



## **12<sup>th</sup> International Living Lakes conference**

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2008

Castiglione del Lago – Palazzo "Duca della Corgna"

### **Session 5**

#### **Lakes and their Spiritual Values**

**Moderator and Keynote speech: Aventino Frau, President of the "Comunità del Garda, Lake Garda, Italy"**

The theme that has been entrusted to us, "the lakes and their spiritual value", poses us some essential questions, relative to the ability of the places to be carriers of spiritual values, which in all their expressions, in history, have been defined as prevalently religious values.

The spiritual values, the religious sense of nature, the stimulation of the vision and its valuable appeals, belong to the culture of man, to his sensitivity, his ability to elevate the reflection of higher values, religious in the highest sense of the term.

On the other hand we cannot state that the places themselves are the carriers of such values but man, populations, and the history they have expressed. I do not think that special places exist – not even lakes – even in their detail, equipped with such values even though – around the lakes – closer and more concentrated populations were able to express common spiritual values.

The territory, the land we live on, is the first reference for man: the height of the mountains, the vastness of the seas, the vision of the skies pushes you towards the awareness of our limits, sensorial too, and the need to gain self-worth, to look for superior spaces, to glimpse in nature the indicators of a higher search.

Man however looks at the territory, at his habitat, he sees the mystery, the ever changing beauty, he looks up, stimulated by it, he sees it as alien and his own at the same time.

Man today and anyway the very ancient one too, finds in the territory deep stimuli which lead him towards spirituality, to reflection on the whys, to recognizing higher values, towards searching for the creator through the created.

That is why in his history he has marked those territories with the memories of his religiosity, with temples and churches, with the signs of the Holy, which show past devotion and the relevance of the places, transforming it into *genius loci*, the identification of a special nature through that which inspired man, on his historical, religious, cultural, artistic path.

For contemporary man, who lives the economic development characterized by demographic growth, industrialization, fast mobility, it is certainly more difficult to feel the spiritual force, its reflections, its silences and seclusions.

I refer to the areas and the lakes where residential and tourist "development" has partly altered the way of being of the lacustrian territories. It only remains for us to enjoy the fascination of the memories which keep that strong sense of religiousness alive.

Why do we believe that the lakes are especially voted for the stimulus of spiritual values? Why do they represent real deposits of memories, small or large, of spirituality and around the lakes, the spiritual emotions of man always provoke new stimuli which the memories of the past consolidate and give testimony.

One reason is that the lakes have more definite terms, even if vast, more visible and understandable, more capable of holding and containing, to be lived. They give a sense of end which encourages people to look elsewhere.

Moreover they express, because they are defined, a sense of unity, of circularity, of internal relationship among the inhabitants, of sharing of problems, of common tie to their own waters, to the flora and fauna. The unity of the lakes, even if politically or administratively not recognized, is objective, it is wanted by the territory, it is therefore spiritual and cultural, it is historical.

The geographic unity gives a natural homogeneity to the territory of the lakes, which transforms into *modus vivendi*, in style of life, in city planning and in the economy. Because of this the visitor finds a habitat where local values, of history, experience of life, greets him in a more definite way and, if not too disturbed by the speculative madness of men, still able to be stimulating to elevate the spirit.

The historical sediment, the signs of life, defined by the contours of a lake, the religious monuments, everything is transformed or can be transformed into spiritual value, into stimulus for the intellect and the heart, into multiplier of cognitive experience. Even in the growth determined by economic progress, the lakes, if safeguarded, represent the "stopover of the wayfarer", the place of defined panoramas, the physical discovery of the modification of the territory over thousands of years, the trace of the human occurrence is given testimony by religious experience which characterized it all over the world.

To be lifted up high, to look at a lake even if large from on high, does not give us confusion of immensity but the sensation of the visible and the understandable, of the harvest. The unconscious safety of the fresh water should not be forgotten, to drink and of the life it gives us.

Lakes and, in a different way, rivers all over the world express a particular sacredness, linked to civilization and creator of the same; the sacredness of the Nile, of the Ganges of the great rivers of the East and the West, is also expressed in the calmest, most stable sacredness of the lakes.

No religion ignores it, but only different historical and religious concentrations, in Europe, in the lakes of Africa, in Asia: from Christianity to Buddhism, from Islam to Animism, or – in the most inaccessible areas – to the religious beliefs of aboriginal Australia or the deep Amazon.

The need for spirituality is growing in the world when more adverse values are expressed: urbanism, unconstrained economism, cultural globalism, the weakening of identity, aggression towards nature, the weakening of cultural values even in scientific growth. An uneasy world, worried, opulent or starving, needs places to rest the spirit, of possible respite, of that stimulus which the defined and interrupted spaces of the lakes have known how to give, from antiquity to nowadays. We find them around the lakes, with regards to Italy and Europe in the thousands of hilly churches, in the saints' statues on the ancient roads, in the popular frescoes, in the signs of religiousness.

Once you understand how important this religious and spiritual presence is, that it is the story of ideas and feelings, the problem of how to safeguard these aspects of lacustrian reality, both for the resident populations and the guests, who must be able to enjoy what nature and the ability of man have made together. Everything in the picture of the deep anthropological, cultural, geographical, historical diversities and existing development.

The experience that I carry is that of Lake Garda the largest of the Italian lakes in Northern Italy between Milan and Venice which has seen and in some ways undergone a great tourist development with sometimes excessive settlements. Garda is set in the basin of an ancient glacier and has a long history, which goes from the mythological narration of ancient times, to the first pile dwelling settlements, up to the Roman villas and their poets and scholars.

But it was with the spread of Christianity that the territory becomes thick with religious testimonies, with churches, monasteries, statues and roads covered in Shrines and by other testimonies of deep religiousness: on the peaks of the mountains which surround Garda, on the hill paths, in the towns along the banks. To safeguard all this, in spite of the difficulty, the policies have been and must be based on:

- renovation and conservation;
- a better understanding of culture and history;
- research and rediscovery of one's own history;
- circulation, sensitization of the people, the proposal of itineraries;
- improvement and information for tourists.

During this meeting we can assess whether these concepts are shared, like other assessments and experiences are, in a global vision of this theme and the ways to maintain the present characteristics of the lakes as spiritual areas.

Naturally, there are themes common to all the lakes, the safeguarding and the quality of the waters for example, but also deep differences which we can experience first-hand from the interventions of their representatives. Certainly we verify the need, seen by everyone, for development of economic and social conditions, for the growth of wealth and standard of life, always maintaining a safeguard of the nature and the environment which is so delicate in the lacustrian basins; we cannot but notice the differences and the needs of the territories which are so deeply different. From the European lakes already greatly built-up with great economic and touristic prominence to those of the areas of northern and eastern Europe used differently and still at a starting point of more compatible experiences and to the Great Lakes of Canada or Latin America, not to mention Africa, with all the problems of that territory strongly linked to very ancient settlements and with very different expectations of development.

However, the link of sacredness of the waters, those fresh waters which guarantee the life of man and all the species of animals and plants, the waters that rivers and lakes carry and contain, remains for everyone, for the whole world. Those waters that only the madness of ignorance and cynical speculation, of the increase with no limits of a development often presumed and portending good, of the unawareness of constructive ability but also destructive of man, may deteriorate and destroy, in a sort of collective suicide. Perhaps, the spirituality, the sense of sacredness which the waters and the surrounding land know how to express may be a limit and an obstacle for the dangers which loom and which we must know how to win.

## Aventino Frau

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