our ‘dual belonging’. We are citizens of Europe, and we are also Catholics. How can our Christian vocation inform our engagement and activity as citizens? How do we cope with ‘dual belonging’?

Julie led us through the results of a survey conducted to inform the Synod on the Family by Univision in 2014. Catholics in twelve countries were asked about their views on a range of moral issues. Opinions were diverse and varied, although it is clear that contraception remains the most divisive issue. This diversity means that the Church has to learn to live with pluralism, differences, disagreements and multiple identities linked to cultures and traditions. Julie quoted Pope Francis:

‘What seems normal for a bishop on one continent is considered strange and almost scandalous – almost! – for a bishop from another. What is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another. What for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion. Cultures are in fact quite diverse.’

Julie argued that while the Pope is clearly serious about the merciful and compassionate Church, there are still no mechanisms for including lay Catholics, including women, in decision making; there is no framework for participation.

Turning to the Pope’s apostolic exhortation *Amaris Laetitia* – on love in the family, Julie noted that the Pope accepts that not all questions need to be settled. Unity of teaching and practice does not preclude a variety of local variations in interpretation, and the development of culturally specific solutions to problems.

People respond to the gospel as best they can; the role of the Church is to form consciences, not replace them.

Julie argued that within both Church and society much remains to be done to protect women’s rights. The persistence of domestic violence and abuse – which ‘contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union’ – trafficking and the buying and selling of women for sex, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, all these have to be addressed.

The women’s movement is indeed a working of the Spirit!!

In conclusion, Julie spoke of Pope Francis modelling a way of being Church that invites the laity to take ownership of our catholic identity, and discern what the Lord requires of us in the concrete reality of our lives. Nothing new here! But the wisdom of lay people, especially women, often goes unheard; and bishops may regard lay participation as ‘optional’.

Can Pope Francis create new mechanisms for participation? Institutions change only slowly.

Our own creative efforts will be necessary to forge the changes we hope for.

After Julie’s talk there were several questions about dealing with differences, which may arise at every level from the parish to the bishops’ conference. Julie suggested that how to deal with diversity may be the greatest challenge facing the Church today. New pastoral approaches are needed, and new theological approaches. She suggested that we have to become bilingual, and speak both the language of the Church and of tradition and the language of the secular cultures in which we live, so that we can interpret and explain the one to the other. In this way we can have conversations with people ‘where they are’ – wherever that may be!

Some of these issues are not new: being ‘one body’ in Christ means that social divisions must be overcome.

Results of group discussions:

Julie had posed a set of questions for group discussion. The questions focused on dual belonging, identity, and the changes people would like to see in the Church and in Europe.

- In much of Europe it is seen a ‘chic to be anti-church’ and even anti-religion; religion is seen as a private, ‘spiritual’ matter; the church is perceived to lack credibility on women, social questions, and sexuality.
- Diversity is enriching, but does the church still offer the ‘home’ that religion used to be?
- Communism made a religion a secret matter; it is not so easy to oppose a powerful state
- How political can the Church be?

The changes identified included:

- The church should be an 'asking questions' church rather than a 'giving answers' church;
- An open church – open doors, ministry open to all, ordination of women and married people; women in positions of authority in the church; a culture of acceptance, a readiness to listen.
- In Europe, less nationalism and more co-operation; focus on work for peace in the institutions; an increase in the number of women in senior and leadership positions – but it was noted 'women need to have courage to take positions of authority'. More and better educational opportunities for all, but especially for women. An emphasis on the importance of family life as well as engagement in work and public life – again, for all, but especially for women.

Julie asked us to consider 'What would happen if ...' there were no more priests? There were no more teaching documents?

Final comments: work with the Council of Europe is important; being positive is important; making good choices about what to nourish is important: the forces of fear or the forces of love?

On Friday afternoon there were group discussions using a World Cafe approach with questions posed for formulating the actions for Andante for coming years.

The main problems were recognized and the solutions were looked for in an encouraging atmosphere. And all the thoughts written down at the tablecloths (part of the World Café approach) were collected for future use of Andante in developing thinking.

[3] Saturday 16th april 2016

On Saturday morning, the study days concluded with a talk by Simone Curau, a member of the Catholic People's Party in Switzerland, and a member of the Swiss federal women's commission.

Simone noted that in music usually it's 'allegro con brio' but we are different: we walk with energy and fire, but our pace is measured, andante, because we have a long way to go. She noted that in Switzerland and across Europe may women have walked away from the Church, and those left are not walking 'con brio'.

Simone asked us to consider why we continue to walk with the Church. For whom are we walking?

She asked us to consider two ways of walking: like hunters, focused, alert for danger; or like growers and shepherds, looking for new possibilities, co-operating and sharing to bring about a better life for all. She argued that political engagement is about solving problems through common, concrete actions – not talking but working together. She noted that when there were floods in Bangladesh those villages which recovered most quickly were those where the villagers took responsibility for relief and reconstruction themselves.

Diapaxis, Simone argued, is what our Church needs: practical cooperation between different groups. Cooperation in concrete tasks breaks down prejudices, fear and hostility. She cited the women's walk to Rome as an example:

<http://www.kirche-mit.ch/de/das-projekt-en.html> [the website is available in German, French, English and Italian].

Diapaxis is the art of living together like good neighbours, working together on solving concrete problems in our own communities, for the good of everyone. In this women have an essential part to play, in the Church and in Europe.

As an activist herself, Simone spoke of the importance of political participation by women, both in mainstream politics and through 'guerrilla actions' that put political issues in a new light. Defacing an anti-immigration poster with the

tourist slogan: *Walking in Switzerland – Great fun!!* became a national news item and raised awareness of the refugee question in a positive way.

Politics can also mean engagement in civil society organisations, although many of these resist specifically political questions. Simone asked us to consider how we support politically active women in our own organisations? It is difficult for women in politics to reach the grass roots, and also to reach the most powerful posts. There is a glass floor, as well as a glass ceiling

On political issues it is important for women to speak boldly and clearly, to support specific decisions and policies; and to make full use of our networks. Effective political actions will raise our profile and encourage new members to join us!

Finally, Simone noted that being peacebuilders and peacemakers does not mean avoiding conflict, but learning to work through conflict to a peaceful resolution. This requires patience, persistence and trust. Working together with other women in this way, Andante can help to shape a more peaceful Europe, offering 'fullness of life for all'.