

Solidarity is often criminalized

Now I have learned the difference between l'espoir and l'esperance. The French use two words for hope. We don't have that in Dutch. You could say hope and expectation, but l'esperance must be interpreted as much broader and more future-oriented.

Before the official general meeting of CINGO* (October 13-16) began, there was a study day for the Catholic organizations (40) represented at that meeting. This was partly in preparation for a meeting of Catholic NGOs in Rome at the end of November. The European model of representation of Roman Catholic organizations, which work together with 260 other organizations on 'Civil Society' as part of the Council of Europe, is unique in the world. The Vatican wants to hear about this at the end of November, together with 52 other NGOs from around the world. The nuncio of Strasbourg will also be there. These are our own channels that we have and that can be used. The Catholic Charities, for example, are very strong in Europe.

But this time, the Cingo itself was very fraught with serious issues. The country reports on the state of democracy were particularly hard-hitting. A report on Serbia made a big impression. You hear things that don't appear in the media. We did see something of the crackdown on student uprisings and gross police violence, but the fact that this is vehemently denied in discussions with the members of the commission is very stubborn. Serbia is a different world, it was said, but they want to belong to Europe. They fill in the forms with neat language, but the reality is devastating and it is not improving. The ombudsman said, for example, that femicide does not exist. The government is testing how far it can go. Visits to such countries by a committee of NGOs then contribute to the assessment of Serbia when it comes to accession to the EU.

I have already reported on the situation in Georgia. The situation in countries on the border between Europe and Russia in terms of human rights and democracy is deteriorating almost everywhere. This also applies to Greece and Slovakia. It does get through, especially when the rapporteurs give their personal impressions. These countries are members of the Council of Europe but do not adhere to the humanitarian standards that have been set. When I asked whether churches in those countries still offer any counterbalance, the answer was very negative. They are (very) conservative and deeply entangled with the ruling regime.

A very important document on the (lack of) housing situation of migrants has been adopted. It is difficult to bring this to the attention of the Council of Ministers, but it will succeed through indirect means.

The adoption of a statement on Israel and Palestine was, of course, very difficult. Our 'club' (European Network Church on the Move) had insisted on this and I also contributed to the text. Everything was carefully weighed and a balanced text was produced, but there was still a lot of abstentions after an emotional discussion. Jewish organizations are also members of CINGO. The emotion is understandable, but you can feel it in your bones.

Henk Baars, delegation leader European Network Church on the Move

*(CINGO: Conference of INGOs: one of the four pillars of the Council of Europe representing civil society)