

THE BISHOP OF LONDON'S SABBATICAL

It has been an interesting week. Writing in the Sunday Times, a journalist who is well known as a disinterested seeker after truth publicised my plans for a two week holiday to conclude a two month sabbatical. This will be the first time in 33 years of ministry that I have been allowed a sabbatical and after ten years plus as Bishop of London I think that I owe it to others to go into purdah for a little time to reflect on what was worthwhile about those years and what was a waste of time so as to chart a course into any future that God might allow me.

I shall be spending most of the time as a guest of the Master of Trinity College Cambridge, praying, reading and writing. I have received one or two kind invitations to preach but I am endeavouring to observe the advice of St Ignatius of Antioch who opined that a bishop never more resembled Jesus Christ than when he had his mouth shut.



It appeared to be especially offensive to the journalist concerned that I was not paying for the holiday element in cash but in talks and acting as on board chaplain. I should like to thank so many of you who have overwhelmed the Old Deanery with supportive messages. The Methodist minister who took the trouble to

participate in "Talk Back" to criticise the BBC's treatment of the story demonstrated very practical oecumenical fellowship for which I am grateful.

On the scale of persecution it was a mere gnat bite and it is of course as usual the family that suffers most. Here again I was very proud of my 14 year old son, Louis who said that there had been better days at school but that "it made you think what the Blair children went through every day of the year."

There was not much time, however, to respond to invitations from the Today programme "to put my side of the story" since I had to travel to Rome as the Church of England representative on the Conference of European Churches for our annual meeting with representatives of the Catholic Episcopal Conferences of Europe. I suppose that in the light of recent revelations I had better say that we were all housed quite modestly in a conference centre about two miles from the centre of Rome which doubles as the Theological Institute for monks and nuns. It was a particular delight that the Archbishop of Westminster was a member of the Catholic team and we were able to spend a good deal of time together.

Our main business was to prepare the Third European Christian Assembly which is due to be held in Sibiu in Transylvania in September 2007. The first such Assembly coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and it was held in Protestant Basel. In 1997 the second Assembly was held in Catholic Graz in Austria where I led the Church of England delegation. Next year Sibiu will be the European Capital of Culture and it may also be the year which sees Romania becoming a member of the EU. Sibiu has a fascinating religious history being a centre of the reformed faith as well as having a substantial Orthodox and Uniate population. Readers of Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial work "Reformation" will realise the significant part played by Transylvania and its rulers in the religious broils of the sixteenth century. Now the region is part of a country recovering from the trauma of one of the most disastrous Communist dictatorships of modern times.

Sibiu will be a good place to contemplate the future of the Christian community in the new Europe. The contemporary oecumenical scene was surveyed by Cardinal Kasper and Bishop Margot

Kassmann a German Lutheran who is due to speak at the Bonhoeffer commemoration in Westminster Abbey this coming Sunday. Kasper helpfully defined the central ecumenical problem as confusion about the kind of unity we are seeking. There was no common vision on the nature of unity. For the Orthodox the Primacy of Peter is the stumbling block and that has the merit of clarity but in the Leuenberg "Konzept", the oecumenical process being pursued by German Protestants, unity seems to mean leaving everything as it is with some having a Presbyterian, others an Episcopal church order. By contrast the Porvoo process was more coherent. Divergence on the nature of the church touched every other issue. We were not in an ecumenical ice age but we were in "a bit of a fog".

I did wonder, however, what planet speakers were living on with talk about Europe's divisions only being healed by reconciliation among the churches. The situation in which we find ourselves is surely more inflected by a combination of the defection of the folk and a notion of Europe that is being invented and is not so old. This gives fresh horizons and a challenge to re-connect. Perhaps in parts of the continent of Europe where the remnants of Christendom are still visible as they certainly are in Rome with its vestiges of the Christian Empire, the radical character of the changes which have come upon our continent are still somewhat obscure.

I was able to visit the place of the martyrdom of St Paul on January 25th and to pray for you all and for our partnership in London in the great Basilica of St Paul without the walls. The Pope gave an encouraging allocution at the conclusion of Christian Unity Week and it was good to see that he was flanked by an orthodox bishop on one side and our own Bishop John Flack on the other. The wisdom of placing a bishop in Rome as Director of the Anglican Centre has been amply justified. I know that some colleagues from the Diocese have already profited from the courses on offer at the Anglican Centre and if anyone wanted further details I hope that they would make contact with me.



The basilica of St Paul has venerable links with England since Henry VIII was a titular Canon there and in return the Abbot was a member of the Order of the Garter. The day after the festival of St Paul the Pope received the joint committee at the Vatican and we had a brief conversation in Latin about the Pope's first encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est". This meditation on the unity of love in creation and in salvation history with reflections on "caritas" as the practice of love by the church as a community of love should find a welcome from Christians of every stripe.

Apart from these treats, the days were spent under headphones trying to grapple with the organisation of an Assembly to reflect the aspirations of those who still lived in an oecumenical ice age and those who could not see what the problem was and wanted to get on to the vaguely leftist social issues agenda. As so often in such discussions it became obvious that we fight not against principalities and powers so much as eiderdowns and duvets. One piece of good news however is the impact the new general secretary of CEC has already made. Colin Williams was previously the Archdeacon of Lancaster and he brings high administrative gifts to the post as well as an enviable command of German which has immensely improved communications.

There is a process of preparation for Sibiu which is being devised and I shall hope to let those who are interested have the details as they become available.

With thanks for our partnership in the gospel.

+RICHARD