

Every year the Nordic Sub-Region (SCMs of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) have a summer meeting, and last year's took them down to the lake-side in Finland, searching for identity in nature.

In Search of the Cosmic

One of the most fascinating events I have ever participated in was the summer meeting of the Nordic Sub-Region. Last year it was Finland's turn to organise it and the organising team started to plan the meeting in Autumn 1990. We had a proposal for a theme: it should deal with identity. We had good memories of earlier meetings. And we had us: a little group that wanted to organise this meeting.

In the organising team we discussed our own identity widely: as members of the welfare state, as rich people who are benefiting from the poor, as part of nature, as students, as Christians ... We realised that there was a kind of conflict in our identity. On the one hand we want justice, we want to diminish the gap between rich and poor, we want to preserve nature. But on the other we feel ourselves unable to do anything to change the situation.

We also realised that Nordic students already know enough of the problems of the world and they don't want to hear any more preaching on how everybody can and must do something. The problem is not the lack of information but the gap between us and nature, and between us and the poor. We decided to do something with the first gap: our alienation from nature.

Experiencing Nature

What can we do with the alienation from nature? We can give people a good experience of nature, an

experience that humankind is part of nature. And if it would be a religious experience at the same time, perhaps the alienation could be won. We wanted to give participants such experiences that would help them to build a cosmic identity, a feeling of being part of God's creation.

We got an idea of taking part in an Orthodox procession which would take place in Eastern Finland in August. The procession moves from one village to the next village by foot, carrying cross and icons and celebrating liturgy all the time. We also found a suitable hostel for our meeting near Koli nature preservation area, which has been of great importance in the discussion of nature preservation in Finland. And the programme began to grow around these two findings.

The summer meeting took place August 1-8 in Eastern Finland in a hostel situated in a village called Vuonismaa by the Lake Pielinen. There we had a couple of lectures and several working sessions with our 40 participants from Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Estonia.

An important part of the programme was one day rambling in nature preservation area Koli, which is situated on the other side of the lake. As our guide,

we had a local gardener, who was also an activist in the movement for preservation of Koli. (The decision on the preservation was made only last May.) He guided us through the area, told us of the nature of the value of creation and made us see God's presence in nature.

Procession and Liturgy

Another part of the meeting - taking part in an Orthodox procession - took place about 100km from Vuonismaa, quite near the state border of Finland and Russia, in and between the villages Hoilola and Saarivaara. The procession (or is the accurate translation "crusade"?) began on Sunday afternoon after we had heard a lecture on "identity, tradition and ecology from the Orthodox point of view" given by the Orthodox Archbishop Johannes of Karelia and all Finland. (The lecture is available in Swedish and Finnish from SCM of Finland.)

The procession moved mainly by foot but also by rowing. In the first night we visited a burial ground island by rowing. On the island we had a prayer service. On the next day after breakfast, we started walking towards the next village carrying cross and icons and celebrating liturgy in Swedish and Finnish. On the way we

visited some little farmhouses, where we had a break and got something to drink. The hospitality of local people was touching, and also something new to us. In the afternoon we arrived to the next village Saarivaara. There we had a party together with local people.

The reason for the party and for the procession was the annual feast of the Church of that village. The feast culminated on Tuesday morning in liturgy held in that little Church. The Church wasn't even big enough for our group and the celebrating congregation, so part of the people were listening to the liturgy outside.

The most fascinating part of the liturgy was the blessing of water. We walked as a procession with the cross and icons to the shore of a nearby lake. The priests blessed the water of the lake, took some water in a bowl and the procession moved back to the Church while one of the priests was sprinkling the blessed water over us. As it was a warm day the priest

didn't spare the water and we didn't mind - actually, we had fun.

But there was also something to be sorry for. All the Finns knew that non-Orthodox could not take part in Orthodox Eucharist, but it was a surprise for some people.

cordial. They are not trying to convert but they just accept me and welcome me to their liturgy.

The most fascinating thing in Orthodoxy for me was the relationship with nature. The whole creation is part of liturgy and whole creation is blessed in liturgy. The procession that moved in nature was a good sign of that.

How did the meeting affect people? We didn't get any new answers to the problems of the world, but we got new strength to meet them and faith in the goodness of life. Rambling and being in nature, taking part in Orthodox procession, discussing, celebrating, being together without hurry a whole week - all this

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Identity

For me it became clear that Orthodox people and the Orthodox Church have a clear identity as representatives of true, original Christianity and that is something that sometimes hurts other Christians. But my feeling is that Orthodox people are very hospitable and

gave us something that cannot be fully expressed in words.

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