



## Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

### *Commission of Britain & Ireland*

[www.mid-gbi.com](http://www.mid-gbi.com)

REPORT ON DIM/MID CONFERENCE 2011

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, 29 AUGUST TO 2 SEPTEMBER

The European Commission met at 9.00 p.m. in the Monasterio de San Pelayo, Santiago de Compostela.

### PRESENT

European Coordinator	Daniel Pont
General Secretary	William Skudlarek
Italian Commission	Matteo Nicolini Zani
German/Austrian Commission	Cosmas Hoffman
French Commission	Marie Pinlou & Samuele Nouguet-Debat
Nordic Commission	GilChrist Lavigne
Nederlandophone, Belgium	Benedicte Vanhoomissen (represents both language groups)
Iberian Commission	Ramon Oranias, Coordinator
	Griselda Cos & Rosa Jimenez, Spain
	Maria Caixo, Portugal
British/Irish Commission	Lucy Brydon

The first session on Monday evening was led by Ramon Oranias to outline the time-table for the following day. The DIM/MID group would leave at 9.30 to make a mini-pilgrimage and attend Mass at noon at the Monte do Gozo, going there by bus and returning on foot. Some planned to walk each way. We would attend the Mass and veneration of Santiago in the Cathedral. The meeting of the Commissions would take place at 1600 hrs.

Monday began with Lauds with the home community in their ancient chapel (behind a grille leading to the main body of the monastery church). Then we had breakfast together and two of the group set out to walk the 5 km up to the Monte do Gozo. The rest of us got the bus up at 9.30. When we got to the top we saw the small pilgrims' chapel, and the large monument, which has a sign commemorating the visit of John Paul II. It is called Monte do Gozo because it is the last stopping place on the Camino, and from it pilgrims could see the cathedral in Santiago, their goal. Then most of us walked back and one or two took the bus. As we were walking down we saw where one or two pilgrims had thrown their shoes over the telegraph wires, in their joy and relief at having completed the Camino! We attended the Pilgrims' Mass in the cathedral. It was PACKED with pilgrims of every nation, and the concelebrating priests used the different languages of the groups they represented. For the Our Father we were all encouraged to pray aloud in our own language.

We had our second (first full) session at 4.00 p.m. after time for a short siesta. First Daniel thanked M Blanca for her hospitality and Ramon for all he had done to organise the conference, and mentioned that next year DIM/MID will meet in Bose from 1-5 October.

## GENERAL SECRETARY'S REPORT

The important things in 2010 for monastic interreligious dialogue were:

1. The anniversary of Henri le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and the various symposia, reunions, courses and books written for it in different countries, and
2. The film: **Of Gods and Men**, which made a powerful impact globally. The film was concerned chiefly with one of the Trappist monks of Mt Atlas: Christian de Cherge.

Both these brought into prominence and were great advertisements for monastic interreligious dialogue of life experience. Particularly moving was the comment in the film, when two monks were speaking with the village leaders. The monks said they did not know whether to go or stay "We are like birds on a branch". The wife of the leader replied: "No, we are the birds, and you are the branch and what will we do if you go?" This moved everyone very much.

So far in 2011 the most important (quieter) things have been

1. The establishment of *Dilatato Corde*, the new on-line journal for DIMMID, and
2. The new web site [www.dimmid.org](http://www.dimmid.org)

### DILATATO CORDE

It has made a good beginning, but it remains to be seen if it will continue. Its success will depend on our individual commissions sending things for it and encouraging people to write for one of the three sections:

1. Testimonies of personal experience of IRD. These are very important. It is not about theological ideas or concepts, but direct experiences of the Dialogue of Life.
2. Serious theological studies on themes of IRD;
3. Reflections on experiences of IRD, at a deeper level than the more narrative testimonies.

The objective is that *Dilatato Corde* should provide the raw material for theologians to go into deeper theological studies of dialogue. William gave a special word of thanks to the GBI commission for contributions to *Dilatato Corde*. (Sr Mary John, Br Herbert and Sr Lucy)

Apart from the 3 sections above, William would be glad to receive photos, videos, pictures etc. The new web site (or D.C.) could also publish reports from our individual commissions.

The model of IRD in DIM/MID is seen as western: this is all right, but we hope that people in the East and South will develop their own approach to dialogue with other faiths.

### THE FUTURE

1. From September 14-18<sup>th</sup> there will be a Catholic/Shi'a Muslim conference in Rome on "The Word of God Calling us to Prayer and Witness". William read the list of Christian participants.
2. Pierre de Bethune has called for a kind of brain storming or study group of Catholic monks/nuns and others to discuss 'the future of monasticism'. Is this a good idea? How will it work out?
3. At the next Abbots' Congress in Rome a Buddhist abbot may be invited as observer: how will this be worked out? Who should be invited? William is to make a presentation as General Secretary of DIM/MID.
4. At Assisi on October 27<sup>th</sup> there will be congress to remember the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Assisi gathering. The Italian commission (Matteo +?) will be represented. William hopes to be there too.
5. Coming towards the end of his second term as General Secretary he would like to hand over to someone in November 2013: to whom? Any ideas on who should be invited to take over? He would be willing to continue as Managing Editor of *Dilatato Corde*, which now takes up a lot of his time.

### NEW INDO-SRI LANKAN COMMISSION

During a visit to this commission, he spoke with a Jesuit leader in the area of IRD there, who is deeply convinced that the future of IRD dialogue will be (should be) monastic.

### IRD IN THE EAST

Attending a meeting in Shanghai of Benedictines of East Asia and Oceania, William saw that they are not yet ready to be involved in DIM/MID.

Things are moving in Japan where a small commission has begun. A group of monastic men and women and other religious is advising the bishops on IRD

In questions after this presentation other interesting facts emerged.

- Jose Luis Navajo of the Iberian commission is now living in Midelt, Morocco.
- The young monks of Meschede have to live in a Zen monastery for 2 days at least as part of their training and it seems to have a good effect on them.
- In Norway the bishops have appointed a commission member and they want to be involved in the work of IRD and to be informed of how MID works in the Nordic countries.

Daniel spoke of a conference of people of several religions on the importance for all of us of ecological issues. Ecology is a MAJOR issue in religion of any kind.

Finally we were asked to discuss in our language groups the question of formation in IRD for monks and nuns, especially formation personnel, and those enclosed women (usually) who cannot get to conferences or courses.

The plenary group then dispersed to separate language groups: Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone.

### **WEDNESDAY 31<sup>st</sup> August**

The first session was a talk given by Don Marcelino Agis, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Santiago, and specialist in Anthropology. He spoke (in Spanish) on "The Phenomenon of Pilgrimage: an Anthropological Perspective". He dealt with this in 3 parts:

1. The theme of Pilgrimage in general;
2. Pilgrimage as a philosophical metaphor for life (referring to a recent book of his own on this subject);
3. From his own point of view as a pilgrim who has walked the Camino several times. He is also a member of the 'Archicofradia Universal del Apostol y de la Fundacion ad Sanctum Jacobum Peregrinatio', a Catholic association/'Brotherhood' that exists to help pilgrims and foster the pilgrimage to Santiago.

The talk led to several interesting questions and comments:

- One of the dangers of the great increase in pilgrims receiving the official pilgrimage stamp (1982, 2,000; 2011, ~350,000) is the danger of placing too much importance on the act of achieving the pilgrimage and receiving the official stamp ('el Compostel') instead of seeing the whole pilgrimage as an encounter with God, and important for life. It has become a mass movement. However, it is also true that the majority of people applying for the official pilgrimage certificate give "religion" as their reason for walking the Camino.
- Many people start out on the pilgrimage as a social or sportive experience and end up as true pilgrims.
- Very little is done at an official level in Spain in the way of spiritual direction ('la pastoral') for pilgrims to enable them to continue the experience of pilgrimage in their daily life. France has begun to provide something for pilgrims returning by the French route.
- Some hostels now exist in Spain, like the old ones – simply to welcome and succour pilgrims and provide food, shelter and medical help.
- Even some HOTELS give free breakfast to the first group of pilgrims who arrive each day, in memory of the original meaning of hostels on the Camino.
- Some hostels organised by Benedictine Sisters (e.g. in Leon and Aragon) are proving more popular than official hostels, because of the historical link with pilgrimage and monasteries.
- The minimum distance for a "pilgrimage" is the last 100 km on foot. In the Spanish route, it is from the province of Galicia; the Portuguese route starts further from the Portuguese border.
- The Benedictine Sisters in Leon offer spiritual guidance and prayer to pilgrims as well as material helps.
- A significant sign of the meaning of pilgrimage is found on the main cathedral door: instead of Alpha-Omega, it has Omega-Alpha: this led to an interesting discussion about ends and beginnings in life's

journey and recalled for some of us TS Eliot's poem: Little Gidding (Four Quartets) and the lines about the end being the beginning and "we know ourselves for the first time".

The morning session finished at 1300 hrs. The midday meal was at 1400, and the Meeting of the Commissions at 1600 as yesterday

### **MEETING OF THE COMMISSIONS**

We decided not to meet in language groups but to stay in the plenary group, so it was all in French. Questions asked, and discussed were

*Dilatato Corde*: do we use it? How often? What do we think about it? How can we use it better?

Translations in D.C. Various opinions were expressed. Everyone agreed on the importance of keeping it **monastic**, even at the risk of talking about ourselves!

Proposal by Pierre de Bethune: It is basically a good idea if we start in a small way and keep control of how it develops. Bilateral dialogue based on friendship has proved its worth.

**N.B.** William proposed that each commission should plan an event in 2012 for some one (or ones) to meet with a Buddhist monk or nun to ask about what monastic life must do to continue to be beneficial for the world. Next year, or on a page in *Dilatato Corde* we may have something to report at the DIM/MID meeting. The question might be something like: *Should monasticism continue to exist? Why?*

After a break the group began again at 5.55, with news from all the commissions, each person recounting what seemed most important.

After discussing tomorrow's time-table, and mentioning the dates for 2012 (Bose 1-5 October) and the place for 2013 (France) the group disbanded for the day.

### **THURSDAY**

1000 Canon Don Jenaro Cebrian Franco on Pilgrims and Pilgrimage.

Don Jenaro's talk was mainly based on statistics of the pilgrimages. For example that in 1985 2,500 people received the "Compostela" stamp to show they had done the Camino. In 2010 it was 300,000. Number goes up and down according to Holy Year or ordinary year. It has become a mass movement. He spoke of the huge variety of reasons why people make the Camino. The official office asks them choose 1 of 3 before deciding on the stamp: Religious reasons; Religious and other reasons; non-religious reasons. He mentioned other statistics: Means of pilgrimage: from the majority walking, to a tiny percentage in wheelchairs. The Spanish are the great number, and apart from them Germans. The percentage of foreigners is on the increase, and the general number of pilgrims, including from the Far East is also increasing. His conclusion is that "the vocation of pilgrimage" is working for people. Media articles, stories and films, and books about the Camino have also had an effect. His talk was enlivened with some interesting and very moving stories of people who told their own story to him. Grace seems to abound. One will suffice: a Physicist from Geneva had cycled to Compostela, without any religious reason for doing it. On the way he had a Damascus experience. When he got to Santiago, he looked for the official church representative (Don Jenaro) and told his story and asked the same question St Paul asked on the road: "What should I do?" He returned home and to his faith. Some people have the opposite experience: nothing ... He told us that he could see that the Camino and Santiago itself is a privileged place of evangelisation. He feels that the Church is missing a huge opportunity here, not realising the great importance of spiritual direction for pilgrims both before and after the Camino. In an average year, nearly 3 million pilgrims pass through the Cathedral of Compostela, and in the Holy Years, about 8 million. These are only statistics showing those who walk (or otherwise) the pilgrim way, which must be at least 100 km on foot. There are no statistics about the many people coming as pilgrims in a smaller way, like many Spaniards and others do, by coach, car etc. to the shrine of St James.

Most people, no matter where or why they started, end up having a similar experience – surprised by the joy, love, sharing, helping and kindness they experience. Many leave written testimonies, all very moving. They frequently leave phrases like: “The Camino is Life”. In Spanish this works both ways.

After a coffee break we returned for a Commission meeting to talk about our conclusions on this meeting, and perspectives for the future. We also did some planning for European Conference 2012 in Bose. Daniel reviewed the work of the week. He gave a special word of encouragement for the GBI commission setting out to organise itself without a coordinator, and thanked Sr Lucy for her work over the past years.

At 4.00 p.m. we assembled at our place of ‘statio’ and went to visit the ancient monastery of St Martin Pinario. Before going to San Martin, we visited the official centre of pilgrimage and Don Marcelino, who spoke to us earlier showed a promotional film and talked us through it. The film was in French but there were opportunities for questions in Spanish and English afterwards. Then we walked up to San Martin which is a big church, former monastery, but now a museum. It had lots of examples of baroque style in church work (altars, reredos etc) and some beautiful wood carving in the monks’ choir.

We went back to San Pelayo for a tea break, and then, M Blanca took us to the community room (or a study room). Ramon first introduced us by name and country, and then M Blanca asked Sr Griselda to tell everyone why and how she had got into interreligious dialogue. It was a good choice: they know her and she spoke simply and eloquently of dialogue and its importance to her life. After her, William spoke in Portuguese, and then everyone in turns, in whatever language they liked. I spoke in Spanish. Maria (Portugal) translated English and French for the Sisters. She has done a tremendous job through the whole week.

After Vespers and Mass we had a quick tour of the ENORMOUS monastery.

## **FRIDAY**

Departure and return to our own countries.