



**Review of the 8th European Meeting of Lay Salvatorians from 29
May - 1 June 2025
in Leutkirch/Baden-Württemberg (Southern Germany)**

The meeting was attended by people from the following regions and countries: Georgia, Ukraine, a Nigerian who is in formation in the Philippines, the lay group from Nazareth was connected via Zoom, Salvatorian lay people from Cologne, Neuwerk, Austria, and of course Bad Wurzach. Two lay Salvatorians from the Congo were unable to come due to visa refusals, but we hope that this will work out in the future.

The meeting was held under the motto '*Walking together with Jesus Christ*' and was conceived as an ecumenical meeting, which was intended to show what unites the Christian denominations, but also the differences between them. Members of the St. Ephrem Academic Centre for Orient & Occident Studies (STEP) were invited as keynote speakers. STEP sees itself as an international teaching and research centre and, on behalf of the Catholic University ITI (Trumau), offers a theological licentiate course (STL) in the field of theological Orient & Occident studies in Baden near Vienna, Austria. It currently runs the study house in Baden near Vienna, as well as a study centre for young people in Georgia.

The connection between the STEP and the Salvatorian family is through Fr Stephan Horn SDS, who teaches and lives there as an emeritus university professor.

At the beginning of the meeting, the various groups present were briefly introduced so that everyone could get an impression of each other's lives and apostolates. As the group from Nazareth was unable to come due to the cancellation of their flights at short notice, a Zoom call was set up so that it was at least possible to get in touch with them via video. Unfortunately, we were unable to organise an equally planned Zoom call with the Congo due to the limited time and full programme of the meeting.

But now to the keynote speeches, which were deepened by subsequent small group discussions:

Fr. Igumen PD Dr habil. Ephräm Givi Lomidze, the director of STEP and priest of the Georgian Orthodox Church (the second oldest ancient oriental Christian church), gave us a very interesting (but unfortunately much too short!) overview of the development of Christians in the first five centuries in his lecture. He also explained the differences and developments between the autocephalous 'Eastern Churches' and the Roman Catholic Church. By 451 AD, the five 'most important' metropolitans of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem had become patriarchs. The dispute between Rome and Constantinople (causes: a gradual estrangement since the third century, the view of the position of the Pope within Christendom, the sacrificial material to be used in the Eucharist, etc.) led finally to the separating of the Western Church from the Eastern (Orthodox) Church in the Great Eastern Schism (1054).

In her lecture, Prof. Dr. theol. Michaela C. Hastetter discussed the comparison between John chapter 17 and the other synoptic writings. John chapter 17 is known as the 'High Priestly Prayer' of Jesus Christ. In this chapter, Jesus prays for his disciples and for those who will believe in him. He asks God to protect his followers from the world and to keep them united (... '*that they may be one, as we are one,*' John 17:22). Jesus also expresses his longing for them all to be with him in heaven. This chapter shows the close relationship between Jesus and God and the importance of prayer for the faith and community of believers. In her work, Dr. Hastetter compares the views of Vladimir S. Soloviev (1853-1900), a Russian philosopher who developed a philosophy of all-unity influenced by

European thought and the Orthodox faith, with those of Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), who is considered one of the most important theologians of the Roman Catholic Church of the 20th and 21st centuries. In her view, this unity is to be understood as 'brotherhood,' which today can also be seen as 'siblinghood.' However, it should be noted that this has not yet found expression in all languages, as there are no corresponding nouns for it everywhere. Following the respective interpretations, these suggest that disunity (or division) can be interpreted as a sin.

A side question to Dr. Hastetter, who also lives and works in STEP, gave us a deep insight into the difficulties and painful challenges of daily coexistence between Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Both sides live in the love of Christ, but are unable to share many things because of restrictions of their confession.

The third speaker was Silke Kuczera, Protestant pastor of the Protestant parish of Bad Wurzach. She showed us the different perspectives and approaches that were triggered by Martin Luther's Reformation. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to engage in further conversation and discussion. In any case, after that we (members from Germany and Austria) felt that the differences between the Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations were far less significant than those between the Protestant and Orthodox denominations.

On Friday afternoon, a guided tour of Leutkirch was on the agenda. During this tour, we learned a lot about life in the town, which is shaped by the past conflicts between the two religious denominations, Roman Catholic and Protestant, and their current coexistence and increasing integration. From today's perspective, the animosity between the two groups was very disturbing. Even if we may smile today when we hear that followers of one denomination were only allowed to shop at their own bakeries, butchers or shops, or that schools had separate entrances and classes. The wounds inflicted here by both sides fuelled mutual animosity and even hatred for generations.

It is very encouraging to see initiatives today that seek to overcome this history and open a new, shared chapter. One such initiative is the Gallus Chapel, a motorway chapel on the Winterberg near Leutkirch. The architecture here has created a friendly and bright space that invites people to gather and meet, but also to rest. The Gallus Chapel was designed as a neutral meeting place, a place where locals and strangers, people of different denominations and religions, young and old can come together. The sound experience created by the space's resonant columns supporting the wooden roof is also impressive. An Orthodox vespers service with singing performed by members of STEP brought us closer to this experience. Thanks to the good weather, we were able to see the peaks of the Vorarlberg, Allgäu and Swiss Alps behind the flowering summer meadows from the Winterberg.

In conclusion, it can be said that this meeting, with its approximately 45 participants, once again provided many new and old, already familiar encounters. For most, it was once again a 'coming home,' as was often said in the closing round. A big thank you once again to the preparation team who took the risk of reviving the meetings of the European Lay Salvatorians after the Corona pandemic. Perhaps those units that were not yet able to attend this time will find the courage to join us for the next meeting in around 2028.