

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As chairman of the Foundation Communicantes it is my great pleasure to welcome you all at our small conference "Women in the Catholic Church of Eastern Europe".

The Foundation Communicantes is very happy to host this conference, which is one of the ways in which we want to further the exchange between the Roman Catholic Church, between Christians, in the Netherlands and in Eastern Europe.

This exchange, which was always an important focal point of our foundation, will receive even greater attention in years to come. Following an assessment by an external advisor, we are now discussing the future of Communicantes. Hopefully, we will be able to update our working methods in such a manner that our foundation can achieve its goals consistently, methodically and attentively.

Our slogan is "constructive collaboration and mutual understanding". It is a reference to the motto of Communicantes, which our founder, the Sacramentine Father Jan Bakker, borrowed from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans chapter 12 verse 13.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to extend a warm welcome to our distinguished speakers: Mrs. Kristina Misiniene from Lithuania, Dr. Marta Bodo from Romania and Sister Rebeka Anic from Croatia. I thank you for coming to the Netherlands to inform us about the situation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe.

Next, I would like to welcome the guests to our conference. I am very happy you made it all safely to Hernen. I hope you will enjoy this day.

Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to Mrs. Victoria van Aelst of the Brediusstichting for receiving us so well at castle Hernen. Thank you ever so kindly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

let me take you back to the days of communist Eastern Europe. Perhaps you know these posters in the style of social realism depicting women driving a tractor or working in a steel factory? Well, actually, this image of women doing a man's job is a cliché that, for some obscure reason, got stuck in the minds of many people in the West. In fact, if we look closer at the reality of communism, we see that icons like the typical woman manual worker and the first woman cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova in 1963 were indeed rare exceptions to the rule.

As such socialism and communism were rather traditional, even bourgeois in their conception of the roles men and women had to play. Actually, there existed a clear distinction between men and women. Muscled men were depicted doing something with guns and bombs, with steel and coal, above ground and underground. There was dirt, blood, sweat and tears. Furthermore, women were under-represented in top management or high office.

However, if women were shown doing manual labour, they would do light work generally speaking. Also, working women were framed in a specific setting: in hospital or at the collective farm. Preferably, women were shown as taking care of children, picking cotton or harvesting weed. Women were shown caring, nursing, feeding and doing other traditional tasks which were generally attributed to women.

Women were looking happy, determined, sturdy and healthy. This, of course, does not mean that women had or have an easy life. Perhaps their reality looked and looks more like the poster of a Vietnamese woman with a baby on one arm and a Kalashnikov machinegun in the other shooting at American helicopters. Unintentionally, this iconic anti-imperialist freedom fighter illustrates the dilemma and the hardship of many women, who not only spend long hours at work but who also need to be a fulltime mother. Of course, communist women were the best and they could fulfil both roles in the same time.

These images from the communist days are not completely unfamiliar to us. This was, by and large, the way how we looked at differences between men and women before the 1970s in the Netherlands. Today, however, women's emancipation is not a hot and widely debated subject. Women's emancipation seems to have attained all its main goals. For example: the idea of a fundamental equality between men and women is so deeply rooted, that anyone who would want to put this equality in question runs the risks of being accused of cultural illiteracy or of backwardness. Since the turn of the century, the topics of women's emancipation and feminism have more or less disappeared from public discourse, and in church circles as well. To put it shortly, feminism and women's emancipation fell victim to their own success.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

in Eastern Europe, however, things are more complex. First of all, the rather limited stereotypical communist point of view did not disappear after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the demise of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In a country like Lithuania there are now less women in Parliament than at the end of the communist era. Of course, this must be said, Lithuania's President is the elegant Ms. Dalia Grybauskaitė who has a black belt in karate.

In Romania, for example, feminism is considered as something coming from the West and as an attempt at forcing political correctness upon Romanian society. Feminism, race and class go together and are considered to be part of specific agenda.

With more than 20 percent of female Parliamentarians, Croatia seems to have a relatively good track record, but there is still much that needs to be done. There exists, for example, legislation for equal treatment, but it remained without much effect. Changes for women often occurred only on paper.

Now. If we look at Church in Eastern Europe, it must be clear that the Orthodox, Protestant or Roman Catholic Churches are certainly not at the forefront of the fight for women's rights. In fact, women's issues have not been given any priority whatsoever. And what is more, women's issues and women who want to address these issues are considered with great suspicion. The study thereof is merely tolerated.

To use the word "feminism" is a dangerous thing to do, because the word itself already raises a suspicion of heterodoxy, a liberal or even libertarian attitude. The word "gender" is an even more dangerous word. The reason is that gender is a relativistic notion, which opposes the idea of a once and for all unchangeable nature of men and women. Therefore it might contain a positive attitude towards the fight for equal rights for homosexuals as well.

Looking at it more closely, I imagine that we see here a struggle to come to terms with modern society. On the one hand, there is a traditional and static idea of men and women and of the society they live. In the past believers, and non-believers alike, were expected to obey to traditional ideas about social class, sexuality and work to the best of his abilities. On the other hand there is a modern more fluid notion of what a man or a woman is. Today, however, we do not thoughtlessly follow pre-established patterns and harmonies, but we chose what seems to fit our character, our personal interests and convictions: individually and creatively.

Both systems have positive and negative aspects. The first one, focuses on collective, social dimension at the cost of individuality and of creativity. The second somehow illusively pretends that the individual is a unique and sole source of truth and that pre-established patterns and harmonies.

In Eastern Europe, the traditional and static idea of men and women and of society prevails and it is, generally speaking, too awkward, too difficult for Church leaders, clergy but also for many believers to see things differently.

This is tragic, because the idea of a more personal approach to life choices is not necessarily in conflict with traditional values and ideas. It is tragic also, because an exclusively defensive attitude has also serious practical and pastoral consequences.

As Kristina Misiniene knows from her experience, it is very difficult for Lithuanian Catholics to look differently at a victim of illegal trafficking than as a sinner. However, if this was the only criterion to judge a victim of illegal trafficking, this would barely help someone to overcome his or her experiences.

Similarly, Marta Bodo will tell us something more about the experiences of women in the Roman Catholic Church of Transylvania, in Western Romania. About how an over-exaggerated trust in traditional ways of looking at women and at men risks of overlooking key questions and problems.

Finally, Sister Rebeka Anic will have a more theoretical discussion about male and female in the Church and how men and women are differently viewed in the Christian Churches, even if the Gospel provides us Christians with clear incentives to do away with sexual differences. Sister Rebeka will also give some examples from her Croatian context.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I suppose, we have here the ingredients of an interesting conference. I wish you a very pleasant day.