

ICCJ General Secretary's visit to Latin America

Report

Visit to Brazil, March 10-13, 2013.

Introduction

Aim of this visit was to reconnect with our Brazilian member organization, the Conselho de Fraternidade Cristão Judaico, CFCJ, of São Paulo and to meet other individuals/institutions engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The visit was organized by a young Jesuit priest, Anderson Pedroso, who had visited Israel last year, heard a lecture given by Debbie Weissman and came back to Brazil, with a strong wish to take part in dialogue activities in São Paulo. He searched the internet and came across our Facebook page. It all started on Facebook...☺

Program

On Sunday evening, March 10, Father Anderson Pedroso and Christianna, a young member of Father Anderson's São Luis parish who served as our excellent interpreter, met me at the airport. We had dinner together and discussed the program of the coming days.

On Monday first of all I met with Gilberto Venturas, a young orthodox Jew who is working as a Jewish teacher in São Paulo and who has a part-time job with the Federation of Jewish Communities in the State of São Paulo as well. Gilberto Venturas and Anderson Pedroso are good friends and want to do their dialogue work on a grass-roots level with young people, serving the community through social projects. I explained that ICCJ also wants to link institutional or academic, high level dialogue (we called that „level A“) with grass-roots activities and social action („level B“). The connections and contradictions between these two kinds of dialogue characterized much of my São Paulo visit.

A second visit was to the Federation of Jewish Communities in São Paulo. We spoke with Dr. Alberto Milkewitz, the Executive Director, and Raoul, board member responsible for interreligious contacts. The Federation understands the need for intensifying Jewish-Christian contacts. Though these contacts on the institutional level are excellent, a certain habituation has slipped into these contacts. This again was an issue popping up several times during my days in São Paulo.



Left to right: Anderson Pedroso, Gilberto Venturas, Dick Pruikma, Dr. Alberto Milkewitz

Over lunch I sat with Dr. Milkewitz, Anderson Pedroso and Gilberto Venturas and already then an initiative was discussed how to let two groups, one of Christian and one of Jewish youngsters, first of all be informed about the others, then brought together and, as third stage of a project, how to let them be engaged together in social activities, e.g. in one of the São Paulo favelas.

In the afternoon Father Anderson and I met Rabbi Michel Schlesinger of the Congregação Israelita Paulista. Michel Schlesinger once was a member of ICCJ's Young Leadership Council. He took part in many ICCJ conferences and was well informed about ICCJ. Michel Schlesinger is a member of the



São Luis Parish Church, Avenida Paulista, São Paulo

National Committee for the religious Catholic-Jewish dialogue (DCJ), the liaison committee of the Brazilian Bishops Conference and the Jewish communities. Rabbi Michel agreed with me that reconnecting with ICCJ is a priority. ICCJ's General Secretary humbly suggested that more internal coordination in São Paulo would be a good option as well.



Left to right: Achmed, Anderson Pedroso, Gilberto Venturas, Dick Pruiksmá, Christianna.

In the evening I met first of all with the members of the CFCJ, the official Brazilian ICCJ member. I was informed by Sr Gisa and her colleagues on their history and activities and I informed the CFCJ Board on ICCJ projects. The Board members expressed a strong desire for contacts with a younger generation. This wish was fulfilled that same evening when we had in one of the rooms in São Luis Parish Church a meeting with Father Anderson's youth group, members of the São Paulo Focolare, CFCJ Board members, Gilberto Venturas and a young guy of his community and some more. A young converted Muslim came in unexpectedly as he attended a memorial mass for his grandmother that evening during which Father

Anderson had said a few words about our meeting. We sang, laughed, talked and prayed. The atmosphere of the evening is difficult to express in words. But there was hope and friendship in the room. By the way, Christianna not only translated WHAT I said but also HOW I said it.

On Tuesday morning Father Anderson brought me to Heliópolis, one of São Paulo's favelas (slums). I met with Father Pedro who lives and works in Heliópolis. It was an impressive visit. A compilation of crime, drugs, lack of education etc. causes numerous problems. Some dare to resist. Like the staff of a children's day care center we visited. My hosts wanted to show me this side of São Paulo in order to convince me of the need of social action. We had lunch at the children's day care center, heard about the many problems they have to face in their struggle for survival, serving each day several hundreds of children with food and additional education and then returned back to São Paulo.



In a Heliópolis chapel: Father Pedro, Dick Pruiksmá and Maria, one of the parish social workers.

In the afternoon we visited Reconciliation House and spoke with Father Bison, who is São Paulo's Cardinal Scherer's delegate for ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Here we also met with (Methodist) Pastor Dr. Margarida Ribeiro, one of the Presidents of our member CFCJ. The talks were open and very friendly. Father Bison is a member of the DCJ, the national committee. And he also made it clear that after many years of intensive contacts, the members of the committee discuss how to continue.



With Dr. Margarida Ribeiro and Father José Bison.

This second day in São Paulo ended with a dinner with the Jesuit community in their home. This gave me the opportunity to thank Anderson's superior and his brothers for supporting him. This visit never could have been successful without an efficient local preparation and coordination. On Wednesday I left São Paulo for Buenos Aires.



Meeting in Sao Paulo with youth group.

Visit to Buenos Aires, March 13-15, 2013.

Introduction

The aim of this visit was to investigate whether there is in Buenos Aires an infrastructure, strong enough to organize the 2014 ICCJ conference. The program of the visit was organized by Martha de Antueno, Presidente de la Confraternidad Argentina Judeo Cristiana, María Grandoli, Secretaria ejecutiva de la CAJC and Pastor Dr. Jerónimo Granados, Vicepresidente de la CAJC. Dr. Granados attended the 2009 Berlin conference and signed the Berlin document on behalf of the CAJC.

Program

On Thursday morning, March 14, we first visited the Latin American Jewish Congress, meeting with Claudio Epelman, Director del Congreso Judío Latinoamericano and Verónica Machtey, Directora de Programas Internacionales del Congreso Judío Latinoamericano. The Latin American Jewish Congress had been very helpful in preparing this visit by recommending the conference hotel (see below). During this meeting we discussed the options ICCJ will have and the challenges we will meet when organizing our 2014 in Argentina. Claudio Epelman anyhow was very positive re our plans and promised all logistical and strategic help we need.

From here we went to the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano where we met with Rector Rabino Dr. Abraham Skorka and Rabino Ernesto Yattah, Vice-Rector of the Seminario Rabínico. Rabbi Skorka is the Rabbi with whom Pope Francis, elected the



Left to right: Martha Bauchwitz, Dr. Jerónimo Granados, Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Dick Pruiksma, Rabbi Ernesto Yattah, Martha de Antueno and María Grandoli.

evening before this visit, has written a book. The two cellphones of Rabbi Skorka therefore rang ceaselessly as journalists all day were asking for interviews. After two interruptions he gave both phones to one of his staff making time for us. We were shown around the Seminario and met with Rabbi Ariel Stofenmacher, CEO of the Seminario. The atmosphere here was the same as during our meeting with the Latin American Jewish Congress: ICCJ is most welcome and every support needed is available.

Over lunch we spoke with Sr Martha Bauchwitz, Nds, Honorary President of the CAJC, who also had joined us at the Seminario. Martha indicated the need of having a conference mainly focussed on the Latin American situation, bringing together, apart of course from participants from other countries, people from Latin America to strengthen the ties among our Latin American members.



Plaza de Mayo: Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's (former) Cathedral.

After a short siesta we went to the apartment of Christina Lerner. Sitting around the dinner table we spoke with other members of the CAJC Board. Many questions were asked. It was clear to me that among the Board members there was, given the size of the Board - quite a lot of hesitance re a major event like an ICCJ conference. After extensive explanations however, on how our conferences are organized, most if not all of this reluctance was taken away.

On Friday, March 15, our first visit was to the Argentinian branch of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. We met with Dr. Kristin Wesemann, Director of the local KAF, and her Project Coordinator Mónica Bing. This was a very fruitful conversation. After having explained how many times ICCJ and KAF have successfully cooperated, there was no doubt whatsoever that this cooperation will be continued in Argentina.

Our next visit was to the Abasto Hotel (www.abastohotel.com) The General Manager Mr. Alberto Brandolin gave us a tour of the hotel. The rooms are very good, the prices are not too high for ICCJ, a bit cheaper than in Aix en Provence. The Abasto has a lot of experience with kosher catering and offers a free hour of tango training each day (!). There is a huge plenary hall, which can be used for workshops as well. We sat around the table and had a pleasant conversation with the General Manager.

Given the chaotic traffic in Buenos Aires it is absolutely preferable to have the conference sessions at the conference hotel. Our Argentinian friends suggest to have the opening dinner at a Palace in downtown Buenos Aires. But apart from outings, we should stay at the Abasto.

Conclusions

Both visits were very successful. In Brazil ICCJ reconnected with many colleagues and friends. In Buenos Aires it was made clear that the infrastructure for having the 2014 ICCJ conference in Argentina is available. It is now up to the ICCJ Executive Board and the Board of the Argentinian Council of Christians and Jews to decide when the 2014 conference will take place. As soon as the dates are known, we will let you know.



Main synagogue in Buenos Aires

Dick Pruiksma
ICCJ General Secretary