

Talk by Maria Draaijers – A European Perspective

Dear colleagues in Christ

It's a great joy to be invited to come here and speak to you at your national meeting. Some of you I met at the European meeting of delegates of national priests' councils in Vienna in 2004. So they know me. For most of you I am unknown. So let me start by introducing myself.

Personal introduction

I started my theological studies in 1971 and finished them with a doctoral thesis about the pastoral work in a multi-religious situation. I worked as a pastoral worker in a parish for around ten years, most of the time with a priest-colleague, but later, alone, in the parish where the vicar general of the diocese was the administrator. At the same time I was for eight years teaching pastoral theology in the catholic theological university in Amsterdam. After that I became the theological assistant to bishop van Luyn and bishop Muskens who, in Holland, on behalf of the bishop's conference are responsible for church & society and mission & development. Because of the need to reduce expenses this function was discontinued in 2003.

So therefore last year I accepted a job as the program director in a retreat house, a centre for reflection and spirituality run by the Redemptorists in the east of Holland. As well as organising and giving spiritual and theological courses to all kinds of individuals and groups I am involved with the pastoral care of groups of around 1500 people who come together for liturgical celebrations during the week and on Sundays in the chapel of the house. (www.zwanenhof.nl) Because there are now big financial problems and a need to reorganize the centre I am at this moment looking for another job again.

I am married. My husband is a permanent deacon, partly working in a parish and partly for the diocese of Utrecht. We have three daughters and one son, all living on their own and studying.

European Forum for National Laity Committees

Almost three years ago I was elected to the board of the European Forum for National Laity Committees, and last June, in Fatima, they chose me as their president. The European Forum for National Laity Committees is an organisation the purpose of which is to promote regular contacts in Europe between the National Committees and Councils of the Laity, or corresponding bodies that can be seen as National Committees.

In order to achieve this purpose the Forum aims:

- to facilitate the exchange of experiences and information between the members on questions of national or European importance, especially in relation to problems on the Church's mission in the world and on pastoral work.
- to promote studies on present day problems in the Church and in the world. Study Meetings are organised every two years, with different themes and experts invited to share their expertise on specific problems.
- to maintain contacts with the Councils of European Episcopal Conferences (CCEE, CCPE, UCESM), Organisations of the Church at European level (ComECE, EZA, Deutsche Katholikentage, Semaines Sociales), the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Catholic International Organisations (ICO's) with structures on European level, Churches and Organisations of other Christian traditions and ecumenical movements on the European level.

Your chairman asked me to tell you what we as a Lay Forum see and think about the future of the church in Europe. As bishops, priests, members of religious orders and lay people we share the same grace and the same mission given us by our baptism and confirmation. We share the same vocation to spread the Good News of Justice and Peace and we have the same task to realize the Kingdom of God. Therefore I think it's good to share with you what the results, conclusions and perspectives were that were developed during recent years in European Lay organisations and movements.

In the last two study-assemblies, in 2002 and 2004 our eyes and hearts were primarily focused on the contribution that the church, and especially the laity can make in the Europe of the 15, and since last year of the 25 countries united in Europe. In 2002 we asked ourselves: what can the contribution of Catholics be to building a Europe of values. A Europe that does not revolve around the well-being of the Euro but a Europe whose first concern is how to realize the welfare and good future of all her inhabitants, especially the poor and vulnerable among them. In 2004 we asked ourselves: what are the spiritual and ethical roots out of which we live and act.

Climate of fear

At the end of June 2004 almost 150 participants from about 30 nationalities thought and spoke about this subject. A lot of themes and questions emerged.

To become a really human Europe, a Europe that lives out evangelical values, it's necessary that people grow to trust one another, grow in solidarity, grow in spiritual consciousness and in a spiritual way of living. It's also necessary that they know of and live a strong relationship between the world and mankind with God, our creator and redeemer. God our saviour teaches us that all people are equal and the liberating God shows us that all people are free.

In our discussions two themes emerged both involving fear. They prevent becoming a more human and God-like Europe arising. These two themes will be worked out at national and international levels during the coming years. These themes are first the role that fear plays in preventing people from growing in trust and solidarity. Secondly the particular fear between Eastern and Western Europe. More and more people seem to be paralysed by fear, not in the least because of the effects of 9/11, and all that came after it. I mean the now almost global war against terrorism and the growing tensions between a secularized west and fundamental Moslems.

After two political murders my country has completely changed. We have to be vigilant because some political powers have already started to change our tolerant culture into a real police state, in which people, because of their background and religion, are forbidden to come into certain neighbourhoods or they are obliged to report every week at the police station. It is not because of what they have done or do, but because of what they could do, maybe, in the future.

Fear pervades everything. There is fear of ones neighbour, fear of those who are even far away. There is a fear of everything and everybody who is different, strange, or seen as hostile. People feel threatened, they are afraid to be dominated, to lose their identity, to lose their self-esteem and self-respect. Often they are even afraid of themselves. Afraid for their dark sides, the shadows in their minds, the fear of failure, of poverty, of suffering and pain, the fear of loneliness.

To become a Europe in which solidarity and justice are the central issues and values, it's necessary to pay a lot of attention to the psychological and social reasons for this widespread epidemic of fear of all kinds. It is only when people can understand, treat and overcome their fear that it will be possible to meet other people with open minds and open hearts, trusting one another and with a authentic intention to create a world in which everybody can have his or her righteous share of welfare and happiness.

Distrust and dialogue

The second theme has to do with a special field in which fear, distrust, prejudices and judgments play a specific role. A field that is extremely important for the future of a really united Europe. It concerns the relation between eastern and western countries in Europe. Or better: between west - and middle Europe. Historical, cultural and religious processes have caused a mental and spiritual gap between these two parts of Europe.

Two years ago, in Erfurt in Eastern Germany, this gap, this tension between east and west came out during our study assembly in a deeply felt and emotionally expressed distrust towards one another. Catholics from eastern Europe claimed that Catholics from the West were no longer true Catholics because of the secularisation which is so widely spread in the western world and culture. Nobody goes to church anymore, morals are much too liberal. The west accused the east of having a mainly sacramental and liturgical religion that was too clerical and patriarchal and paid too little attention to the real needs of people in social justice. People are objects and not subjects of pastoral or religious life. This confrontation resulted in very emotional discussions in which everybody felt unhappy, misunderstood, rejected and condemned, frustrated. Fear for one another made the climate aggressive and destructive.

In the meeting that took place in the summer of 2004, we decided to pay extra attention to this phenomenon. We were very happy that the participants were able to deal with the differences in a totally different way. Instead of having only eyes for the good things about themselves and pointing fingers at the shortcomings of the others, they talked about the good and the bad things on both sides. By putting these things on the agenda we have only made the first step on a road that will take a long time to reach the end. But I think these first steps, and results, are very worthwhile to be shared with you, our ordained brothers, who stand in the same cultural and religious tensions.

Common priesthood

In all Europe Christians, ordained and non-ordained, share the same responsibility for church and society. But the way this shared responsibility is felt and lived differs throughout Europe. In middle Europe, especially Poland, it is mainly the priests who determine what is the function and the role of the church. In the west, where the needs and wishes of every individual believer are taken more into account, more and more responsibility is given to the laity.

In Holland for example, as in other countries, alongside every professional church worker, priest or lay-theologian, there are 13 fulltime active volunteers. In my first parish (7000 members), almost 700 services are performed annually by more than 250 individuals.

Some figures:

Population

- On the 31st of December 2002 the Netherlands had 16.192.842 inhabitants
- 31 % (5.013.800) of them are Catholics.
- Between 1980 and 2002 the part Catholics decreased from 39,5 to 31,0% of the total population, 17,6% of all Catholics are over 65 years of age.
- In 2001 the number of baptisms, first communions, confirmation and funerals decreased. Only the number of marriages increased by 5,4%!! (11,5% of all marriages)
- 810 people became catholic, 170 of them came from protestant churches.
- 590.000 people went to church at least once a month, that's 8,6 % of all Catholics

Parishes

- At this moment there are 270.000 people (this is 5,5 % of all Catholics) fulfilling tasks in their parishes as volunteers. Spread over the following areas (in %):

area	total*	age			educational level			sex	
		18-33	34-54	55-74	low	middle	high	♀♀	♂♂
board	21	8	47	45	14	39	47	47	53
catechesis	8	7	71	22	16	33	51	26	74
diaconate	17	8	31	61	24	43	33	31	69
buildings	66	9	35	56	34	38	28	43	57
information	39	5	36	59	30	41	29	39	61
liturgy	25	13	48	39	20	41	39	30	70

* because some people have more than one function the total sum is more than 100%

But also among the salaried church workers, the part of the laity has increased enormously. For almost forty years now we have experienced in Holland the phenomenon of the so called pastoral workers. These are fully educated, university and college taught theologians, who most of the time work in a parish, next to and alongside the priest(s) responsible for the parish. Originally it was anticipated that the end of obligatory celibacy and the admittance of women to priesthood would follow soon. My husband for example went to the seminary when he was twelve. When he was twenty he still wanted to become a priest but not to be celibate. So he became a pastoral worker.

When I started to study theology in 1971 I also wanted to become a priest. No problem, said the study adviser, before you have finished your studies women will be ordained. Things went differently, as we all know. But as the years have passed young people have started their theological studies not any longer with the idea of becoming a priest, but to be and stay a lay pastor, a pastoral worker. And the people are used to the fact that there are three types of professional workers in the church: priests who can celebrate all the sacraments, deacons who celebrate some, and pastoral workers who sometimes are allowed by their bishop to baptize.

1557 parishes have 1281 professional workers. In some dioceses (Utrecht and Rotterdam) at this moment there are more pastoral workers than priests working in the parishes.

year	priests	permanent deacons	pastoral workers
1980	3374	0	302 ♀♀: 4,9%
1995	1610	201	702 ♀♀: 37,3 %
2002	1112	243	774 ♀♀: 43,3 %

What do we do?

The mandate we receive from our bishop when appointed states that our mission will be to serve the pastoral needs in the parish in all its aspects, except in those areas for which ordination is needed. So we have our pastoral contacts, we do the catechesis for the children and the adult people, we organise and guide all kind of working groups. We lead funerals and the other liturgical celebrations during the week and on Sundays.

In a lot of parishes we are the only pastor available, because the responsible priest is just an administrator who lives and works elsewhere. In practice it means that we do whatever a priest would have done, except that we invite priests to celebrate on a regular basis the Eucharist, to celebrate weddings (that we prepared the couples for) and to give the sacrament of the sick. In most cases the pastoral worker assists at these celebrations because the priest is unfamiliar with the families involved. A good collegial relation between pastoral worker and priest is necessary to make these celebrations a fruitful event in a relational process. Prayerful reflection and planning between priest and pastoral worker are absolutely necessary. Perhaps we can look at questions in these areas, in questions at the end.

In these times of change where we have fewer clergy and indeed pastoral workers some diocese decide to cluster parishes. When such clusters have taken place in Holland the pastoral team may consist of a team leader, who is not necessarily a priest, together with a priest (if available) and other lay members. Each member gets a specific task for the whole region, for example the catechesis, the diaconate, the building up of community, the liturgy. Alongside these responsibilities each member would be the first contact in designated parishes.

Last year for instance I was working in a cooperation of four parishes with four pastors, two priests and two pastoral workers. I was the pastor of one of the parishes primarily available for the people and for the liturgical celebrations in this parish. Together with this parish responsibilities I had charge for the catechesis in all four parishes. When there can be no Eucharist we celebrate a service of the Word and Communion. In a lot of cases the pastoral worker gets permission of the bishop to baptize.

How are the pastoral workers accepted?

For almost forty years now people have become familiar with this phenomenon. Generally this has been well accepted and even appreciated. Thirty years ago it was sometimes said: why a pastoral worker? They cost more and they can do less, because they can't celebrate the sacraments. But when it is shown what a priest costs, who lives for free in a parish house with a paid housekeeper, the financial objections soon disappears. In daily practice they see and experience that young, most of the times married pastoral workers, also have much good and new things to offer. They are more like 'common people', with the daily concerns of family, household and neighbourhood. They meet you at the schoolyard picking up your children, stand with you in line waiting to pay in the shops. They live ordinary lives, you can make contact more easily with them than with some priests who have their own, a little bit mysterious way of living somewhere in an isolated parish house.

Pastoral workers seem to be accepted and appreciated as more 'down to earth', and this fits in well with a development in which faith and church need to be more relevant for the everyday needs and concerns of the people. Theological and ecclesiological developments no longer aim to get people out of the world and to raise up to a higher level, the level of God and heaven, but to bring God back into their daily lives with its difficulties, sufferings and evil, as a sign of life and hope.

The expectations towards church and faith changed the last fifty years in a very fundamental way. My experience of this change in Europe is varied. Social, political and historical context determine what is the relationship between church and society and between priest and people. For instance in Poland at this moment there is a strong hierarchal understanding of church, connected with very conservative, anti-European and anti-Semitic tendencies. Minorities, mainly lay organisations feel unhappy with this, but hardly have means to express themselves. In the west you see more a process in which church give voice to the powerless and marginalized groups. You see this particularly in Germany and Holland.

How do priests accept these changes, having lay colleagues?

What determines that the relation becomes more and more natural and accepted is the fact that layworkers and priests have the same formation. Their theological and pastoral training is university-based, and they follow the same courses.

There is still a tension that exists surrounding lay-workers. The reason for this is that some conservatively minded bishops are themselves very much concerned with the idea of only priests can be responsible for the pastoral running of a parish. In the south of Holland there are no layworkers in parishes. But this is not the development that the majority of the Dutch bishop conference agrees with.

Are we prepared for the challenges of the 21st century?

At present about 50% of the Dutch population doesn't belong to any church any longer. In a culture that is more and more secularized and individualized, church and belief have become marginalized. Internal conflicts and problems have advanced the decreased credibility of a church that presented itself as the one and only representation of the absolute truth. Sexual scandals, but also the violation of basic human rights within the own institutions damaged the credibility and legitimacy of the words of the church.

Also more material developments have played a role. The decreasing number of parishioners caused an increasing financial problem. It's no longer possible to provide for all the monumental buildings, churches, convents, retreat houses that were built in the past. For many religious institutions an important question is: do we use our money to maintain the buildings or do we invest it in our pastoral work.

I don't know how in England and Wales people deal with this, but at this moment in Holland a lot of churches are closed and sold. That needs special care for the parishioners who lose a place where they came together on important life moments, and special attention to give these buildings a destination that fits with its original destination. From a cultural and esthetical viewpoint this is often a great loss. On the other hand I always thought it a little controversial and hypocritical to talk about our option for the poor in such a rich and well to do environment.

Not only the identity of the church has changed, but also the needs of the people have changed. Among our inhabitants only between 25 and 30% of the people call themselves Catholics. Of these fewer than 10% visit the church regularly. The liturgical and sacramental function of the church has become of less importance for most of society. On the other hand social investigations show that 97% of all Dutch people, believers and non believers, want the church to go on existing and play an active role in political and cultural life. They trust and expect from church organizations a specific and reliable contribution to all kinds of ethical discussions. Which are not based on self-interest or short time aims but are built on strong humanizing values based on here and now transcending experiences and views. Religious leaders are taken very seriously in debates about the social and economic future of the country and the world.

The developments around Islam have only intensified these expectations. While for many people fundamentalist religion is seen as a threat to peace and stability in the world it has been pointed out by rabbi Jonathan Sacks also does contribute to harmony, peace and social justice. Religion is seen not only as a part of the problem but also as a serious part of the solution of it. In an impressive way this was worked out by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his beautiful book 'the dignity of difference' in which he described what can be the contribution of the three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and the Islam - to a society based on solidarity and freedom, on reconciliation and spirituality. His book is a constructive answer to the supposed clash of civilizations of Samuel Huntington and a reaction to all that happened after 9/11.

Changes and chances

These demands out of society ask from the church and her workers a change in focus. This begs the question of what is faithfulness to Christ nowadays. In the past we had a very top-heavy sacramental presence. Now the church has been asked to give priority to be a convincing sign of a better world in a practical sense, to which people can relate. This can be seen as a challenge to return to the essence of our faith, to the centre of our vocation and mission: to bring the message of Gods love to all ends of the world, the message of peace and justice of Jesus Christ, and the holy Spirit seen in the eyes and deeds of spiritual inspired people. So then we become once more a light of the world and salt of the earth. Therefore it's necessary that we focus on what unites and not on what divides us.

In our different religions, among different Christian denominations, but also among Catholics ourselves. We must acknowledge that we are all members of the same body of Christ, all with our own talents and possibilities. We should not be afraid or jealous for one another, but walk the road together, appreciating and enjoying different views and practices. We must encourage and empower one another to become what we were meant to be from the beginning: man and woman, in the image of God.

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