



Communicantes Newsletter 2012/2 Christmas

Heaven out of view, our wishes what are they? – Roman Antiquities, William Wordsworth

Dear friend of Communicantes. The year is drawing to a close and because the great cosmic crash that the Mayas had installed for us will undoubtedly pass us by in silence, it may be useful to highlight the most important events of this year and to look forward to 2013.

For Communicantes the year 2012 was very busy, a bit confusing but refreshing in the same time. A company advisor had a close look at our foundation and she concluded that we must adjust our ideal of exchange and dialogue with the Church in Eastern Europe to 21st century requirements. Board members and employee of Communicantes could not agree less and will investigate how to make our foundation ready for the future.

An external audit has its good uses. Someone unfamiliar to Communicantes looks from a different angle, holds less prejudices and looks critically at hobbyhorses. An auditor can define problems, but also make suggestions

for improvement. Many things we heard for the first time – good things but also things which definitely need to be improved. Still, it remains difficult to assess whether solutions will really work. This is why the whole process is confusing and refreshing.

At this moment, it is still too early to give you some clear-cut ideas, but you will find some very concrete examples of change in the column on the right.

This assessment procedure was time consuming and obviously cost a lot of energy. Of course, daily duties needed to be fulfilled as well. Traces of all that hard work you can find on our [website](#). Hopefully, you will enjoy the reading. There are also quite a few interesting links, you may want to explore.

Frans Hoppenbrouwers visited Ukraine in April/May and attended an [ESWTR](#) – *European Society of Women in Theological Research* – conference in Croatia in early September. It

was sponsored by Communicantes. Indeed, the role and problems of women in Church and Society are underestimated. On 3 November 2012 Communicantes organised a meeting about the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church of Eastern Europe.

Two weeks ago, Frans Hoppenbrouwers returned from Lithuania and Latvia. During this visit, partners were explicitly invited to express their opinion about our mission of exchange and dialogue between the Church in the Netherlands and in Eastern Europe. It was somehow comforting to hear that there exists a clear interest in the Dutch Roman Catholic Church. On the next page (p. 2) you will find four *miniatures*, highlighting my recent trip to Lithuania and Latvia.

On behalf of the board of Communicantes I wish you a blessed Christmas and a happy New Year,
Frans Hoppenbrouwers.

Looking at the Future

Communicantes is becoming more interactive. A recent innovation was to improve our internet presence. First, we created a **Facebook page**. There, friends and subscribers can receive updates of news about Church and religion in Eastern Europe and about Communicantes. There, the recent visit to Lithuania and Latvia was publicised, highlighting a meeting or a specific event. Second, Communicantes created the **Twitter account** @communicantes. Tweets with news are made available to followers. They appear at our website and Facebook page as well. Our **LinkedIn** page already exists for some time now.

- Communicantes on the Internet**
- [Facebook](#)
 - [Twitter](#)
 - [LinkedIn](#)
 - [Website](#)



Yes, both Sister Ligita Ryliskyte (on the right) and Frans Hoppenbrouwers of Communicantes (left) made the same remarkable discovery in the years following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe (1989-1991). Theologians have thoroughly neglected the theme of communist religious persecution and sometimes even physical fight for survival of the Christian faith. I spoke about this with Sister Ligita, but she doesn't understand it either, even after several years of studying this topic.

It is strange, because, after all, there exists something like "theology after Auschwitz" – thinking about the meaning of the holocaust for modern Christian faith. However, theologians in East and in West did not rise to the occasion.

Of course, it is a good thing that Sister Ligita works as a cardiologist at Vilnius university. She is a great asset to her congregation. Still, it is a pity that her study is not advancing fast. In 2011 she wrote a very nice article about a Lithuanian priest and a lay woman, who suffered under the terror until death during the reign of Soviet-dictator Joseph Stalin and his successors: [Spiritual Freedom as Liberation Within](#).

I had remarkably open conversations about faith and Church in Ludza, near the Latvian-Russian border. There, the Sisters of the Eucharist Jesus are working in youth and parish pastoral care. Communicantes has helped them for several years now to carry out their mission.

After an adventurous five hours drive on icy roads, I had interesting discussions with a group of active parishioners in Ludza. One statement stuck to my mind. A husband who had come along with his wife explained that he didn't trust the Church at all, but immediately added that the parish priest is good and that he visits church on great feast days. It was interesting to hear someone speak out like this. I remember very well from my last visit in 2005, how people were much more closed in themselves and did not feel so free to say what was on their mind.

In Lithuania and in Latvia, I heard that there seems to be a marked decline in religious fervour, vocations are dropping steeply and the words of church leaders are no longer self-explanatory. This is also a reason why there is an interest in the Dutch Roman Catholic Church: to learn from mistakes and to find good solutions.

My trip to Lithuania and Latvia gave me the possibility to absorb the religious and cultural heritage. The Priestless Old Believers community in Jekabpils, Latvia, is a great example. This Old Believers Church broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century.

The Old Believers Church is like a little time machine, recalling 19th century Holland: ultra-traditional with rock solid morals and beliefs. However, a comparison with the Netherlands reveals some confusing details. These Old Believers do not have priests but lay ministers: *nastavniki*. They baptise, hear confession and bless marriages. Furthermore, their work ethics and modesty is truly Calvinistic – sociologist Max Weber would have liked them a lot. But then there are complex rituals, intense adoration of icons and elaborate liturgies which are not exactly old-Calvinistic.

In 2005, when I first visited Jekabpils, the *nastavnik* favoured a reunion with the Russian Orthodox Church. It created a deep rift in the community. One can still feel the pain today.

The [website](#) of the parish has good information, many photos and videos (in Russian).

Caritas Latvia coordinator Egita Volinska had invited me to meet in her office in Riga. It was icy cold inside, so we decided not to take our coats off. There, the mother of twins is trying to put Caritas on the right track. It is not an easy task, because Latvia's Roman Catholic Church is rather small. Needs are plenty, however.

Mrs. Volinska must deal with several difficult tasks and introducing the common Caritas quality requirements is one of the toughest. But her work is not only about introducing uniform and transparent working methods. She must also find new volunteers and raising funds: without extra hands and without money the Caritas work stalls. With just a few collaborators it is extremely difficult to promote the good functioning of diocesan and parish Caritas offices.

Fortunately for Egita Volinska, the Archbishop of Riga, Dr Zbignevs Stankevics, is an active and enthusiastic supporter of the Caritas mission. Archbishop Stankevics succeeded in 2010 to cardinal Janis Pujats.

The [website](#) of Caritas Latvia may give you an idea of what it is about (only in Latvian).