

The European mood of Pannonia. A new tune for a region! A dialogue about the past, present and future of a region and its orientation towards Europe.

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The Charta Oecumenica 2001 and its impact on Europe!

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0. Introduction

The conference theme is a highly artistic and poetic mixture of metaphors, symbols and narratives.

The focus is on "**Pannonia**": a cultural landscape characterised by the harmony and simultaneity of different religions, cultures, ethnicities, languages and traditions. Pannonia is to be "**reformatted**". Perhaps this modern expression from the computer industry is exactly the right way to express what the Pannonian Academy has in mind. **Pannonia is to be opened up to Europe**. We are invited to a dialogue that focuses on the past, present and future of this landscape.

As a Protestant theologian, what can I contribute to the Pannonian "mood"? Where should I get involved? I am at home with the historical dimension of the question. The history of Christianity in this landscape was largely a history of conflict. Presenting a contribution to this would have suited me perfectly.

However, those responsible for this event have given me a completely different task, namely the **Charta Oecumenica** - it is not the conflict that is to be addressed, but the countermovement, the steps that bring us together. I will try to do this in seven steps.

1. The contribution of theology: Charta Oecumenica

As far as my theological background is concerned, I must say at the outset that I have been an enthusiastic supporter of the ecumenical movement since my youth. It started with my participation in the first ecumenical Pentecost meeting of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox youth in Graz at Pentecost 1968, just four years after the Vatican Council and the ecumenical awakening proclaimed there, and one year after the Catholic youth had joined the Ecumenical Youth Council.

Back then, we young people in Graz saw ourselves as the avant-garde of ecumenism and looked closely at how our predecessors, the "official church", had taken up this momentum. We were able to register this progress as early as 1968 with the example of the ecumenical morning prayers in broadcasting, soon followed by the mutual recognition of baptism. Every year brought some kind of innovation. In 1970, Catholic women joined the "World Day of Prayer for Women". The commitment to ecumenism was included in the parish council regulations. The so-called "ecumenical" weddings were introduced. The Catholic Church was invited to join the ÖRKÖ, where **Christine Gleixner** had been involved as an observer since 1970. In 1994, the Catholic Church became a full member, and from 2000 to 2005 she was the chairwoman for three terms.

2. Basel 1989

But now to Europe: the First European Ecumenical Assembly took place in Basel at Whitsun 1989. It was entitled "Peace in Justice" and saw itself as a "Peace Council", organised by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of Roman Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe. This opened a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, which the World Council of Churches had already called for a few years earlier. It was the first major ecumenical event to which thousands from most European churches had travelled. Although it took place before the great social change, before the fall of the Wall across Europe, many Christians from Eastern Europe were able to take part.

These participants all took with them a "commitment to an ecumenical process of peace, justice and the integrity of creation". This was to be reflected in the participating churches and implemented at local level. As a consequence of this, the Reformed Church in Vienna's Dorotheergasse erected a photovoltaic system to generate energy - for the first time on a listed building. The fruits of Basel also include the founding of the Poverty Conference and the Ecumenical Social Word, which was drawn up between 1999 and 2003, a compass that aims to indicate the direction of a humane development of society.

3. Graz 1997

The meeting in Basel, which was characterised by Protestantism, was followed by the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz in June 1997 - in a clearly Catholic environment, but this city developed into the capital of ecumenism. The theme was: **Reconciliation, God's gift and source of new life**. 10,000 participants were counted, 50% of whom had travelled from Eastern Europe - 225 Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians from Moscow alone. The **Charta Oecumenica** was planned here.

4. Charta Oecumenica

Let me summarise in a few sentences what the **Charta Oecumenica** is all about: in Graz it was decided to draw up a joint document of fundamental ecumenical duties and rights - an "agreement" on guidelines and rules on how the participating churches should shape their relations with each other as majority and minority churches in an ecumenical spirit. The delicate differentiation between church and "ecclesial communities", as laid down in the Catholic legal code Codex Iuris Canonici in can. 364 No. 6, did not play a role.

After a lengthy process, a basic text was signed in Strasbourg in 2001 by the Presidents of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC). This was a sensation, as it was the first time in the history of the ecumenical movement that such a joint text of significant scope had been signed.

There has been no shortage of criticism. I will mention just one point of criticism. It was very sharply criticised that the text articulated an awareness of the problem that was clearly located on the high

ground between Geneva and Strasbourg, but ignored the concrete situation of ecumenism in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Furthermore, its normative claim had to remain unclear.

Nevertheless, there was a document that set out "**Guidelines for growing co-operation among the churches in Europe**" and voluntarily committed the signatory churches to this - regardless of their size and political radius of action - as majority or minority churches. They committed themselves - among other things - to this:

- * not to compete with the missionary work in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe,
- * not to allow any discrimination against minority churches - a vital point of conflict between the Orthodox Church and the United Churches in Romania, Hungary and Slovakia, which was reactivated with Rome after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- * on co-operation in the process of European unification and the task of "giving Europe a soul",
- * outlaw proselytism and prevent conversions from taking place due to physical violence, moral coercion or material incentives,
- * to conciliatory contacts with Judaism,
- * to foster relations with Islam;
- * but ultimately to call for resistance when religion and church are misused for ethnic or nationalist purposes .

5. Vienna Declaration 1998

Parallel to the Charta Oecumenica, a declaration on multiculturalism and multiethnicity in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe was proclaimed in the Vienna Hofburg on 30 September 1998. This took place during the first Austrian Council Presidency and was extremely controversial in view of the planned eastward enlargement of the European Union. Unfortunately, it has been little publicised and I have hardly found it quoted. And yet it is important, especially with regard to the churches concerned in this united Europe. Among other things, it calls for interdenominational and interreligious bridge-building. It was an important text at the time, which I am happy to take up in order to show the extent to which the churches and religious communities have a duty to fulfil:

1. The churches and religious communities will preserve their traditions, but will not be able to exist in competition with each other. Rather, they must see their common task as influencing social forces and cultural forms, showing them goals and paths that serve mutual understanding and peace.
2. Ecumenical dialogue between the Christian churches of Western and Eastern tradition is just as important for the future of Europe as interreligious dialogue between Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
3. Churches and religious communities can offer guidance in constant dialogue with society, business and culture, but must not be misused to open up rifts. (...)

6. Sibiu September 2007

The Third European Ecumenical Assembly took place in a country characterised by Orthodoxy and was dedicated to the theme "**The light of Christ shines on all - hope for renewal and unity in Europe**". After forty years of communist dictatorship, Romania had just become a member of the European Union and Sibiu was the European Capital of Culture. Due to the limited capacity, the number of participants was limited to 2,400. I was one of the participants and the most important impression I took away with me was that the Charta Oecumenica was received despite strong objections.

In Vienna, we had already initiated the process of reception in 2001 with an Ecumenical Vesper in St. Stephen's Cathedral and concluded it a year later in an official service of the World Council of Churches on 20 January 2002. Since then, the Charta Oecumenica has determined everyday inter-church life and shaped the remarkable heights of the culture of co-operation.

In Sibiu, however, we were confronted with a completely different constellation of ecumenism. The Charta Oecumenica was not received, although a Romanian church historian was involved in its formulation. This refusal to accept it is probably due in part to the foreignness of the Western European awareness of problems and values. The conflict between the dominant Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church, which was forcibly reunited with it in 1948 and has been authorised again since 1990, over the restitution of church property dominated everyday life. The second largest Orthodox Church in the world, to which 87% of the population belongs, acts as the church of the majority. It is now expected to fulfil the requirements of the **Charta Oecumenica**, namely to defend the rights of minorities and help to reduce misunderstandings and prejudices between majority and minority churches.

In the final document, the **Charta Oecumenica** was recognised as a "stimulating" signpost for the ecumenical journey in Europe. The fact that its visionary power was recognised was the lasting impression of this Third Ecumenical Assembly for me.

But there was another major conflict there, which I would like to use as a transition to my final point.

7. Religion and church in the field of tension between nation and its mission of reconciliation

It was the Magyar minority churches that feared for their cultural development opportunities in the Romanian state (unlike the diminished church of the Transylvanian Saxons). They articulated this loudly at the meeting, demanding that the Hungarian place name Nagyszeben be included in the conference programme alongside Sibiu and Hermannstadt, and that Magyar should also be included as a conference language.

This brings us to a very sensitive point, which is also addressed in the **Charta Oecumenica**, namely where religion and the church are to be used for ethnic or nationalistic purposes. The **Charta Oecumenica** emphatically warns against abuse.

But where does the abuse begin? The relationship between denomination and nation is difficult to define in Romania. It is tricky wherever nation-building or the preservation of ethnic identity was determined by church and religion. This applies to a large extent to the meeting places in Eastern and South-Eastern Central Europe.

Just think of the multi-ethnic kingdom of Hungary, where the Slovaks in Upper Hungary or the Transylvanian Saxons in Transylvania were decisively saved from Magyarisation by the Lutheran Church. Or think of Orthodoxy, which was and is ethnically characterised and has a very close relationship with the respective state. Let us think of the defunct multicultural and multiethnic Yugoslavia, where Serbs were Orthodox, Croats Catholic and Bosniaks Muslim. Where is the church a carrier not only of confessional but also of ethnic identity - and where does the abuse begin? Was the demand for minority protection for the Magyars in Sibiu an abuse of religion for nationalist purposes? Or was it legitimate?

At this point, we see a difficult yardstick for the relationship between denomination and nation. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has set up a commission that has been working on this problem for a number of years. Perhaps the result can be summarised as follows: **The nation is important, but it is not sacred!**

The **Charta Oecumenica** does not demand the abandonment of an ethnic identity, but only condemns the instrumentalisation of religion for nationalistic purposes.

Our loyalty to the nation is entirely justified, but it must not be religiously exaggerated. It must be relativised by our belonging to the people of God. The church may also preserve a national heritage, but at the same time it remains within a transnational framework and is forced to endure the apostrophised tension - between nation and denomination.

When Hungarian President **Victor Orban** went public on 22 November 2022 with a scarf that showed the outlines of the old Kingdom of Hungary, thus ignoring the peace order and the Trianon border settlement, this also caused an outcry in Burgenland. **Orban** repeatedly reminds people that Magyars live in Hungary's neighbouring countries, to whom he is also happy to grant a Magyar passport and allow them to benefit from financial support. The churches have so far reacted cautiously and calmly. The Roman Catholic Church, as a global church, is not as affected as, for example, the Reformed Church, which claims to represent the Magyar faith: **magyar vallás**. Here, of course, the **Charta Oecumenica** must be recalled and the statement repeated: **The nation is important, but it is not sacred.**

Finally, Europe once again: both documents, the **Charta Oecumenica** and the Vienna Declaration cited above, have Europe in mind and they grant religion and churches a remarkable space in social discourse, call for the necessary interreligious dialogue - but exclude **negative** religiosity. Religion must not cause rifts or jeopardise social peace. Religion is good if it contributes to understanding. Under no circumstances should it promote the "clash of civilisation" (**Samuel Huntington**) or reinforce any polarisation that occurs. It should be wary of nationalism and populism, or at least approach them with caution.