RELIGIOUS LIFE IN EUROPE –

TOWARDS CONCRETE ORIENTATIONS

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ORIGINAL TEXT

To identify areas of promise, renewal and growth for consecrated life in Europe already germinating now

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INTRODUCTION

The scope of the May assembly of the USG was to listen to Europe; at this moment in history, what message does Europe have for us religious? Two thirds of the input was entrusted to lay people who were asked to address the assembly about their view of Europe and the call that context addresses to the religious, as well as a diocesan bishop spoke to us about the same. Together we looked at a continent that has basically enjoyed 60 years of peace after centuries of war and dictatorial regimes (with the exception of the wars in the Balkan and in Georgia) and that has experienced the wonder of the non-violent collapse of communism. However, now Europe finds itself plunged into a crisis. Europe is aging and losing its influence in the world. It is also experiencing a profound cultural transformation of which can be attributed to its being exposed to the process of globalization, distancing itself from its Christian roots and its reception of large numbers of immigrants who are culturally rather distant.

From a Christian viewpoint we observe with sadness that many people in Europe no longer build their lives on faith in the God of Jesus Christ. In his opening words Fr. Pascual Chavez, SDB, president

of the USG, quoted Pope Benedict who stated in Turin that "the concealment of God is part of the spirituality of the contemporary human being … like a void in the heart that has continued to grow larger and larger" (May 2, 2010). In this context, as the lay contributors to our assembly pointed out, Europe would be in dire need of a strong presence of consecrated persons who have been so important throughout its history. Statistically, Europe is home to about 25% of the world's Catholics and to about 40% of its religious. But, while religious life still presents large numbers in Europe it is aging and shrinking.

The May assembly discussed, through extensive group work, the challenges of the situation and the commitments Europe's religious may want to envisage. The group results were summarized in a very clear way by Fr. Mario Aldegani, CSJ. His summary echoed certain voices which challenge us religious to renew our trust in God as portrayed in the anguish of ancient Israel when it finds itself in front of the Red Sea. It was further mentioned in the groups that we need to renew the quality of our communities, giving room to all generations; that we must learn to speak a new language which can be understood today; and that we are called to renew our option for the poor by going to the periphery of society. When it comes to concrete commitments, which should be the consequence of those challenges, the following are mentioned: commitments to inter-cultural community living, to offering spiritual itineraries to seekers, to making more consequent invitations to laity to share our charisms and in general, to putting mission at the center, instead of our own survival.

In spite of a number of stark references to the European crisis situation, the May assembly was characterized by a spirit of hope; it was the lay speakers who especially conveyed to us religious this message of hope while not denying our demographic reality. They told us: Europe needs you religious more than ever and you are capable of rising to the challenge.

After having listened to Europe in May, the USG now wants to give Europe an answer "identifying areas of promise, renewal and growth for consecrated life already germinating now on this continent".

In my contribution I will start with descriptions of the changes in Europe and in European religious life as they have surfaced, qualifying them as strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats[1]; I will then invite us to seek clarity about our goals and on this basis finally name some possibilities for concrete action which seem to be appearing on the horizon. Analyzing how religious life is facing the context of today's Europe

I found it significant that our lay speakers spent less time analyzing our own situation as religious in Europa than on Europe itself. They wanted to make us aware of the context we live in, and the message was that Europe finds itself in crisis for which it urgently needs the contribution of the religious and of all disciples of Christ.

For the purpose of method let us begin with a look at ourselves. What are the our strengths and weaknesses as religious in Europe, at this moment when a continent in crisis - which we will describe

[1]This is the so-called SWOT matrix, used in certain planning models. I do not claim to be a professional in its application but find it useful!

below - needs our assistance? It is important that we be conscious of our own possibilities. Then, in a second step, we will to move on to the opportunities and threats we find on our continent.

1. *Religious life in Europe - showing strength and weaknesses*

a) Strengths

What we heard in May about our strengths can encourage us. In a nutshell it was said:

In Europe, religious life has great model personalities to offer, even in very recent times;

It shows an unknown face of the Church;

It disposes of a vast north-south network which can put Europe in a broader perspective;

Europe's religious life breathes with "two lungs": the eastern and the western spirituality;

The religious could be considered as a UNESCO World Heritage for Europe, such is their historical merit for the continent;

Even in the secularized part of Europe religious life continues to survive; with smaller numbers new approaches to evangelization are made and new communities are founded;

It was also noted that few sectors of the Church have made such important efforts of renewal and restructuring as religious life.

b) Weaknesses

Several weaknesses of religious life were pointed out as well. The diminishment in numbers is evident and it was said that we religious can be called an endangered species. How and why is that the case? The following four elements were brought up - I admit that the emphasis on these is mine:

We lack visibility. Our profile and purpose are often unclear.

We are sometimes confused about the type of work we want to do. For the apostolic congregations one could say that our traditional "business model" is no longer working, and we struggle to find a new one. Meanwhile we have taken refuge in parish ministry and as a consequence the identity and the public image many religious have adopted is very similar to the identity and the image of the local clergy.

We are affected by individualism and the quest for a comfortable lifestyle

It is only normal that as religious we are influenced by the context that surrounds us, and we might be too weak in this aspect. Mauro Magatti characterized the context as one of a "smiling nihilism". One could add that, given that the present nihilism is so attractive, the real weakness would consist in not seeing its dangers.

We are still unconsciously making comparisons with the days when we were numerous and powerful

Among us there is as hidden nostalgia for the 50ties, and a few of us may still be looking for some isolated spots where things are as they used to be and a certain type of Christendom remains intact. [2] This type of weakness would prevent us from responding to the present needs.

We find it still difficult to admit some of our past errors

The obvious past errors are those of misconduct which are now being published everywhere in the west, including several European countries. One of the things we are learning in the process of exposure of our scandals and of our lack of appropriate supervision is that our heart and our words must above all be with the victims of such abuse. This is somehow a similar situation as at a funeral when the pain of those grieving must get all the attention, no matter what else has happened. It is a weakness if we point out too easily the positive side of ourselves and our institutions. Loss of reputation is bad enough but we must not appear as defensive - it will be better that with time others stand up and take our side. It is the suffering of the victims which needs our undivided attention.

The reference in Fr. Aldegani's summary to past errors we should admit, may also refer to another type of error; past errors in judging the signs of the time. Have we taken too long to recognize that the environment that surrounds us today in Europe is no longer friendly, as it appeared to be around the time of Vatican II?

Regarding the errors of the past, I found an interesting remark by a North American author. The journalist John Allen speaks of a new generation of religious whom he calls "millennials", which is different from the "Vatican II generation". He has the following to say:

> *"The Vatican II generation grew up within a strong Catholic culture and to some extent reacted against it, seeing it as overly stifling and controlling. The defining cultural crucible for millennials, however, has been a rootless secular world. They're eager to establish a strong sense of Catholic identity, not to reform or redefine it. In essence, they're reacting against the world, not the church." (NCR, Aug. 14, 2009)*

In my opinion we should listen attentively to this new generation; they are of course not perfect, but perhaps we could learn about today's society and recognize our past errors in dealing with it.

I insert into this part on our weaknesses another quote from the New World, from Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, a Canadian who teaches in the US. He was asked to compile "a list of 10 of the major spiritual questions bubbling in the Catholic world". [3] In particular the following three might help to describe our spiritual struggle as religious here in Europe.

> *"1. The struggle with the atheism of our everyday consciousness, i.e., the struggle to have a vital sense of God within secularity, which, for good and for bad, is the most powerful narcotic ever perpetrated on this planet; to be a mystic rather than an unbeliever."*

[2] Fr. Aldegani's summary mentions "i giorni dell'onnipotenza" … "(i numeri, il potere, le forse e le strutture degli anni '50, con cui spesso, anche inconsapevolmente facciamo il paragone)".

[3] *NCR, May. 25, 2010*

"5. The struggle for interiority and prayer inside of a culture that constitutes a virtual conspiracy against depth and serenity -- to keep our eyes set against an infinite horizon."

"9. The struggle to link faith to justice, ecology, and gender -- to get a letter of reference from the poor."

2. *Europe - presenting opportunities and threats to religious life*

To us religious, such as we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, Europe has been entrusted as our mission field. It offers us great opportunities which we must recognize and poses threats we must be aware of. But it is part of a world immensely loved by God and destined for salvation and liberation.

a) Opportunities

We do not often mention some of the most obvious opportunities we enjoy in Europe.

Absence of war, rule of law, freedom of opinion, religious freedom, historical privileges, etc.

At least in the countries of the European Union we have the advantage of these opportunities which we may take for granted.

Religious life is at home in Europe, most of our religious institutes were born here

Another obvious opportunity we have is our rootedness and the fact that we share centuries of history with the people of the continent. Religious life cannot be labeled as foreign to Europe.

There are less obvious opportunities which our common reflection in May made us aware of.

It has been often repeated that Europe needs values to build its future, and we religious have experience with some of these values

Is it too pretentious to say that we religious have experience with living precisely those values Europe is in need of? This opportunity lies in the fact that we can offer our long and vast experience of things like hospitality, inter-cultural communion, sharing material resources, sensitivity for ecology, long-term commitment, etc.

Europe has the capacity of rebirth and we religious have experience with long-haul journeys

The opportunity lies in becoming a prophetic minority where hope is kept alive. Secularism has been compared to adolescence; parents know that another stage of life will follow and a new relationship between the generations will be established. We must begin to prepare for the time after the present darkness.

People excluded by the prevailing system are in need of recognition and we religious have always stood beside forgotten and abandoned sectors of society

The present situation produces crying needs among the excluded who are the aging, the unemployed, the immigrants, the victims of trafficking, the dying, the handicapped, the unborn, etc. Here lies an opportunity for a silent or loud witness to values that challenge the system through our presence among these groups of people. What happened with Mother Theresa in India can also happen in old Europe.

Europe is a laboratory

We do not live in a forgotten corner of the world. On the contrary, the world is watching Europe. Personally I have always been surprised how much the young religious of my institute inquire about the west: What happens with you? Where do we find Christians in Europe? What about vocations to consecrated life? Many others in the civil society are watching Europe as well. People say that to find out the latest trends in society one should watch California. Watching Europe, people do not expect to discover the latest trends but the deeper undercurrents of thought. As a German, I am amazed that words like "Zeitgeist" and "Weltanschauung" have made their way into the English language. Europe remains a laboratory of ideas and whatever we can achieve here will have repercussions in the rest of the world.

b) Threats

A continent which, according to Mauro Magatti is being dominated by a "techno-nihilistic capitalism" will also pose threats to those who either cannot agree with such a system and those who cannot compete in it. One keeps wondering how such a system can possibly gain so much terrain, as I still remain surprised that the ideas of the European Karl Marx could profoundly change distant China. Maybe the convincing power of the present way of thinking it is the hidden result of the totalitarian ideologies of the last century which have left many people with a great inner emptiness.

Pope Benedict XVI, has quite clearly warned Europe of the present global threats, dangerous to the Europeans themselves and to the world, which are the consequence of our alienation from God. He advised the participants in a European Meeting of University Professors in June 2007 that "unless we do know God in and with Christ, all of reality becomes an indecipherable enigma." Speaking to Africans, he referred to certain ideologies as "toxics from the west", mentioning "practical materialism, combined with relativistic and nihilistic thought" and "religious fundamentalism, mixed with political and economic interests".[4] As it was said above, this present global threat is the more dangerous the more it comes with a smiling face, in a deceptive culture of death that is smiling all the way.

Some specific threats are easier to recognize. While they could be seen as opportunities if we are strong enough to grow with them, they have the potential to hurt us and make us weaker.

Decline, fear, pessimism

We are living on an aging continent, where "the combination of the demographic decline, economic slackening and political and institutional fragility make up a deadly blend that risks pushing Europe towards sad decline. (…) the prevailing emotion is fear". (Mauro Magatti)

[4] Benedict SVI, homily of October 4, 2009 on occasion of the last African synod

Change of balance between local people and immigrants

The population will increasingly be replaced by immigrants and their children. In 2020, more than half of all births in the Netherlands will be non-European. Currently there are 52 million Muslims in Europe (excluding Turkey and Azerbaijan), a figure that will double in 20 years. By 2025 one in three children born in Europe will be born in Muslim families.

- Minority situation of Christians, cornered between non-believers, believers of other religions and fundamentalists

It seems we Christians are not yet used to our minority situation and are still trying to somehow swim with the current even if it leads to nihilism.

Are we too pessimistic as we look at Europe from the angle of the threats it poses? I believe that the picture is rather realistic. However, our call is to never lose hope, while we clearly fix our eyes on the reality. We heard in May that Europe has shown in the past an amazing ability for renaissance if it was helped. We should remember that many of the institutes of apostolic religious life were founded in the wake of the French Revolution when everything was falling apart. The historical experience of these institutes could provide us with the ethos to face the present challenges as well.

What are our goals?

Fr. Pascual Chavez reminded us in May at his opening address, that the aim of our reflection on religious life in Europe is not our own survival but to be prophets. If we speak about Europe it is because we want to take on our responsibility for a continent in which we religious are in a true sense forefathers. We are undertaking this reflection for Europe, not for ourselves.

Before we move on to the practical questions, and prepare the material for certain strategies, it would be important to briefly outline our goals as religious in Europe. Let me mention a few goals we may all agree upon within the obvious differences between religious charisms.

We want to evangelize Europe

While every religious family will have its own focus we all might agree that our goal in Europe is to evangelize the people of the continent and their cultures. I found it striking how close to the actual situation the words from the 1999 Synod for Europe are:

> *"Acknowledgment must first be made of the fundamental role played by monasticism and consecrated life in the evangelization of Europe and in the shaping of its Christian identity. This role must continue to be played today, at a time when a "new evangelization" of the continent is urgently needed". (Ecclesia in Europa 37)*

Recently a new Pontifical Council for New Evangelization was created; Pope Benedict XVI said that the new organism has "the specific task of promoting a renewed evangelization in countries where the first proclamation of the faith already resounded, and where Churches are present of ancient foundation, but which are going through a progressive secularization of society and a sort of 'eclipse

of the sense of God'". I believe all religious will be able to fully agree with the goal of "renewed evangelization" in Europe.

We want to be present wherever the need is most urgent

Another goal common to all of us is that, as religious, we want to be present where the most urgent need is found. According to the charism, this need is identified in different fields, from academics to family education, from art and culture to work with undocumented immigrants and JPIC work, or it can be seen in pure contemplation and prayer. In any of these cases, the call to evangelize does not originate from our interest to find some work to do or to discover a niche to survive but from the objective needs of the other and of the European society as such.

We do not limit ourselves to Christians but our goal is to reach those of other beliefs and those outside any faith community

Again, the choice will depend on each religious community but it is evident that the Europe of today demands a clear missionary outreach to those who do not share our Christian faith which is the majority. We have the advantage that in most countries this can be done in a climate of religious freedom.

In our life and mission we want to express our own identity as religious, that is, a group of people who follow Jesus in a particular way.

Our goal-setting should finally take into account and respect our identity as religious and as institutes with a particular charism, even if sometimes we will have to adapt to urgencies. What Lumen Gentium says about religious life gives us the framework: "Christ proposed to His disciples this form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. This same state of life is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church". (LG 44c). Even if our primary goal is not survival, we do want our specific form of life to visibly continue since we consider it a precious gift from God.

Towards practical action - What areas of promise, renewal and growth can we identify?

The main purpose of our reflection is to "identify areas of promise, renewal and growth for consecrated life in Europe already germinating now" - that is the theme I was given. After listening to Europe and envisaging our goals the next step is to strategize, to find out where we could start in areas that are promising as fields of evangelization, and which for us will lead to renewal and growth.

I have two preliminary remarks for this strategizing part. First, when it comes to action, leadership will be essential. I have often observed in the provinces of my congregation that the new is already there, and some creative and capable members of our religious family have identified where we could start to work. I recall a young religious who would go around with a van and seek contact with people on marketplaces in Germany, or two young religious in Poland who were starting off a new

type of youth ministry. I think I am not saying anything new, but it is very important that leadership takes up these initiatives, evaluates them and makes them an common endeavor of the local or provincial community. If this does not happen we will end up with maybe prophetic but individual works whose influence on our overall mission is limited and whose future remains uncertain.

A second remark is that we need not to give in to excessive fear when faced with the these terrible sounding threats like capitalism, nihilism, secularism. A few years ago I came across an article from an Italian sociology Professor, Massimo Introvigne. He explains, what in sociology is called the Theory of Religious Economy, developed first in the United States by Stephen Warner. It is, to a great extent, in contrast with the secularization theory which for some time has been used to explain the decline of church attendance and membership. The theory of religious economy sees the situation differently, as an article explains: "In cultures where one religious group has a monopoly, religious participation tends to decline. … In a competitive religious economy, some denominations/churches fare well, others fail to renew and lose ground."[5] I have not studied this theory in depth but it has made me wonder whether we do not use secularism too often to explain the decline in church attendance we observe. From a purely sociological point of view, there is a "market" for religion. If we are present in that marketplace and know how to present our "merchandise" we do have a chance to make the message of Jesus the Christ heard, even in a secularized environment. Does this not remind us of Saint Paul making Christ present on the areopagus of Athens?

3. Areas of promise, renewal and growth inside consecrated life

As Christians and as religious, eager to evangelize the world that surrounds us, we are in turn quite affected by this world. As religious we feel the temptation to do many things without God, to give in to individualism and a feel-well mentality, to avoid long term commitments, to buy in to xenophobia, etc. One could say that we are also "evangelized" by the secular good news of the European and western world. Because of this strong influence it would be wise to begin our strategizing with ourselves as the point of reference. The time has come to have a look at our way of being, before we strategize on what we should do for and with others. From the May meeting, I identify three areas within religious life which should draw our attention.

a) Finding ourselves, becoming humble and proud at the same time

A biblical figure mentioned several times at the last assembly is Nicodemus. Like Nicodemus we have good qualities and are seeking the friendship of Jesus but something is missing: more courage, getting out into the open. This can only happen if we are reborn from the Spirit. We all know that the present culture of appearances and superficiality must be overcome but first we must become a new creation ourselves. Of course, through our baptism and our religious consecration we already are this new creation. It is a treasure that may have to be rediscovered, or better appreciated. Let me suggest that we need to become, at the same time, more humble and more proud.

[5] http://www.homestead.com/rouncefield/files/a_soc_rel_9.htm

More humble. Several of us agreed in May that we must honestly recognize our mistakes.

As to the present time, the question of our life style was mentioned, for instance how we are served by employees today when we did things ourselves decades ago. Our being too busy was also pointed out. One could add that also our recreation deserves attention: Can we find other ways of recreating, can we get away from the screens?

> Enzo Bianchi says: *"'It is time that there be time,' Paul Celan wrote in a poem. Yes, it is time that there be time, especially in a religious life that runs as the world does, that complains not to have time, showing what one of its idols is."*[6]

As to the past, we have reasons to be humble as well. There is not only the question of sexual or financial scandals but also the compromise with the powerful, which includes the heavy legacy of colonialism. I have been around in Southern Africa - were we always standing where we should have been when the African countries became independent not so long ago?

More proud. Finding ourselves again this way and becoming more humble we will grow in true self-esteem. While recognizing our sins we will learn, like Paul, to boast of Jesus Christ and be proud of things that truly deserve it, for instance of having saints among us. Each religious family will find reasons to praise God: "O house of Israel, bless the Lord! O house of Aaron, bless the Lord! O house of Levi, bless the Lord! You that fear the Lord, bless the Lord!" (Ps 135,19-20)

At the last assembly we were surprised that non-religious observers can be more optimistic about us than we are ourselves. Why is this so? Why is religious life in Europe still seen in such a positive light so that we can be proud of it?

History plays a role - what would Europe be without Basil, Augustin, Benedict and Scholastica, Cyril and Method, Francis and Claire, Thomas Aquinas, Theresa of Avila …

The language which reaches the heart most directly are not mere facts but rather, beauty. The gospel appeals to many people simply because it is beautiful. As someone well known to us said: we must return to religious life all of its enchantment.

> *"The appeal and interest that 'enchantment' awakens — as part of something intrinsically 'good' — is passed on by itself and when it is perceived, invites reception and sharing. Scholastics used to say, Good is disseminated by itself, without anything or anyone propagating or spreading it. Rather than speculating, we can understand what 'enchantment' means and is in the sense that we are using it here, in the appeal that Jesus had for his first followers." (Bro Alvaro Rodríguez, FSC)*[7]

b) Offering God the center place

[6] "É tempo che ci sia tempo" scrive Paul Celan in una poesia. Sì, è tempo che ci sia tempo, sopratutto in una vita religiosa che corre come il mondo, che denuncia di non avere tempo mostrando quale sia uno dei suoi idoli. E. Bianchi, Non siamo megliori, Ed. Qiqajon, 2002, page 34, translated.

[7] May 2005 assembly of the USG

In a time when faith in the God of Jesus Christ is apparently evaporating fast, we religious are called to witness to the primacy of God. Someone said we must witness to a God with whom we communicate, and not just to a God about whom we speculate. The search for God is to occupy center stage in our lives again, of God to whom we pray: "your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." (Ps 63,4)

In this second *area of promise, renewal and hope* the practical issue is that the intensity of our relationship with the God of Jesus Christ needs to increase. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. referred to someone outside the circle of our usual saints when he made this point in an interview: "Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts and a man who wasn't himself particularly religious, once said: 'I like my religion the same way I like my tea – boiling.'"

We are in real danger of becoming lukewarm and secularized ourselves, which would mean trying to build a religious life without God at its core. To realize the challenge, we have only to look at our founders. They have always been intensely religious people, up to the point of apparent insanity. If we speak of the new ardour that is needed as of one of our strategies, the language is of course improper. God's Spirit is the main actor here - what we can do is only to empty ourselves for God's mystery and, like Jacob, struggle with him until he blesses us.

The Word of God speaks to us on many pages about the passionate, seemingly less than reverential relationship with God, of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, of the prophets, and of Job, and in the New Testament about the every-day familiarity with Jesus in the lives of the apostles and of Mary. They are so much present in the European works of art and it is up to us to avoid that they just become museum pieces.

c) Heeding the call for greater communion

The walls around old monasteries do not tell the truth: in reality religious are not walled in but rather are very good communicators. Baptism, consecration through the vows, prayer, the Eucharist - they not only express the covenant with God but also create intense relationships which include all people and all of creation excluding no one. Our Christian life is meant to be communicative of the Eucharistic way: full of gratitude to God, creating communion among us all and giving ourselves away for those far off.

An area of promise for religious life lies in becoming aware again of this treasure of communion, so much needed in an individualistic society where loneliness and fragmentation cause endless suffering. This spirit of communion will make us cross borders; it will take us far into the fields of inter-cultural and interreligious relationships and it will make us quite visible and not walled-in. Someone said in May: our true visibility ought to be charity.

An area of communion to be mentioned is active openness to vocations. Although our main goal is not to recruit but to pave the way for the Kingdom of God, we must also give a clear message that we do not want to remain alone in our endeavors and that our life and mission urgently need partnership. It is too easy to give up. If we are truly heeding the call for greater communion we will also make moves to be actively and strategically present at places where vocations are more likely to

be found, and while our patience is sometimes stretched we continue to pray to the "Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Lk 10:2).

Another area of communion is with the laity who want to live the charism of our founders. I have always felt it as a gift from the Spirit that such lay people are available, seeking contact with us, ready and willing to share our mission.

In religious life the call for greater communion should also be expressed through inter-cultural communities. A wide field of possibilities opens up here, here some of our communities can become really prophetic.

Another opportunity exists in inter-congregational endeavors. There are already some examples of them, and we could go further. If the vocations are not numerous in some countries, why not try out inter-congregational formation houses as well?

It is again interesting to see how many of these ideas about religious life Europe were already expressed at the 1999 European Synod. For instance, the need of witnessing to life's transcendent dimension and to fraternity were clearly indicated: "The demand for new forms of spirituality, now making itself felt throughout society, needs to find a response in the *acknowledgment of God's absolute primacy* which consecrated persons experience in their total gift of self and their permanent conversion in a life offered up as true spiritual worship. … In today's multicultural and multi-religious world, there is also a demand for the witness of that *evangelical fraternity* which characterizes the consecrated life and makes it a stimulus to purifying and integrating different values through the reconciliation of divisions." (Ecclesia in Europa, 38)

4. *Areas of promise, renewal and growth in our missionary outreach*

Religious life fosters communion and as a consequence it becomes explicitly missionary, according to each institute's charism. To be missionaries to Europe is another important area of promise, renewal and growth for us. In practice it will need careful strategizing. At a time of numeric decline opening new missionary endeavors entails closing down places and drawing people together. Such moves will make it visible, show that we are not here for ourselves and that we are not meant to look back for ever at our own glorious past. I shall mention three possible focuses for such a mission in Europe: towards the mainstream, the core of secularized Europe; towards the poor in Europe and towards a greater responsibility of Europe for the world.

a) Mission to Europe's mainstream cultures

If we lament too much about the present culture of Europe we might give the impression that we are nostalgic for an era of Christendom, which was not perfect either and which we cannot call back. How negative an attitude of lamenting is, has been especially pointed out by German church leaders in recent years. It is not a good thing because it paralyzes us and may induce us to simply run away like Jonas from Nineveh. Has not the world always been bad? I recall two remarks from the May assembly which invite us to stand our ground even if things are bad. One remark said: do not run away to other continents; the other, coming from Eastern Europe: there is a temptation we must resist, the temptation to think that evil prevails.

In my congregation in the USA we observe the phenomenon that our vocations mostly come from immigrants, hardly from the mainstream culture. We work, of course, intensely with immigrants - but are we doing enough with those more deeply affected by secularity and nihilism? I observe similar tendencies in Europe, though on a lesser scale. We are called to be present to the core of today's European culture, to address it up-front.

Several approaches to the mainstream culture could be imagined:

Intellectual research and debate. Bishop Pierre Raffin mentioned this to us in May.

Supporting the life of the family. The family is deeply threatened by the present culture, and at the same time families would be the places where Christian life should flourish most.

Outreach to those who no longer come to us. The observation was made in May, that as religious we are getting too involved in parishes, which leads to a clericalization of certain institutes which were not founded to replace local clergy. Many of our institutes were in fact founded to go where the Church is not present. While parishes will always remain, our call is to reach out beyond the ordinary pastoral structures.

Offering a public voice. The European society offers to those who have the gift of public speech great opportunity to be heard. Bishops like Christoph Schönborn, Reinhard Marx or Diarmuid Martin are examples. On issues concerning the common good or JPIC, the voice of church members has high credibility.

Mission with youth and with lay associates. I have observed in recent years that youth ministry is picking up if the young are supported in their spiritual life (sometimes inspired by a founder of a religious institute) and are encouraged to take their own initiatives. The same applies to lay associates.

Creating open spaces for ritual and reflection. People who may not share our beliefs are sensitive and open to make use of spaces of silence and ritual.

b) Mission to those who are most in need, active care for the endangered environment

Bishop Pierre Raffin and the lay people who spoke to us in May offered quite a list of people in Europe who would need the care of the religious. It is good to know that we are needed! A further area of promise for us lies in making these needs our priority, according to our different charisms which were often given to us as God's response to a crying need. If we take those needs of Europe as our starting point it will not be on the basis of a cold analysis of facts or out of mere philanthropy; it will be as a mission. It is God who sends us and we just obey his will, not ours.

Here are some of the groups of persons and situations that were pointed out to us:

the difficult quarters of the large urban centers

the old in nursing homes or living alone

education

hospitals

immigrants, particularly those of other religions

the young - some of them growing old without having found employment

victims of human trafficking.

Religious life has also a longstanding tradition and credibility in caring for the environment. Personally I find it surprising that even in a secular age the expression “integrity of creation” is still maintained. As believers we can make the reference to the Creator explicit by working in solidarity, side by side, with other people to protect nature against destruction through human greed and thoughtlessness.

All of the things mentioned in this paragraph can be done together with other people of good will, with NGOs or volunteers who, in most cases, have more expertise than we do but often appreciate the presence of people with a strong spiritual motivation. For a good number of young religious in my own institute the participation in the World Social Forums has been an eye-opener about our realistic possibilities given our limitations and our strengths. This connects us to the following and last point.

c) Mission in view of Europe’s opening up to the world

Another area where religious life can play a life-giving role in Europe is helping the Continent to open up to the world even more. For great parts of Europe is true what a ‘Misereor’ officer told me about the German church: we lack openness to the outside. Religious congregations have an international network that could greatly help to make Europe aware of a broader horizon.

It is true that the world is globalized and international connections are no longer the privilege of a few. Also in this, we must be humble enough to learn from others. But we do have a specific contribution to make. For us, inter-cultural contacts are an expression of our faith in Someone whom we call “our Father” and who makes all people brothers and sisters, in Christ who challenges us with the question “who is our neighbor” and invites us to become neighbors to those far away, in the Spirit of Pentecost who makes us understand each others’ languages.

Working in this promising area is already taking on a variety of expressions, and we religious can help each other in this field.

Volunteers live with missionaries in other countries; many young people are open to this and generously give a year of their time.

Religious with experience abroad come back to work with immigrants in Europe.

European religious, working with youth and laity in general, organize festivals with immigrants in different parts of Europe, to increase appreciation of foreign cultures.

Some religious make efforts to influence European foreign policy through lobbying, or organize themselves to disseminate international information available to us through missionaries, for example a news agency like MISNA.

The USG-UISG have started the important inter-congregational South-Sudan project

These types of activities also help to overcome an outdated mission model too much mingled with colonial thinking and thus opens the way for a new brother and sisterhood among peoples and local churches.

Some of these ideas about missionary outreach were already envisioned as tasks for the religious, by the 1999 European Synod, particularly the commitment to the poor and to Europe's opening up to the rest of the world:

> "The presence of new forms of poverty and marginalization ought to call forth that creativity in *the care of those most in need* which has marked so many founders of Religious Institutes. Finally, the tendency to a certain self-absorption can find an antidote in the readiness of consecrated persons to continue the work of evangelization on other continents, despite the decrease of numbers in various Institutes." (Ecclesia in Europa, 38)

Conclusion

The reference to the synod above, and our own memory tells us that much of this has been said before. What is the element of newness? Perhaps we can find it with the help of Nicodemus who was mentioned several times at the last assembly.

"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old?' … Jesus answered, … Do not marvel that I said to you, `You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (Jn 3: 4a, 7 - 8)

The Spirit will be the one who will renew the face of the earth, and that includes the face of religious life in Europe.

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