

A few weeks ago we had the kick-off of the academic year of the universities in Belgium. This unofficially also means the start of the year of our parish St. Martha & St. Mary's, a parish that attracts mostly students. For me it meant that the diary was getting quite a bit fuller.

At the beginning of that week I went to the opening mass of the Catholic University in Leuven. My chaplain had asked me to represent our parish by leading in a prayer of intercessions. Even though I have been studying in Leuven over the past three years I never went to this ceremony, which may have to do with the fact that I never studied at this particular university... Anyhow I did not really know what to expect.

I was expected at 9 o'clock at the side entrance to the St. Peters Church in Leuven. St. Peters is a massive and gorgeous church that I only ever visit when I have got family or friends over in Leuven. As I went in my nerves started telling me the church was way, way larger than the last time I visited. Soon after I was introduced to the other people invited to lead in a prayer of intercession. Each one of them represented a different religious group. There were representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, Hinduism, Baha'I and myself representing the Anglican Church.

Just after we had received instructions, mainly on how not to fall over the stairs to the stage, the *togati* (professors) came marching in. It took about 10 minutes for all of them to find their seat, they may look intelligent in their academic gowns, but finding a spot proves hard even for them.

A beautiful service followed and after the homily we prayed our prayers each in accordance with our own tradition. Holy Communion followed and as the priest was pouring the wine my Muslim friend turned to me and whispered: "Why is the wine white, when it is supposed to resemble blood?" to which I did not know the answer.¹ He then joked: "So, you really do drink alcohol in church?" we both grinned.

After the ceremony we went for a coffee with all the representatives and the priests who lead the service. I happened to share vegetarianism with my hindu neighbour and had an interesting conversation as to whether Jesus would have been a vegetarian. We concluded he would have been if he were to come this day and age. I thought our interreligious dialogue went pretty well, although we did not reach consensus on veganism.

On a more serious note, I felt blessed beyond measure to stand among these truly beautiful people. And having prayed for unity among the different religions it truly felt that that prayer was answered there and then as we had honest and open conversations with each other, accompanied by a good laugh and a cup of coffee (with soy milk of course).

As the Dutch saying goes: "Een goed begin is het halve werk." And "een goed begin" of CEMES it was!

¹ Later I was told this is to avoid stains.

Attached is the prayer I prayed:

We pray for political and religious leaders, that they might inspire the people of our world to work for peace. *We thank you especially for those political leaders who seek to lead with righteousness, courage and compassion. We pray that you will guide them in wisdom and strength to do what is best for this world. Likewise we bring to you all our religious leaders, we pray that you will give them an open heart and clear mind to work on unity within and outside the religion. That together they may find the strength and vision to work on a world filled with faith, hope and love.*