

Meditation on the Sibiu Icon (John 1,5–14; 3,25–30)

The Light of Christ Shines upon All: Hope for Renewal and Unity in Europe: *this was the theme of the Third European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA3), which was held in Sibiu, Romania, from 4 to 9 September 2007.*

More than two thousand Christians from all over Europe participated in the Assembly, which was jointly convened by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and by the (Roman Catholic) Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE).

The Assembly theme was clearly inspired by the Gospel of John. The theme of light is present already in the prologue of the fourth Gospel, as we heard: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The light is Jesus Christ Himself; and in order to avoid confusion, the Gospel specifies that John the Baptist, though a “man sent from God”, “he himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light”, the “true light which enlightens everyone”.

To testify to the light, to witness to the true light that enlightens everyone, this was the mission of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ's forerunner; but is it not also the mission of the Church, of the disciples of Jesus Christ? Actually, the fourth Gospel influenced the Sibiu theme not only through the reference to light, but also through John's theological reflection on witness.

This *theology of witness* was made visible in Sibiu through the Assembly icon. Painted on glass by the monks of the Orthodox Monastery of Sambata de Sus, not far from Sibiu, it is a special version of a very common icon, the so-called *Deisis Icon* (the Greek word *deisis* meaning prayer and supplication).

This icon is present in every Orthodox Church, but this icon is special for two reasons: first of all, because in the original version of this Sambata de Sus icon there is a different phrase written on the Gospel, which Jesus Christ holds in His left hand.

The original has “I am the door, the resurrection and the life”, a combination of John 10,7 and John 11,25, while the Assembly icon has another verse from John, which was more directly connected to the Assembly theme: “Eu sunt lumina lumii”, “I am the light of the world” (John 8,12).

The second detail is that, in the original, all the four angels hold a long sword in their hands. After a discussion in the EEA3 Worship Committee, and in the spirit of the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV), which challenges us to purify our spirituality from all forms of violence, we asked and were allowed to have four “non-violent” angels: as you can see, they are now carrying thuribles instead of swords.

But it is time to look more closely at the other characters in the icon. The main figure, of course, is Jesus Christ on His throne. But who are the two persons behind him? I made a test, asking several Western European Christians, and the constant answer was: well, of course, they are Saint Mary and Saint Joseph.

This is, of course, wrong, or at least half wrong. Indeed, the person on the left is Mary, but Mary's counterpart is not Joseph, but John the Baptist. Why this rather unusual combination?

Because – I was told by my Orthodox sisters and brothers – Mary and John the Baptist are at the same time the precursors and the witnesses of Jesus Christ. They are the last prophets, and at the same time the first representatives of the Church.

For a Protestant like me, it was interesting to discover that Mary can be seen as a forerunner and a witness of Jesus Christ. She is indeed a precursor, in that she bore Him for nine months in her body.

And she is a witness; during the wedding at Cana (the first miracle of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John), Mary is already acting as a witness of Jesus Christ when she invites the servants to confidently follow Christ's instructions: “Do whatever He tells you.” (2,5)

It is interesting to note the exact position and attitude of these two witnesses in the icon. First of all, they are not at the forefront but behind Jesus Christ, and they are much smaller than Him.

Their look is fixed on Jesus Christ, and with their hands they point to Him: this is at the same time the attitude of prayer. They are not announcing themselves, they are witnessing to the true light.

Does this not remind us of John the Baptist's attitude, pointing disciples to Jesus Christ, saying: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1,29)? And: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3,30).

And: "He, who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1,27). Indeed, there is a clear reference to this last verse in the icon, because Jesus Christ is portrayed wearing sandals.

What does it mean, today, to be witnesses of the light of Jesus Christ? It means to learn from Mary and John: they are not in the foreground, and their role is basically to point towards Jesus Christ, whom they themselves are contemplating.

The Assembly in Sibiu clearly suffered from the difficult ecumenical climate of recent years. The Sibiu icon was there, in the Assembly tent, to remind us of the right attitude, of the humility of witnesses.

It was and remains a challenge for all of us to take a step back, whichever church we belong to, to decrease so that Jesus Christ, the true light, will increase and His light will reach all human beings.

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Daniel PASTIRČÁK

A Story about Love

Imagine, if you will, a sandy plain, shards of mirror in the sand, and fragments of a face in the bits of mirror. You see before you the soul of the man of this story. Days were the sand, whirled up and dropped down by the wind. Fragments of thoughts were the mirror; thoughts that the man cannot collect and in their mosaic he is unable to see his own face.

Largest, however, was the space, the vast emptiness above the sand and the splinters. The space was the loneliness of the man. It stretched up and away and filled everything. "I want to know real love," said the man. "I want someone just for myself."

The One-above-Him, who had created the man, placed him on the land, and knew and loved him, said: "Come and I will teach you."

So the man went, in order to learn and know. Thus, he came to a poor village beneath a poor church, and, finally, the poorest house in the village. Out of an earthen yard, onto a road between decayed fences, people were carrying a timber coffin.

In the dismal, gray light of morning, the church bells knelled the death. The father lay in the coffin, and the daughter walked behind. This burial was, for her, a burial of everything, since the toothless gravedigger had claimed her entire family.

"Love her," said the One-above-Him.

"Both of you will die of starvation," thundered the shadow that had been following him from the beginning.

"Love her," repeated the One-above-Him. "The toothless gravedigger will guffaw in a leaden morning, and the bells will ring as today, but they will be ringing for your funeral," whispered the shadow.

"I want to love her," said the man.

As the solemn group returned, he offered the girl his arm. A curtain of tears and a veil of pain isolated her from the road on which she was walking, as well as from the man's arm on which she was leaning. Thus, she remained distant and unaffected. Her face, resembling a