

Dialogue without Borders: An Account of Sant'Egidio's Activities, and Experiences from an Exchange Year



Sofia Lemmetyinen studied comparative religion and international organisations at Åbo Akademi University (Turku, Finland) 2001-2007 and did her exchange year at Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) 2004-2005. The exchange year – a source of inspiration for her choice of thesis topic – was particularly important for her academic specialisation and professional endeavours. In this article, she gives an overview of her thesis on a Catholic lay movement, Comunità di Sant'Egidio, which has become renowned for its peace efforts and various dialogue initiatives.

When I started my exchange year in Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), I was not quite sure what to expect from my year abroad. One thing was sure, though: I had applied for exchange in this university due to its vast choice of interesting specialisation courses in cultural and political studies.

In one of these courses, I wrote an essay about the originally Italian but today nearly global Catholic lay organisation, *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*¹, and its role as a peace facilitator in the Algerian conflict in the 1990s. At this point, I was not familiar with Sant'Egidio's work, but from the beginning I found the subject of religious peacebuilding, i.e. how



¹ I will hereafter use the shorter version *Sant'Egidio*. More information about the organisation can be found here: www.santegidio.org.

religious actors may be involved in processes preventing or transforming violent conflict into sustainable peace, both interesting and groundbreaking. It is fair to say that my exchange year was an important source of inspiration for choosing a thesis topic and a building block for networking, thus determining my academic and professional specialisation.

*On the Borderlines between Dialogue and Diplomacy – the Catholic Lay Organisation Comunità di Sant'Egidio as a Transnational Actor*² is a thesis written for the department of comparative religion at Åbo Akademi University in 2006-2007. It is an analysis of a contemporary Catholic organisation described from an internal and external perspective. By internal perspective I mean an analysis of the internal structure and function of the organisation in line with religious sociological methods. Four chapters out of eight are dedicated to the background, religiosity/spirituality, structure and activities of



the community. Thanks to field observation and interviews with members of Sant'Egidio in November 2005 and April 2006 (in Belgium and Italy), I managed to collect relevant and illustrating data to my thesis. The focus of my research was to *understand* the organisation, not simply describe, and for this purpose maintaining direct contacts with members of the organisation became crucial, if not necessary.

Besides the internal aspect of the organisation, the thesis also aims at analysing the organisation from an external perspective by contextualising its values, structural set-up and functions. Cultural globalisation theories represent the main theoretical framework of the thesis. By using sociological theories about religious cohesion and conflict, according to which religious actors relate to their environment either in an inclusive or an exclusive way, the thesis seeks to exemplify how a contemporary Catholic lay organisation chooses to respond to the challenges of a

² Translated from Swedish: I dialogens och diplomatins gränstrakter – den katolska lekmannaorganisationen Comunità di Sant'Egidio som transnationell aktör, Åbo Akademi University, 2007.

globalised world in an inclusive manner by accepting pluralism and religious cooperation.

Dialogue is a key word in understanding how a religious organisation can act inclusively and in the case of Sant'Egidio, dialogue is a principle, means and result of its various activities. Sant'Egidio promotes and practices dialogue on a variety of issues with persons representing different social, religious, cultural, ethnic or other backgrounds. The thesis analyses systematically the nature of dialogue that Sant'Egidio conducts and concludes that it exemplifies four types of dialogue, according to the typology developed by Eric J. Sharpe (2005)³, namely



Buberian, discourse, secular and spiritual dialogue. These types of dialogue may overlap or take place separately depending on each situation. For instance, in the case of Sant'Egidio, secular dialogue tends to take place in the organisation's peace negotiation efforts at international and transnational levels, while spiritual dialogue is mainly limited to interreligious meetings and activities undertaken at local level.

In the case of Sant'Egidio the analysis of globalisation and dialogue can be brought even further, namely to include international politics and the practice of diplomacy. Following its principle of inclusive friendship and dialogue, Sant'Egidio has become involved in various peace mediation processes and played an important role as a peace facilitator in a dozen of conflicts in the world, since 1982. In order to understand the linkage between dialogue and diplomacy, the terminological differences between these concepts are discussed and the thesis comes to the conclusion that if diplomacy is

³ Eric J. Sharpe, "Dialogue of Religions", in Lindsay Jones, (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 2005, Vol. 4, pp. 2342-2345.

understood in inclusive terms, i.e. as an activity constructed from dialogue with the aim of mediating otherness⁴, Sant'Egidio could easily be identified as an actor of intercultural, transnational diplomacy. The argument goes that the role of transnational non-state actors in international politics has become more important during the post-Cold War globalised world order. Diplomatic activities, traditionally represented by governments, are not restricted to governmental actors only – rather, non-state actors such as religious organisations can play an increasingly important role as peace brokers. This transformation process, including the emergence of new diplomatic avenues, is one of the core questions in contextualising and understanding Sant'Egidio and its diplomatic potential in a changing world.

One of my personal conclusions after this learning process, which started during my exchange year in Belgium and culminated in my thesis, is that more research about



religious peacebuilding actors and the evolving nature of diplomacy is needed. The sociological theories of religious responses to globalisation show that besides the exclusive and potentially more conflict prone reaction towards globalisation and pluralism, religious organisations may also choose to act in an inclusive manner,

welcoming cooperation and dialogue with various actors. In order to balance the biased information in media and popular culture which sometimes depict religions as sources of conflict, it would not only be interesting, but also timely and necessary, to pay more attention to the potential of religious peacebuilding, in order to understand its possible advantages or disadvantages.

⁴ Cf. James Der Derian "Diplomacy", in John Krieger (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Politics of the World*, 2001, p. 217.

The Arenberg – Coimbra Group Prize has partially responded to this need: thanks to the generous award, I have been able to continue research in this fascinating, yet complex field of study. In 2008, I complemented my post-graduate studies at the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium), where my thesis examined the emerging patterns of cooperation between the European Commission and religious peacebuilding NGOs⁵. This led me to another challenging research project, done in cooperation with UCL and funded by the Centre for European Studies, on the EU's perspectives for engaging with religious actors in dialogue and peacebuilding⁶.

To sum up, my exchange year at a Coimbra Group -university was an unforgettable experience in terms of academic specialisation, social networking and cultural learning. With fluency in two foreign languages, new contacts and many enlightening insights, the exchange and the prize awarded by the Arenberg foundation and Coimbra Group have paved way towards new horizons: horizons where strictly defined national categories or belongings are blurred – horizons where dialogue is allowed to take place and flourish.

Sofia Lemmetyinen, August 2009



The photos illustrating this article were taken in Sant'Egidio's School of Peace ('School van Vrede') for children in Antwerp, Belgium, and at Sant'Egidio's headquarters in Rome, Italy, in 2005.

⁵ Sofia Lemmetyinen, *Terra incognita? The Cooperation between the European Commission and Religious Peacebuilding NGOs*, College of Europe, Bruges, 2008.

⁶ Friedrich Bokern, Sofia Lemmetyinen, Vincent Legrand & Brigitte Maréchal, *From Dialogue to Peacebuilding? Perspectives for the Engagement of Religious Actors by the EU and the European People's Party*, Université Catholique de Louvain & Centre for European Studies, 2009.