

AISGA EASTER NEWSLETTER; A Visit to

Finland with SD Europe

February 2010



This year SD Europe's had its Annual Conference in Turku in Finland from Feb 24th to March 1st. Turku is a southern sea-coast city in Finland which maintains contact by ferry twice daily through the Baltic to Stockholm in Sweden. All during the winter when temperature can drop as low as -20, small boats go ahead of the large ferries to break up the ice to allow the ferries proceed on their journey. It was an education in itself to watch this procedure at work.

Arrival Wednesday Feb 24th

Because we had a delay at Helsinki airport before the departure by bus to Turku, Rev Helena Kolki (A member of SD Europe) along with her husband Emmo came to the airport and brought Noreen O Shea and myself (Una Agnew) on a tour of the city. They showed us the most historic churches and invited us to lunch with them in a restaurant for retired people; this highlighted Finland's excellent social services. The sun was shining on a snow-covered city which made this a truly memorable day. It was impressive to see Helsinki Cathedral, in all its snowwhite majesty against the mounds of snow which rose several feet high against the buildings. Even the Finns have found this winter challenging!



We were both deeply impressed by another of Helsinki's churches which is carved out of granite and recessed in a mountain.



SD Europe representatives from all over Europe took part in this conference at which Noreen and represented AISGA and Ireland. We find it good to maintain links with spiritual direction in mainland Europe and dialogue with countries like The Netherlands who have also chosen to organise themselves into a professional organisation like AISGA. We have acted, with them, in a semi-advisory capacity. Participants at the conference ranged hailed from: Belgium, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, The Grand Canaries, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, The Czech Republic. In all there were approx 67 participants and all input and business was conducted in English. The largest number naturally came from Finland itself, the host country, where spiritual direction is particularly strong. Finland is almost exclusively a Lutheran country. We were graciously hosted by the Lutheran Church there in a collegium-hotel complex, normally used for the training and on-going education for ministries in the Lutheran Church. Our stay was subsidised by the Lutheran Church and the hospitality offered us was superb. The structure of the Conference followed its usual format drawing mainly from the resources of the participants themselves and especially, in this case, the native spiritual resources of Finland

Introductions: Boundaries disappear



The Committee of SDE Europe organised a bus from Helsinki airport to Turku and after supper the evening was dedicated to introductions in a formal setting as each country's representatives introduced themselves separately. Each one selected a miniature tree from a hundred little trees that

depicted a series of boundaries across the centrepiece of the assembly room. At the end of the evening boundaries were symbolically dissolved while a full circle of trees was formed and all mingled to find friends and acquaintances from a variety of nations. We prayed together in a spirit of gathering and respect for otherness. English is the working and praying language of this conference, a factor which was a huge advantage for Noreen and myself.

Thursday a.m. 'I arise today...'

On Thursday morning I was charged with the task, previously arranged, of conducting morning worship to which I gave a distinctly Celtic flavour around the concept of *lorica* and protection. Along with prayers and readings for Lent we had Shaun Davey's "The Deer's Cry" and Carmel Boyle's and Brid O'Hare's "Celtic Songs of Earth and Heaven". In true Irish style we prayed our Trinitarian hymn: "We are "bending our knee in the Eye of the Father who made me" etc.

We had morning prayer together each day and an evening Eucharist: Lutheran, Anglican or Catholic. As well as that the Roman Catholics among us had an early morning Mass before breakfast. There were at least 20 RCs in the group between religious, priests and laity. However the conference was conducted in a genuinely ecumenical spirit.

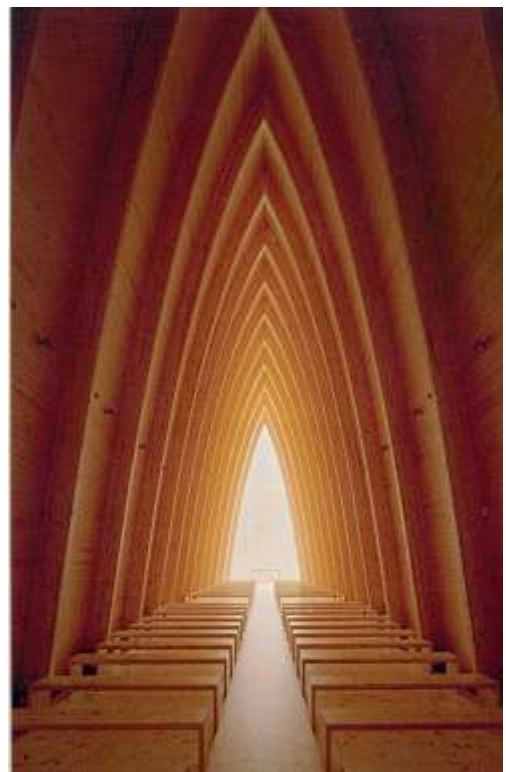
One of the highlights for me was a meditation and sharing on a Finnish fresco entitled "The Wounded Angel" (1903) which hangs in the Cathedral of Tampere, the spiritual capital of Finland. The artist Hugo Simberg did not wish to interpret his painting but it was voted painting of Finland in 2006. As spiritual directors we meditated long and prayerfully on it, so that the sharing was rich and deeply felt. The guiding questions were: What do you see in the picture? Where are *you* in the picture? Who/what does the wounded angel represent? ... There are no correct answers but sharing in a group on this can be deeply moving.



The wounded Angel' by Hugo Simbery

Friday: Pilgrims in the city Turku

The arched wood of St Henry's Ecumenical Art Chapel was a spiritual moment in itself during our morning pilgrimage through Turku. One only had to stand in this church, the light refracted along the recurring and upward reaching archways workmanship to be moved to pray in what one could only genuinely a mystical landscape. It was a prize winning design from Matti Sanksenaho's architect's firm and was awarded the International Grand Prix for architecture in 2007. A selection of Bach's orchestral preludes and fugues set the atmosphere for a period of quiet meditation. Turku is to be the **cultural capital of Europe in 2011**



Another high point for me was a discussion we had in small groups on a new prize-winning film just released in Finnish entitled, "The Letters of Fr Jacob" subtitled in English. The film portrays an elderly blind priest who received hundreds of letters from people asking for help in difficulty. He needs a scribe to answer his letters and the government assigns him a prisoner just released from a life sentence to answer his mail. This woman's story and how she deals with her situation forms the kernel of the drama that ensues. The film weaves slowly and meditatively around one holy man's inner vision, the plight of his reluctant helper and the priest's struggle to wrestle with a need to be needed. The filmmaker Klaus Haro's rationale for making this film was "I felt that I had received so much from faith, that I wanted to give something back".



Like the deer that yearns for running streams...



Leila has already decided to leave the rectory when the letters suddenly stop coming. Jacob's life is shaken to its foundation as their two completely different lives are intertwined unexpectedly, and the roles of the helper and the one being helped are turned upside down.

Saturday was our day of quiet retreat.

Osmo Ruahala is one of the better known Finnish Artists. His painting of the deer that yearns for running streams is one of the paintings in St Olaf's Church in Sastamala inspired us throughout our quiet day.

Traditional Finnish Sauna was also part of the quiet day. It was carefully explained to us that contrary to popular opinion, sauna is a spiritual experience, one where one lays down one's burden and rests in meditative silence. It is a purification of our inner and outer personal world and leads to deep inner restfulness. I enjoyed it a lot.



St Olaf's Church which also features in 'the letters of Fr Jacob

On Saturday night we partied a little, flushed with the excitement of Ireland's win over England in the 6 Nations rugby. We tried to be sensitive towards our English colleagues and they were gracious in defeat. The Finnish people are serious and a little sad so it was good that Noreen and I were able to teach them the 'Walls of Limerick' and quite a few nationalities got up and danced it with us. The houses in Finland are so well heated inside that we hardly knew that the temperatures outside were never above freezing point and often below. I had brought a gift of smoked salmon for

the group from Ireland but it was like bringing coals to Newcastle—Finland is awash with smoked salmon! Next year the meeting is scheduled for Germany, beginning Feb 24th once more. I'll carefully select what I should bring there as a taste of Ireland! Perhaps we can entice a few more AISGA members to become members of SD Europe and join us at the Conference. Early booking of travel tickets saves money.

All in all thanks to the excellent conference and the added hospitality of the SD Europe Committee along with the Kolki family in Helsinki, Noreen and I received an excellent experience of Finnish culture, Finnish hospitality and Finnish spirituality. We saw at close range the country's superior care of its citizens in excellent social services. We learned firsthand of Finland's sad history of conflict with Norway, Sweden and even more intensely with Russia. Slowly it has emerged as an independent self-reliant state dependent on trade with Norway and Sweden and struggling each year with the ice-bound Baltic. Currently it struggles with recession and the people wonder if taxes will continue to be sufficient to provide them with the social services to which they have grown accustomed.

AISGA Business

The Board of AISGA will be meeting our accountants Dunne and McNulty on May 20th to present our accounts to these registered accountants and auditors. This annual process is carried out to confirm that our books are in order and our records kept in accordance with Company Law. Tom Cooney OSA, Treasurer is particularly busy at this time collecting receipts and, along with Sorcha Woods, preparing the accounts for inspection.

Because of the Haiti disaster this year, you will be happy to know that the Board of Aisga made a decision to send €1000 to the Trocaire Haiti Fund on all our behalf.

It was also decided to give €500 to our own St Vincent de Paul to alleviate poverty in Ireland in these recessionary times.

Newly Accredited Members

It was with a great sense of pride in our Association that twenty new certificates have been issued to many of the first founder members. These have now renewed their license as fully accredited spiritual directors until 2015.

While new members continue to join AISGA, and applications for full membership continue to arrive by post, it is timely that we acknowledge those who have embraced this ministry and exercised it so competently over the past five to six years. We wish them continued success and blessing in this hidden and often solitary work of Spiritual Guidance.

Reminder: June 4th

All is in readiness for Beverly Lanzetta's visit on June 4th. Henry Morgan, Chairperson of SD Europe hopes to be present at our meeting. He wants to express solidarity with us and meet members of AISGA at one of our functions. I'm sure we will find a moment during the day to introduce him to the group.

Jack Finnegan, our Chairperson is lecturing Slovakia at the present time. He would have liked to have time to write a special Easter message to all members at this time, nevertheless he sends his good wishes from across the Continent and prays that each one may experience a truly blessed Easter.

It remains for me, on my own behalf and on behalf of the Board Members, to wish each and every member of AISGA a Happy Easter and to repeat once more that wonderful prayer of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Let him easter in us,

be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east.

[Gerard Manley Hopkins from his poem 'The Wreck of the Deutschland']