

Europe – Mission Land: What we have done so far and some possibilities for the future

*Complete version after the Western Europe Region Team Visit, Lyons
11 August 2011*

Fr. Vaclav Klement
Councillor for the Missions

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Introduction

I have a confession to make. It was very difficult to prepare this report because up until now we have not reflected in an all-around way on this theme in the Commission for Project Europe. First of all, the organizational procedures of events taking place outside the community are not very clear and there was practically nothing concrete gotten from the Team Visit. Therefore, I tried to look at the context around which our theme revolves. Here I have attempted to give some inspirational starting-points for future reflection. I wrote five pages of the draft on the last night that the Commission for Project Europe gathered. This was one week ago at Santiago de Compostella. I wrote up till 4 AM in the morning.

I would like to ask you all a question: Does a truly European heart beat inside each one of us? As I was preparing the theme I came to the realization that we need a big heart to embrace today's great cultural and ecclesial continent-wide changes. Therefore I wish to give a little gift to each province. It is calligraphy of the Chinese character Xin, which means heart.

In the third European Provincial Meeting (November 2010) I gave a report with the same title that contains some concrete data on the projects presented to the Rector Major by the 9 provinces, the road for discernment of the missionaries for Project Europe and for their reception and follow-up. All this information is available on the www.sdb.org site under the title Project Europe. How many of you are registered on our site to be able to download these documents?

I am very happy to have been invited to participate in this European Team Visit. Before coming to Lyons I spent three days near Taizé' praying for this meeting and getting a feeling for what attracts so many young people from all over Europe and the whole world to come to this country place to pray. Now that I am here I have been able to listen during the first three days of our Team Visit to the joys and hopes of the eight provinces of the Region. Already two years before the official beginning of Project Europe (November 2006), we held a seminar on the same theme as my report "Europe, A Mission Land." In the "Guidelines for Action" for the European Project (2008 – 2014) the Rector Major delineated the content of these guidelines. The third priority consists in creating the necessary conditions for giving a heart-felt welcome to confreres from other regions of the Congregation so that they can take up the evangelization of Europe with an awareness of the inculturation needed to do so.

During the period 2008-2011 **38 confreres** have been assigned to Europe; of these **7 have already returned** to their original provinces (2 from Europe and 5 from South Asia).

I would like to reflect together on the significance of the presence of over thirty missionaries among the more than 6,000 Salesians of Europe. They are confreres assigned from other continents (2 from America, 2 from Africa, 4 from Europe and the greater part from Asia.). In the last three years I was able to visit all seven provinces that have received new missionaries. In every place I met with the Provincial Council in order to follow up the welcoming process and to see how the new missionaries are adjusting to salesian life and the mission.

1. What kind of Church will there be in Europe in 2050?

In the last 100 years the Church in Europe has changed a lot. A careful look at the mosaic of churches will help us to point out signs that are truly essential for the future of the Catholic Church in Europe. I now ask you to imagine what would be the make-up of the Church and of salesian life in Europe in 2050, forty years from now.

The facts show that while the Church is numerically increasing in almost all the world, in Europe it is decreasing. There are many reasons for this situation. At the same time we don't see many signs of rebirth, of purification, or of a new spring. But we believe that from every crisis an ever more dynamic life is newly born again.

The European Church of 2050 will probably be a creative minority. After a few centuries of Church monopoly at State and society level it will now become a numerical minority. In some countries it has already become a Church of the Diaspora where all the Christians don't even make up 10 % of the population. In other places Communism has almost destroyed all structures and institutions. It is not easy to rebuild them. In many countries there is a dearth of two generations of faithful and pastors. On the other hand, in some places you can find some communities that are very lively animated by first or second generation Catholics coming from the "Global South." After a few centuries of mission activity *ad extra*, the European Church will truly become a Church that gives and receives at the same time. Certainly it will be a Church that is more catholic in a sense because of the variety of ethnic groups or nationalities, of new and old church movements. There will be more lay people engaged in service to the community, with religious and priests coming from other continents. It will present us with a very complex picture - at the same time secularist and renewed, aging and young.

Some trends gleaned from statistics on the European Church: "When we examine data on Christianity in Europe, we see some broad outlines. Defections (atheism, agnosticism, secularism) add to the decline in numbers of all the Christian Churches on the whole continent. Still the number of Christians is increasing thanks to births in Christian families and thanks to immigration. Neither declining emigration nor conversions exercise a substantial role in this increase. **So the increase of European Christian communities seems to be in the hands of immigrants from non-European countries.** Moreover, active participation in the Church life of Western Europe is declining. **This shows us that Church renewal will become the priority.** For example, in 1910 the Charismatic Renewal had only 26,000 adherents while in 2010 they can count 31 million participants. (Atlas of Global Christianity, Edinburgh, 2010, p. 156 – A work undertaken by an ecumenical group for the centenary of the first ecumenical missionary congress at Edinburgh.)

Using Cardinal Suenens classic vision in his book “La Chiesa in Stato di Missione” (1956), we can formulate a path for the future until the Synod on New Evangelization begins in 2012. (Among the books of Card Suenens it seems an English title of that name does not exist. In English the Italian means “The Church in a State of Mission”): Our path can start with a first announcement of Jesus to European “post-Christians” or “half-Christians” who are fret with prejudice and we can continue all the way up to and include a mission ministry and continual commitment to the missions on other continents.

What kind of image of the European Church in 2050 are we dreaming about? Are we preparing for it in our lives and in our daily education ministry?

2. Europe Land of Missionaries and Mission Land

Don Bosco already heard the following from missionary Bishop Amando Joseph Fava of Grenoble: “Unfortunately perhaps haven’t even our Catholic countries become, so to say, mission territory? Religious ignorance and indifference, march side by side with hatred against religion fed by ignorance and stirred up by wicked agitation. They make headway more and more. May the Lord be thanked a thousand times for the crowd of well-educated and zealous workers that he deigns to lift up here under the virgin mantle of his Mother., These boys, as laymen or priests, will come in their own time to the help of the Church, keeping in their hearts respect, acknowledgement and love for, and the practice of, our holy religion. (MB 17, 20 Jan 1885) (It seems that this episode does not exist in the English BM Vol 17)

One Hundred years ago there were about 60,000 missionaries present in all the Christian Churches; of these 40,000 were Europeans. Today world-wide we count 400,000 Christian missionaries of which only 132,000 come from European countries. In the same span of time Europe received 90,000 Christian missionaries, the same number as Africa. The mission scene has changed profoundly. It is multi-directional.

At the same time the number of Christians in Europe has gone down by 20%. Almost the whole of the Christian population today counts for only a fifth of the agnostic, atheist and Muslim population..

One hundred years ago, the great world religions did not have missions. Instead today we find Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu missions on all continents. Sometimes they copy the structures, strategies and methods of Christian missions.

At the same time the nature of the priesthood and religious life has also changed in Europe. In all European countries Catholicism is on the rise, thanks to the arrival of non-European clergy and some vocations coming from migrants that are in Europe. According to the latest data the non-European clergy in France total more than 10% of the clergy, in Spain 15%, in Belgium 14%, in French-speaking Switzerland about 22%. Obviously in 2050 this percentage will be even higher! At the same time about 15,000 non-Italian female religious are working in Italy while about 8,000 Italian missionary. sisters work outside the country. Even the diocesan clergy of “Fidei Donum” number about 2000, while those Italian priests working outside the country are about 900. More than 30 German-born Vietnamese priests are working in German dioceses. It is difficult to find these data. Only the French Bishops’ Conference publishes them in official form. (French missionaries in the world in 1994: 7,000; 2005: 3,700. Instead foreign religious sisters present in France number 5,000, priests 1,100. (www.coop-miss75.org).

John Paul II’s post-synod apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (n 46) urges us to a “first

announcement of Christ and to a renewed proclamation of the Gospel, realizing that on the continent there are vast social and cultural areas which stand in need of a real missio ad gentes”.

In the last ten years almost all of the Bishops’ Conferences of Europe have asked for renewed missionary activity: Germany (2004 Salvation for All), Spain (2008 The Current Situation of the Missio ad Gentes in Spain), Portugal (2010 Para um rosto missionario da Igreja em Portugal). It is notable that this commitment makes the strict linkage between the foreign mission ad gentes and the re-evangelization of one’s own country stand out. The pastors’ message is clear: **If the European Church does not become a missionary Church it has no future.** Bishop Luc Van Looy is not the only missionary that has been named to head a diocese in Western Europe in these last few years. Together with many collaborator priests and lay people Bishop Van Looy has written a book entitled “Toward a Church in Mission” (Gent, 2009)

What resources do we have for the evangelization of our provinces in the testimony of around 280 missionaries of the Region engaged in the missionary frontiers on all continents? (Spain 247, South Belgium-France 15, Portugal 15)

The conference of Joachim Wanke, Bishop of Erfurt is very enlightening. He is responsible for new evangelization efforts in Germany. “What is the vision of the Church? To bring light to the lamp lighters! We have to rediscover the courage to speak of our faith in the first person. Are we ready to speak about God and our faith? The Church in Germany lacks something: It is not money nor the faithful. **The weakness of our Church first of all is that it lacks conviction. How can we give birth to new Christians? We are rooted in the prejudice that “mission” is only for Africa or Asia but not for Hamburg or Erfurt.**” (*Lasst uns das Licht auf den Leuchter stellen, Impulse fur Christen, St. Benno Verlag, GmbH Leipzig, 2001, p. 120*)

3. Mission Journey Towards the Future of the Congregation in Europe

In spite of few vocations and aging confreres, the European Salesians are present in Europe in respectable numbers. The 6,000 Salesians of the 28 provinces make up one-third of the congregation. They are the fruit of a very rich charismatic history and heritage.

The challenge to form each of these 6,000 Salesians to have a missionary mentality should be the strategic priority of our theme. If we acknowledge that our countries are mission territories we would already be well on our way down the road to a radical conversion to adapt ourselves to this new situation. (cf. the first draft of the guidelines for missionary formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco February 2011 put out by the Formation and Mission Departments.)

a. The religious life is always a catalyst for mission. Consecrated religious have always been the best missionaries in the history of the Church. Religious life is a center that gushes forth energy for building up the Church and launching its mission. **Let us take an honest look at our life. We will find some roads that do not lead to a future the Lord wants. He is the one who sends us out. This first step is a must for our conversion.**

- Some confreres pretend that nothing has changed in society, in the Church or in the world of youth. They continue to live and work as yesterday.
- Others have taken some wrong roads that do not lead to the future (for example, following a

liberal model of the religious life or leaving our central position in the mission to lay people;
- Others surrender in the face of the apparent dearth of vocations; still others move out from the most strategic positions such as schools or professional formation centers.)
- Others give in to fatigue. They do not see Christ at the center of their history.
- Still others hide behind some external strategies. They have not been converted. Neither as persons nor as community do they start from Christ.

b. Another step in our conversion process would be to humbly let others help us: We have to realize that we lack the energy and enthusiasm to be surprised at the novelty of Jesus. We have to renew our life of faith and center once again on the essential. We have to stop pretending that we are already evangelized enough. This means that we have to invest much more to re-evangelize the heart of each and every Salesian. We have to become searchers for God. We are always on the quest. This conversion has to take place not only on the personal level but also on the community level.

c. Some attitudes and strategies for a third step in the conversion process required for the livelihood of Salesian apostolic consecrated life in Europe:

- A more open mentality toward youth, not fearing to meet them where they are.
- A more open mentality that is not afraid of going beyond provincial and national boundaries.
- A more courageous mentality that is able to leave the comforts of home and of material structures to allow oneself to be converted by “our” youth.
- A Salesian heart attracted to Jesus and remade so that every educational and social activity becomes a chance at evangelization for every Salesian.

There has to be some visible signs too. For example, we could have a new international community dedicated to the communications mission in the digital world. Can we imagine a community of four confreres of different nationalities who live, work and reflect together? Could we found it in Paris, Brussels, Madrid or Berlin?

4. Missionary Confreres Help on the Journey toward the Future

In the last 10 years about 70 Salesians have been sent to the European provinces. They come from non-European provinces (50) and European provinces (20). Of these 36 were sent after Project Europe. They were sent to provinces that requested help from the Rector Major (AUS 4, BEN 6, FRB 6, GBR 6, IRL 5, UNG 10, ICP – Lithuania 3, CEP – Bulgaria 1). 16 of these are priests and 20 candidates to the priesthood.

The missionaries are not many in number. But **their presence makes Project Europe visible** both inside our provinces and outside them. It makes us think about the motives of the mission, and clearly points out the multicultural dimension of some communities or provinces that only a few years ago were closed in their own culture. Their presence is also sign of the attitude of always being ready to move. This is a fundamental attitude for mission. The greater part of the newly-arrived confreres who came after the official beginning of Project Europe are still in initial formation (Practical Trainees or Theology Students). We are only at the beginning of our journey. The provinces are learning how to accommodate and accompany the newly arrived confreres, how to insert them into the community and how to entrust them with positions of responsibility in the life and mission of the community. Moreover, we already have an Indian provincial in Hungary, an Indian director in The Netherlands and a Vietnamese director-provincial council member in Hungary. In November

2011 we are looking forward to a meeting of all the new missionaries present in Europe to evaluate what we have done on the journey so far.

When we wanted to present to the public a European seminar on missionary animation (Valdocco, Nov 27 –Dec 1) the Delegate for Social Communications who stays in touch with journalists of the big Italian magazines asked my help in setting up three interviews with some newly-arrived missionaries in Europe! It makes us think about the symbolic value of the presence of the few non-European confreres among us.

One cannot measure the impact of new confreres who have come for Project Europe only with the few factors of the contribution they are making to ministry. According to the experience of some Italian provinces that in the last 15 years have received about 10 practical trainees from Asia, East Europe or Africa, the presence of these missionaries has many good effects: 1. At the vocation level they are close to the young animators or the few young local confreres. 2. They rejuvenate those communities that have forgotten the "young Salesians of the playground." 3. They help create more fraternal and open communities.

In almost all the communities of the Region we can already find young immigrants in our Oratories, Youth Centers, Family Houses, Parishes, Schools and Professional Formation Centers. From the time of Don Bosco the migrants on the streets of Turin were our first preoccupation. The migrants of Latin America were the first preoccupation of our mission ad gentes. We have to find the specific educational contribution we want in Project Europe.

Ministry to young migrants. Right now today we can count about 40 million migrants present in Europe. Of these about 20 million are non-European, 10 million European migrants are present outside and there are 10 million Gypsies. Just last week the Commission for PE decided on a concrete strategy for researching lines of action in our commitment to migrants in the European Provinces (work group – UPS Rome, YM, Missions, 3 Regions).

Probably **the most suitable field for new confreres** coming from non-European provinces would be ministry among young migrants. They themselves are strangers in Europe. Even if they don't speak the same language as the migrants they can be the best educators and evangelizers in the vast migrant field.

Conclusion

I would like to return to the words the Rector Major spoke in the second encounter with the provincials of Europe in November 2008: *"Project Europe is a spiritual proposal without equal. Here we're not talking of evangelization ad gentes, as for example we do in Asia or in Africa. Nor are we speaking about consolidation of an evangelization that is already finished, as for example we do in Latin America. In Europe we want to recover the spiritual and cultural (patrimony, identity) of a continent already non-Christian or post-Christian."* Yes, here we are on roads not-yet-traveled. They are full of challenges. But we have faith that the Lord walks with us and the Madonna goes before us.

I am convinced that the Salesian of Europe is the first mission land: only by remaining faithful to his intimacy with God can the European missionary Salesian be a prophet in his own land, one who helps to find new inroads in the announcement of the Gospel. At the heart of GC26 "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle" every Salesian is asked to evangelize his own heart. (2nd theme, The Urgent Need for Evangelization)