

## Centre de Rencontres Internationales

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pour le Réarmement moral

# CAUX

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Dear friends,

The Aims and Values conference started on Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> July with no chairs in the Main Hall, a bare tree on the podium and a slightly confused audience. This unusual opening marked the beginning of 'An honest conversation on private and public decision making'. As Christoph Keller put it in a sketch in which he appeared as the only person in the house not rushing around with time to answer the questions of a new arrival: "It's going to be inter-active, inter-generational, inter-continental and interesting."

Another of those who we more often see at work in their part of the house than on the stage was Frieda Thaler from South Tyrol. It was her idea to set up the bare tree, and she explained how at home the vines unfold their leaves and flowers in a matter of hours. She invited us to clothe the bare branches with green leaves on which we had written our hopes for the week and for the world. At yesterday's final meeting she was again on the stage. Behind her the tree had now sprouted flowers. She invited us to go fast forward through the seasons of fruit giving place to seed. As some of the participants shared their decisions, many more came up and helped themselves to packets of seeds to take home with them. A symbol of the new life that is stirring in many hearts.

From a woman's perspective the audience was more than promising. 40% of the people in the house were under 35 years old... a number of good-looking men from the 'Hope in the Cities' Workshop proved that no matter what situation and background one comes from –and some came from extremely tense situations - one can still laugh and dance. Later in the week a group from Huddersfield gave a sophisticated Powerpoint computer presentation on their street project 'Connected 2' followed by a breathtaking breakdance performance. Their expectation and hope on coming to Caux was to find support for their work. "A bridge needs more than one pillar," one of them described their frail situation.

It is not an easy task to describe the process of inner change that has taken place in so many hearts. An honest conversation was the overall aim we were heading for. But at the beginning the value of dialogue was not uncontested. During the final session a black member of the group from Nottingham spoke of the pain and conflict they have been through in Caux. He said he had even checked airline timetables to fly home early since he felt he was wasting his time here. "But things really changed. We've now got an action plan, it's all been worthwhile, thank you," he concluded.

Each day we focused on a different element of change starting with an honest conversation with oneself, in the family, at work... Someone spoke of the words "we've got to talk" as being the four scariest words in the English language. A Dutch student said: "I must not self-censor my own thoughts or censor the other person's thoughts – that's how an honest conversation works. I like discussing and philosophizing but I need to work on decision."

When we looked at private and public decision making we heard from many initiatives in the US, in England, Australia, Kenya, South Africa, and other places in the world where following their personal change people made a decision to work for a change in society. A black police officer spoke of his

puzzlement in the face of a brother in prison. "Why do we make the choices we make?" he asked. He was angry, and he posed the uncomfortable question of institutional racism. Another asked: "Who is the problem? Is it us? Or is it the majority community?" A white American spoke of 'the toxic issue of race'. He said: "We are the problem. Whites have to name themselves as the problem."

We explored our tools for decision making and how we keep going facing inner and outer resistance to change. On another day when people entered the Main Hall they found their chairs turned outwards. They were reminded that changing perspective can mark a turning point in life, and were invited to decide whether they wanted to look away or to turn around their chairs and face the consequences of change. A young woman explained that some years ago she had to decide whether to live or to die. She discovered that there was actually a third option which is to live in a better and different way. It required a lot of effort and time, but she concluded: "I feel I can make a difference even though I'm not quite sure how. I took the right decision." A participant of the Hope in the Cities Workshop talked of the loneliness of 'change-agents', excluded from their own group and not accepted as a part of another group. "These people need help. They have to find the support of an inner source, some power beyond themselves". "I've learned not to move ahead without my senior partner – I do have a senior partner," said another participant talking about his own search for spiritual authority in his life.

Mgr. Bernard Genoud, Catholic Bishop of Fribourg, Lausanne and Geneva, delivered the Caux lecture and fed our souls with rich philosophical food – for further details please refer to the press release that comes with this letter. An older person appreciated the bishop's insistence on the hope he saw in young people, many of whom voluntarily help others. He reminded us that human rights find their expression not in desires or longings but in needs.

In the course of the week Bev Appleton and a professional American theatre company performed "Wenzeslas Square" in the Theatre, a group of Ukrainians spontaneously staged "The Ladder" in English in the Main Hall after a hot evening of International Folk Dancing, and Fitzwilliam String Quartet ended the week with a most enjoyable selection of classical music. Young and very talented people offered music, drama and catching announcements throughout the whole week lightening the serious process of an honest conversation in which the participants engaged in.

On Saturday we enjoyed an exclusive pre-premiere of the new video film "The Cross and the Bodhi Tree – Two Christian Encounters with Buddhism" directed by Alan Channer. The film was followed by an inter-religious panel. In his introduction to the film Alan Channer quoted a Cambodian Buddhist who had been asked what it was like working with Christians and had replied: "We have no problem with the living Christ." In the film we meet a Catholic priest who lost 38 of his 40 Cambodian students in the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge, and Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres, in Oxford, England, who spent a two month sabbatical at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire, England.

During the final session on Sunday a black African-American minister presented the house with a cover of Life magazine of one of the historic civil rights marches in the South (USA), and a commemorative medal that he had received as a young man for taking part in that march. It was obvious that this medal was the most precious thing he could leave in Caux to mark what his visit had meant to him.

I would like to conclude this report by quoting an African-American activist who said towards the end of the week: "I've never seen the majesty of God so displayed as in this place. It has been a tremendous blessing. I've never been in a more inclusive community."

Affirming these words I send you my warm greetings,

Maria Wolf