

Europe - Mission Territory

Project Europe in the context of European Churches

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1. Introduction

Dear friends!

Good morning to each one of you. First of all I want to repeat that the Congregation is proud of you! To be a missionary in Europe today is a grace but not such an easy task! Thank you for your daily response to this very specific call of God to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ here in Europe!

We are beginning a new day in Valdocco, a district of Turin, in Italy, and Italy is part of Europe. I am happy to meet all of you here and my task is to trigger your ongoing reflection on the Church in Europe. Being the second largest men's Congregation in the Church, **we could easily lose our 'Sensus Ecclesiae' (Constitution 6)**. The SDB Project Europe which GC26 set in place almost six years ago runs the risk of being disconnected from the Church generally and from the circumstances faced by Christianity in Europe today.

This reflection is my second attempt to **look around us** not so much in terms of general cultural, religious or youth trends but more as a reflection on the experiences emerging in the Church today

in various parts of Europe. Some of you would be aware of my first reflection on this topic which I shared in Lyon (Team Visit for West Europe Region) in August 2011, which many young Salesians in Europe and beyond have commented on in lively fashion.

The Provincials of Europe gathered four times with the Rector Major and his Council for from 2004 to 2012 for discernment together on Project Europe (2004, 2008, 2010, 2012). Many distinguished guests helped the provincials to read the signs of the times. Three priorities, goals or principles of Project Europe were explored in-depth: Revitalisation of the Charism; Re-dimensioning of the mission and Sending and receiving missionaries.

But to motivate and move 6000+ Salesians in 29 European provinces towards renewal of religious life and mission is not an easy operation. To keep an eye on the different renewal movements of local Churches or other religious congregation and ecclesial movements in the old Continent is also a challenging task. Last year as part of the evaluation of PE, the Rector Major recognised that some 34% of European confreres still have little appreciation of the goals of PE. The goals are clear but progress is rather slow. Indeed if it is about conversion, change of mentality – this is a long-term process. This short reflection tries to look at the context of European Christianity and the Catholic Church. It is an attempt to offer points for your ongoing reflection. To be sent as a Salesian from Asia, Africa or Latin America to Europe is a privilege, and not something easy to do. This reflection aims at broadening your vision and mentality from being too local (*my school, my parish, my community, my province*) to a broader awareness of Europe as citizens, believers and confreres (*our Europe*). It will help us to embrace the significance of your presence (60+ missionaries among the more than 6,000 Salesians in Europe).

For each of the four points of the reflection you find some questions which could help you today and in the future to '**think and breathe more with the Church in Europe**'.

2. 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 point to 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 much of the rest of the world, it is decreasing in Europe. There are many reasons for this. At the same time we do not see many signs of rebirth, purification, or of a new spring. But we believe that from every crisis an ever more dynamic life is born again.

The European Church of 2050 will probably be a **creative minority**. After a few centuries of Church monopoly at State and societal level it will now become a **numerical minority**. In some countries it has already become a Church of the Diaspora where all Christians put together are not even 10 % of the population. In other places Communism had almost destroyed all structures and institutions and it has not been easy to rebuild them. Many countries have lost two generations of faithful and pastors. On the other hand, in some places you can find already some communities that are very lively, and animated by first or second generation Catholics coming from the “Global South.” After a few centuries of mission activity *ad extra*, the European Church truly becomes a Church that gives and receives at the same time. Certainly it will be a Church that is more catholic due to 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 from other continents. It will present us with a very complex picture - both 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 directions. Defections (atheism, agnosticism, secularism) add to the decline in numbers of all the Christian Churches across the whole continent. The number of Christians is still 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**. But active participation in Church life in 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 it has 31 million. (*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 Leo Suenens' classic vision in his book "La Chiesa in Stato di Missione" (1956: *The Church in a State of Mission*), we can formulate a path for the future: "Our path can start with a first proclamation of Jesus Christ to European "post-Christians" or "half-Christians" who are filled with prejudice and we can continue all the way up to and include a mission ministry and continual commitment to missions in other continents. For example the topic of the United Kingdom (GBR) Bishops Conference Mission Day 2013 is: *How to help the 4 million lapsed Catholics return to the ecclesial community*.

For further personal or community reflection

What kind of image of the future European Church (=in 2050) are we dreaming of?

Am I open to deepening my personal understanding of Church trends in Europe now?

3. Europe as Mission Territory and a place for Missionaries

Don Bosco had already heard the following from missionary Bishop Amando Joseph Fava of Grenoble (France): "Is it the case perhaps that unfortunately our Catholic countries have become mission territory? Religious ignorance and indifference go hand in hand with hatred against religion fed by ignorance and stirred up by wicked agitation. They make increasing headway. Let us thank the Lord a thousand times for the many well-educated and zealous workers he has deigned to raise up here under the mantle of his Virgin Mother. These boys, as laymen or priests, in their own time will come to the aid of the Church, keeping respect, and love for our holy religion and its practice in their hearts." (MB 17, 20 Jan 1885).

One hundred years ago there were about 60,000 missionaries in all the Christian Churches. Of these 40,000 were European. Today world-wide there are 400,000 Christian missionaries of whom only 132,000 come from European countries. Also today Europe receives 90,000 Christian missionaries, the same number as being sent to Africa. The mission scene has changed profoundly. It is multi-directional.

At the same time the number of Christians in Europe has decreased by 20%. The Christian population today counts for only a fifth of Europe's population – the rest being agnostic, atheist and Muslim, amongst others.

One hundred years ago the other 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. Catholicism is on the rise in all European countries thanks also to the arrival of non-European clergy and some vocations coming from migrants already in Europe. According to the latest data 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 only some 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 in France number 5,000, priests are about 1,100. (<http://www.coop-miss75.org>). And you could add many more data if you look around you in the respective countries and provinces).

John Paul II’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (no. 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 in 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 highlights the strict linkage between the foreign mission ad gentes and the re-evangelization of one’s own country. 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 appointed as head of 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” (Ghent, 2009).

How do we maximize the **resource we have for the evangelization of our European provinces in the life testimony of some 1200 European missionaries** engaged in the missionary frontiers on all continents? As a fresh example we can watch the recently made videos on Fr Michal Moskwa (98 year old Polish missionary working in Japan) or about the late Fr Guezou (French missionary who passed away in India, Tamil Nadu in 2009). Not by accident both were prepared through the initiative of two young missionaries - one Polish deacon and one Indian student of theology!

The experience of Bishop Joachim Wanke (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, Leipzig, 2001, p. 120)

For further personal or community reflection

What and how could we learn from thousands of religious and priests who have reached Europe in the past 30 years in order to contribute to the European Church?

Do we know, are we in touch with the directives of the respective representations of Church Magisterium (Bishops Conferences, Bishops) in our new countries and provinces?

4. Indicators for the Future of the Congregation

In spite of fewer vocations and aging confreres, European Salesians can be found in Europe in respectable numbers. The 6,000+ Salesians of the 28 provinces still make up at least 40% of the worldwide Congregation. They are the fruit of a very rich charismatic history and heritage of

holiness, spirituality and mission. The strategic priority should be to form a missionary mentality in each European Salesian. **If we acknowledge that our European countries are mission territories we are already well on our way to a radical conversion and to adapting ourselves to this new situation.** (cf. *The Missionary Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, January 24, 2013 prepared by the Formation and Missions sectors, and *The Initial Proclamation in Europe*, Study days in Prague, 2010)

a. 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 directions that do not lead to the future the Lord wants.** He is the one who sends us out. This first step is a must for our conversion - change of attitude:

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 they did yesterday. Others have taken some wrong directions that do not lead to the future (for example, following a liberal model of religious life or leaving our central position in the mission and Charism 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 present history; Others hide behind some external strategies. They do not feel the need for conversion, to start afresh from Christ (the 'mundane Church' Pope Francis has pointed out).

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 focus once again on the essentials. We have to stop pretending that we are already sufficiently evangelized. This means that we have to invest much more in re-evangelizing the heart of each and every Salesian. We have to become searchers for God. We are always on a 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 for Salesian apostolic and consecrated life in Europe:

- A more open approach to youth, not fearing to meet them where they are.
- A more open approach, unafraid of going beyond provincial and national boundaries.
- More courage in leaving our 'comfort zones' so we can reach out to youth.
- A Salesian heart attracted by Jesus so that every educational and social activity becomes a chance for evangelization for every Salesian who is living in Europe.
- A humble heart so we can walk side by side with our Lay Mission Partners (even of different religions) in developing new and creative ways of being amongst youth today.

For further personal or community reflection

How does this changing way of being a Christian/religious in Europe affect our daily life?
What is the specific contribution of a missionary in Europe to helping local confreres in their renewal of consecrated and community life and developing creative ways of mission?

5. Missionary Confreres Aid Progress in Project Europe

Over the last 12 years about 70 Salesians have been sent to European provinces. Your number is small but **your presence makes Project Europe visible both inside our provinces and beyond them**. It makes us think about the motives of the mission, and clearly points to the multicultural dimension of some communities or provinces that only a few years ago were closed within their own culture. Your presence is also a sign of the attitude of always being ready to move. This is a fundamental attitude for mission. The majority of the newly-arrived confreres in Project Europe are still young - this is an asset. 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 some missionary rectors and one provincial councillor in Europe. The first meeting of new missionaries in Europe (November 2011, Rome) was a first major step - assessment of our journey so far. Over the past two years some regular provincial or inter-provincial meetings of missionaries in Europe have taken place. Also the Provincial Chapters in 2013 benefited from the participation of many of you, thanks to the invitation from the respective Provincials.

One cannot measure the impact of new confreres who have come for Project Europe only by the contribution they are making to ministry. According to the experience of some Italian provinces that in past received some 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 leaders 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 Europe we can already find young immigrants in our Oratories, Youth Centers, Family Houses, Parishes, Schools and Professional Formation Centers. Rural migrants in the cities have been our first concern since Don Bosco's times. Latin American migrants were the first concern of our *missio ad gentes*. We now need to discover the specific educational and pastoral contribution we want you to make in Project Europe. The Europe-wide research of Salesian commitment for/with Migrants (Vito Orlando, *L'attenzione ai migranti e la Missione salesiana nelle società multiculturali d'Europa*, UPS 2012) and *Salesian Missions Day 2014 (We are the others - Sharing Christ's love with the migrants)* which brings this mission to the attention of Salesians worldwide, might be a compulsory matter for reflection on your part. Probably **one of the most suitable fields for new confreres** coming from non-European provinces would be ministry among young migrants. You are strangers in the new cultures of Europe. but even if you don't speak the same languages as the multicultural migrant groups, you might be the best educators and evangelizers in this vast mission. As missionaries in Europe you are a very small group in the vast movement of 50 million migrants who have moved from other continents to Europe over the past 30 years.

For further personal or community reflection

Do we learn from the experience of other religious missionaries in our new country?
What might be the specific contribution of a Salesian missionary to this vast field of our educative
- pastoral mission towards/with migrants in Europe?

6. Conclusion

I would like to return to the words of the Rector Major regarding Project Europe.

Firstly, when he spoke at the second meeting of provincials of Europe in November 2008: “Project Europe is a spiritual proposal without equal. Here we are not speaking 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.

Secondly, when Fr Chávez addressed provincials in Europe in November 2012 during the Project Europe Provincial's meeting (cf. Evaluation of how Project Europe was being carried out and future directions) “[Over the]years we have been working at Project Europe, the sending and receiving of missionaries from some Europe provinces to other European provinces which are weaker or more in need of personnel, or from Provinces in other continents has been one of the more successful dimensions; while some real challenges remain regarding selection of confreres who come, their linguistic and cultural preparation, their ability to fit in, their reception and accompaniment by provincials and rectors of the provinces that receive them.”

I am convinced that the first mission territory is the heart of all European Salesians: only by remaining faithful to intimacy with God can they be prophets in their own land, one who helps to find new ways to witness and proclaim the Gospel. There is a strong need to continue the *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* renewal sought by GC26, especially in all European provinces. Yes, every Salesian is asked first to evangelize his own heart, in order to become a credible and visible witness to the Gospel in Europe today.

Indeed the humble, faithful and dynamic presence of thousands of non-European religious, lay and priestly (among them also some 70+ Salesians of Don Bosco) in this continent, is a small but very precious contribution (like leaven or a catalyst) to this challenging Church process in present day Europe.

I believe that you are not expecting many satisfactions, huge achievements or clapping of hands along the way! You are welcomed by the youth and a good number of our lay mission partners, but there are still many misunderstandings with local confreres (starting from the very hesitation to call you missionaries). But a wider and more open view of the broader reality of several thousand fellow missionaries (lay, religious, consecrated or priests) will always help you to take a fresh breath, have deeper hope and conviction about the meaning of your contribution in this hour of Europe's history.

Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us!

Saint John Bosco, pray for us!

Blessed Ceferino Namuncura, pray for us!