

Centre de Rencontres Internationales

CENTRE DE RENCONTRES
RUE DU PANORAMA
CH-1824 CAUX
TÉL: 021 / 962 91 11
FAX: 021 / 962 93 55

pour le Réarmement moral

CAUX

BUREAU: 1, RUE DE
VAREMBÉ
CASE POSTALE 3
CH-1211 GENÈVE 20
TÉL. 022 / 733 09 20
FAX: 022 / 733 02 67

Caux, 12.07.99

Dear friends,

The first letter of a new summer in Caux, the first fresh struggle with a blank screen, and what seems to be a blank mind! How many of you can remember last year's theme? I suspect that this will not be the case this year. The metaphor, the image of cleaning our slates has certainly already deeply marked me, and seems to provoke deep reflection and sharing. It is a simple phrase, that helps us think about ourselves, our past, and to make the link with the history of the groups we belong to. And perhaps across the miles, we can be linked in an exploration of what this theme means to us. I felt that I could not come to Caux and help to lead a session on this theme without visiting a chapter from my past - something that happened 17 years ago. I was able to do it the day before coming.

Of course, it's very early days yet. The conference really started only on Saturday, at the end of one week's 'warm-up' and preparations. We're now 250 in the house, and we're thrilled that it seems set to be full for much of the summer - for the Caux Conference for Business and Industry, for the International Cities Consultation, and for the Agenda for Reconciliation - but there's still some room for the last session, A Conversation on Aims and Values for the 21st Century. The workers are still installing smoke alarms in the first floor rooms where I stay, so the corridor has a workshop air. At the start of the week, we couldn't use the main kitchen - it was closed off with plastic sheets, and was being redecorated. The road outside is still up, and traffic is one way... so it's been even harder than usual to get set.

It has helped to have time for quiet and prayer in all the busyness. We've already had two services in the Protestant chapel, plus several Catholic masses, including one in Spanish from a Colombian priest based in Montreux who came on to the opening meeting, and wants to come back this week, bringing an exiled Latin American friend. Last Sunday, Jean Piguet asked us to reflect on where we would find our refreshment of spirit, and yesterday, a new young Montreux minister invited us, in the spirit of this summer's theme, to forgive each other, to turn the page - and to keep a sense of humour, to laugh at our mistakes and not to take ourselves too seriously.

During the warm-up week, we met daily in the bay window of the great hall, and after dealing with all the practical questions of the work of the house, we reflected on a few phrases from a book by Jean Vanier on creating community (*Community and Growth*), before moving into discussion groups by language. It seems to me that there are three transformations in recent years in Caux. There has been the practical changes brought about by the hotel school - this year, new furniture in the front hall and at the reception, the coffee shop in the promenoir, the new tables and chairs in the dining rooms. But the 'spirit of Caux' does not reside in such changes - though it's not unhealthy to have practical changes to remind us of the fact!

I would suggest that the two deeper changes have been the importance that we've given to sharing in smaller groups, in the 'communities', where we do the practical work together, but where there are daily times of sharing. I'm sharing the

leadership of a community with a friend; we've met twice; and already I'm struck, stirred, deeply moved by the way that a group of people with little in common, who didn't know each other two days ago, have started to share some of the deepest things in our lives.

The second change is the *YPLT* - the young people's liaison team - the flexible group of young and not-so-young who have given a great deal of time and energy to thinking and planning for the teenagers and young adults in the house. The most visible fruit of their labours is the *Caux Café* in the third floor, a natural heart for 'cleaning the slate till late' as it is advertised, where young and old can sit and chat after the evening programme, play games, listen to music... It is hard to overestimate the importance of this change. There spirit of community, a reality of integration in the life of the conference. The *Caux Café* was inaugurated on Saturday night by Cornelio Sommaruga, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and an old friend of the house - he cut the ribbon with the scissors of his Swiss army pen-knife, after a lively question and answer session with the younger people in the house.

As we were building up to the opening, we welcomed first a small advance party, then a lively team, of young Latin Americans with the show *Gente Que Avanza*, 'people on the move'. We look forward to seeing their show tomorrow night, but we've already had a taste of their music, their energy and enthusiasm. Already in Geneva airport, they gave an impromptu presentation while waiting for a missing harp to turn up. There are some 40 of them in all, from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, South Africa, USA and Venezuela. It's a continent that I know little about - but I'm learning fast, as we all are. Their presence is an amazing result of one of those strange threads of destiny - Gunnar and Sylvie Söderlund and their family, visiting friends in South Africa for Christmas, met François Duigan, the son of the family, who is working with *Gente Que Avanza*. And the result for us is this dynamic Latin group AND a large part of the Horn-Duigan clan from South Africa...

At the opening meeting on Saturday afternoon, before a rap-song from a Norwegian team, about cleaning the slate, we heard different translations of this metaphor - and I hope we'll collect many more during the summer. They may help us to explore this rich and complex process further. It's not about amnesia, forgetting the past, or about trying to be a blank slate! In French, they talk of turning the page; in German, cleaning the table; in Dutch, cleaning up the ship; in Spanish, correcting the accounts, rubbing out the error and correcting the column of figures; in Norwegian, taking a fresh sheet of paper and a handful of coloured crayons; in Russian, a new start or a second wind were suggested.

Yesterday afternoon's session started with restful music on the piano from a Swiss handicapped woman leaving today after her first stay here - her way of saying 'thank you'. Then a talk on Frank Buchman and his experience of silence and listening provoked a deluge of interesting questions - and I hope the desire to explore silence in the days to come.

Some may be disappointed if they don't receive a weather report - it seems that the reputation of these epistles is in part linked with this element. Perhaps summer will make up its mind to arrive and to stay, but for the moment, it seems to hover, to come and to go again. It rained yesterday, and this morning we look out to grey clouds, and the threat of more rain to come. But the luxuriant nature is not complaining; the cows, the trees, the grass, the abundant wild flowers have all appreciated it.

Warm regards from a still quite chilly Caux,

Andrew Stallybrass