

+Bishop Seraphim Sigrist

Church as Travelling Community.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

first I greet you at this important conference and am most regretful to not be with you but glad to have the opportunity to share in a small way in the work of the conference.

The subject of the Church in the Bible and within the Biblical imagery is of immense importance and in particular because it is in finding the Church in the Bible that we find and ground ourselves within the Biblical story. By the inner truth of an image one is joined, in as it were the sacrament of the word, to that which is imaged.

I am going to be brief and not academic and no doubt I will be impressionistic... as to that anyone who has heard me speak will not be surprised.

Let us start with the words of the great French Christian philosopher Gabriel Marcel:

"Perhaps a stable order can only be established if man is acutely aware of his condition as a traveler."

This 'stable order' based on awareness of being on a journey is of course first of all that of the Church as a community travelling through Time and through history. It follows also that the vitality of the Church and its openness to the inflowing life of the Holy Spirit depends on its being always 'acutely aware' of the condition of being on a journey.

Now of course this image of a community on a journey is established in that of the people of Israel in their spiritual formation through forty years in the wilderness of Sinai guided by the pillar of cloud and fire and in the Tabernacle which they bore with them.

This journey from the Passover to the Land of Promise becomes that 'Salvation History' which is at the heart of the Psalms.

The condition of journey becomes an image of the Church we may say in Sinai but it is even more primordial going back to the leaving of Eden by which humanity entered into history, and to the dispersal of nations at the tower of Babel, and to of course Abraham's leaving of his place in Sumer, and "sojourning as an alien in the land of promise" (Hebrews 11:9).

If you have read C.S.Lewis 'Perelandra', you will remember that in creating a story of Eden in another world, Lewis has God's fundamental command being to live on the floating islands in that planet's ocean and not to seek to live on the fixed continents. This reflects that deep spiritual necessity for being on a journey which the Bible also teaches and which is summed up in

Hebrews 11:13 "they were strangers and pilgrims on earth."

And of course this is reflected even in the detail of addressing each church as the church "in" (that is sojourning in) rather than "of" Corinth or Ephesus etc.

Lewis's floating islands may remind us also of how the early church father Hermas writes of seeing the church as a tower being perpetually built on the surface of the waters, on and within the ever-flowing nature of things, not like Babel on the land, not on the fixed.

Now we might read a bit further in the words of Gabriel Marcel (from "Value and Immortality" in the collection *Homo Viator*)

"[Man must remember that he]is required to cut himself a dangerous path across the unsteady blocks of a universe which has collapsed and seems to be crumbling in every direction. This path leads to a world more firmly established in Being, a world whose changing and uncertain gleams are all that we can discern here below.

Does not every-thing happen as though this ruined universe turned relentlessly upon whomever claimed that he could settle down in it to the extent of erecting a permanent dwelling there for himself?."

Does not the history of the Church, like that of Israel in the wilderness, and indeed like that of each of us individually, attest to the truth that we are not meant to settle down?

The Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete expresses it:

"Pass through the flowing nature of time, like the Ark of old, and take possession of the Land of Promise, my soul: It is God's command"(Song 6 tropar 2)

And so the Spirit speaks always to the churches in that word an early church text attributes to Jesus: "Be wanderers."

This image of Church as journeying community ,it seems to me, is one which frees us with its revelation of all that is provisional and allows us as Christians and as a Church to reach out with open hands to receive the future which God gives us. And as Marcel says, history and the world, does not allow us an alternative to the embracing of this deep and Biblical image.

In the embracing of the image we indeed pass into the Biblical story and join the age-old journey of the Church.

So that is what I have to offer...

But perhaps in conclusion this word of prayer from Marcel can apply not only to the individual at the hour of departing this world but also to each of us and to the Church at every moment.

"Oh, spirit of metamorphosis!

when the given hour shall strike, arouse us, as eager as the traveller who straps on his rucksack while beyond the misty window-pane the earliest rays of dawn are faintly visible!"