

International Council on Pastoral Care and Counselling.

8th World Congress of ICPC 2007.

I had the privilege of attending the 8th International Congress on Pastoral Care and Counselling in Krzyzowa, Poland, 7th -14th August 2007. Krzyzowa in East Poland was a very fitting setting for a Conference on Pastoral Care and Counselling. It was originally owned by Helmuth James von Moltke, who during the Second World War led a resistance group to the war which eventually cost him his life. The resistance group was known as the Kreisau and it's mission of resistance and reconciliation was resurrected after the communist reign in Poland. In 1989 a group in the Polish Solidarity movement proposed that the former von Moltke estate at Krzyzowa would be acquired from the collective farm that ran it. So the stables and cow sheds surrounding the castle were transformed into beautiful living quarters and is now a European youth meeting centre committed to reconciling cultural and political differences especially between Poland and Germany.

Krzyzowa proved a very apt place to host a Conference addressing *Care of Souls facing Fragility and Destruction*, having as title, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. From the first day that we arrived, there was a sense of a history of fragility and brokenness in this place and as we settled into the programme the stories of brokenness in this particular part of Poland was very striking. As a resident of Ireland I was unaware of the depths of painful history still present in the people of Poland and especially in this region as they recover from the Second World War and communist rule.

On Tuesday evening, we were welcomed by the planning committee, a group of diverse people from all over the world. Professor Dr. Ursula Pfafflin from Germany, the ICPC President led the greetings. Rev. Helmut Weiss, the Convenor of the Conference facilitated the evening which included speeches of welcome from leaders of local churches and civic authorities and a beautiful choir from Southern Silesia. We set into the main work of the conference on Wednesday morning. The theme on this day was "Stories of survival amidst fragility and destruction". We heard from Alexandra Blahut-Kowalczyk, a Polish woman, how her mother survived the Second World War, passing on the importance of service, *As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.* Mt 25:40. This moving presentation was followed by Rev. Dr. Steven Voytovich who explored his Slavic heritage and how he explored cross-cultural issues in his clinical training in America. For me the final story touched me deeply. It was told by Dr. Ma. Teresa Gustilo Villasor from the Philippines. It was a story of her father's struggle with cancer. Drawing on Carl Jung's theory she demonstrated the hero's transition from vitality, strength and independence to weakness, dependence and vulnerability as he journeyed towards his death.

The three presentations highlighted for me the importance of telling one's story and having someone to listen to the many dimensions of each person's narrative and enabling the person to acknowledge the feelings under the story.

The theme of the second day was "Survival amidst fragility and destruction: Theological and socio-political reflections". Dr. Ottmar Fugs, a Catholic theologian at Tubingen, Germany, explored with us theological perspectives on fragility and destruction, paying

particular attention to the victim and perpetrator and how both are viewed from God's perspective. While his expose was comprehensive and at times dense one thing stayed with me. This is the need in our prayer life we need to hear the cries of our suffering brothers and sisters across our globe, being in solidarity with them and lamenting the injustice and oppression they are suffering.

The second input on this second day was given by Prof. Dr. Valburga Schmiedt-Streck from Brazil. Her focus was on the socio-political and economic situation in Brazil. The effects of poverty, exclusion and violence on family life was explored and we were left wondering how such marginalisation could be responded to both pastorally and socially. The third day brought us away from the lecture hall into the beautiful old city of Wroclaw. We started the day in the city university where in a very ornate hall, Aula Leopoldina, we were given a lecture on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was born in Wroclaw and is still honoured as a beloved son of Wroclaw. As well as a theologian, Bonhoeffer was also part of the resistance movement which found him in prison and eventually hanged in one of German's concentration camps. As well as his writing on ethics, his book, *The cost of Discipleship* and *Letters from Prison* gives the world insight into a deeply Christian man and challenges Christians to really look at what it means to be a Christian as he saw that Nazi regime took hold in Germany because of the failure of Christianity.

Wroclaw is a beautiful city, with beautiful architecture and many churches. In the city hall where we were met by the Mayor, we got the first glimpse of how the Poles have laid claim to their favourite son, Pope John Paul II. His pictures and statues were evident everywhere. His presence was evident in St. Elizabeth's Cathedral where we attended an Ecumenical Service in the evening.

On Saturday we were back at work again. On this day there were options to attend different presentations of how Pastoral Care and Counselling is delivered in four different continents, Europe, Americas, Africa and Asia and the Pacific. I attended the European which explored how family therapy is been used in Germany. The healing of generations was very interesting. Again we were confronted with stories of families who inherited brokenness resulting from the violence of war.

On Sunday we took a long trip to the Giant Mountains, but unfortunately we did not see the beauty of the mountains as mother nature decided to give us a wet day. However, the service at the stave Wang church in Karpacz half way up a mountain was a real treat. This church originated in Norway, but was moved to this beautiful site in the last century. It is a Lutheran church and as well as been a place of worship, it is a meeting place for many people across the world.

On Monday we had two beautiful meditations on two biblical texts. One was on 2 Corinthians 4. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" was explored and meditated on by Kathleen Greider from USA. The other was given by Rabbi Smith from London. This was a beautiful reflection on creation.

I have not mentioned work-shops and small groups. These took place in the afternoons when we were in sessions. There were sixteen workshops presented from participants from all over the globe. Of course I could only choose two. I attended one on spirituality and religiosity in psychotherapy. Elizabeth Groezinger from Switzerland teased out both concepts in a few schools of psychotherapy, including Jung and Freud.

The second one was more creative, where the presenters used art to explore resilience in a South African context.

As there was over 200 participants, it was difficult to get to know everyone. The small groups gave us an opportunity to get to know at least twelve people. As I led one of these groups I had first hand experience how the sharing in these groups gave us insight into the lives and work of a small section of the conference membership.

In this short article I have given an overview of the proceedings at the 8th Congress on Pastoral Care and Counselling. However, I have been left with a few significant impressions. The hospitality of the Polish people is a beautiful memory that I will hold for a long time. There was a great sense of being treasured all during the week long conference. It is a real privilege to be part of a group of people from around the world. There was a real sense of the global community and that we are connected in many ways. I learned again of the importance of narrative and giving people the opportunity to tell their story. I was particularly struck by a short DVD presented by an Irish Loreto nun, Jacinta Bannon who is involved in the Healing of Memories programme in South Africa. Giving persons the opportunity to tell their story and acknowledging feelings underneath that story does bring about healing. I was also struck by the commitment to the care of souls by so many different people in very complex situations. I end with a quotation from Kathleen Greider's meditation on *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, "When we are caregivers and when we are in need of care... every day is a new opportunity to receive the treasure of sacred light.... Every day is a new opportunity to be the clay pots we are created to be – fragile, porous, prone to mould – expecting only of ourselves that we bear in a modest way the kind of hope and vision and love and justice that points beyond our limited energies, days, and wisdom to that which is eternal and ultimately reliable." Finally, "When we are caregivers and when we are in need of care, this passage teaches us: remember that, yes, there is a crack in everything, and that is also how the light gets out."

**P.S. The next ICPPC Conference on Pastoral Care and Counselling will be held in New Zealand in 2011. For more information consult with www.icpcc.net
The new President of ICPC is Prof. Dr. Nalini Arles.**

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