

Non-European SVD Missionaries in Europa: A Multidirectional Vision of Mission. Points for Reflection

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While we Salesians are struggling to find our way how to revitalise our charism in Europe as mandated by GC 26, twenty years ago the Divine Word Missionaries invited their confreres to work in Europe which they called “Project Europe.”¹ We shall reflect on a survey of their experience in order to draw out some points for our reflection.

SVD in Europe: A Historical Development

During their 12th General Chapter in 1982 it became obviously clear to SVD European Delegates that their Congregation is not only becoming less European but also that the delegates coming from other continents were much more prepared and had coordinated effort on matters of interest to them. After their Chapter the European Provincials decided to meet in Poland in 1984 where they discussed “the work of the SVD in Europe” and vocation promotion in the Continent. Henceforth they decided to meet every 2 years. In the light of the profound transformation processes taking place in Europe, in their meeting in Roscommon, Ireland in 1990, they pointed out that “Europe had become a mission continent” which “called for a change of mind-sets at all levels, in Europe and in the Society as a whole.”² They drew out the *Resolution of Roscommon* which proposed “the possibility of a first appointment of confreres from all over the world for Mission in Europe.”³

Inspired by the *Resolution of Roscommon* their General Chapter in 1994 underlined “the importance of missionary work in Europe.” It similarly asked the SVD General Council “to make known to the whole Society the need for international personnel to be appointed to the European zone.”⁴

The charism of the SVD is mission *ad gentes* in the strict sense. Today peoples, groups and contexts in which Christ is not known or where the Christian community is not sufficiently mature is found in Europe.

¹ Ladislav Nemet, ed., *Today's Europe and the SVD. Reflections on Mission* (Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut: Sankt Augustin, 2007), 5.

² Ladislav Nemet, 20.

³ Idem, 21.

⁴ Karl Josef Rivinius, “The Resolution of Roscommon,” in Martin Ueffing, ed., *Non-European Missionaries in Europe* (Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut: Sankt Augustin, 2011), 10.

Besides the problem of poverty, migration and refugees, Europe is confronted too with religious and cultural pluralism. There is too a growing number of baptized Christians who lost their faith while there are also many who search for meaning in the practice of religion. Thus “the mission of the SVD in Europe is and remains rooted in the *Missio ad Gentes*.”⁵ In practice this implies that “the parishes under our care must have a missionary face. We feel obliged to minister to migrants, the poorest of the poor in Europe, and to enter into dialogue with other religions and cultures.”⁶

Non-Europeans in Europe: A Survey

A recent survey indicated that in 2008 there were 204 non-European SVDs (137 priests, 62 students for the priesthood, 5 brothers) working and studying in Europe. Many of these missionaries in Europe come from large religious farming or labourers’ families. They are academically well trained. Most of them had done their philosophical studies in their home countries. Of the 113 interviewed only 4 did their philosophical studies in Europe.

In general non-European missionaries judge their reception in European Provinces as good, even if there were difficulties especially on the part of older SVDs. However many consider themselves not well prepared for their task in Europe. The survey showed that non-European SVDs recognize the problem of language, take it seriously and strive to solve it. The good command of the local European language seems to be the primary reason that non-European SVDs manage well and feel at home. However, the lack of an introduction program or preparation specifically for Europe, as well as the lack of accompaniment are the main complaints of those interviewed.

In general the great majority of non-European SVDs felt at home in their new setting and have a positive experience of the Church. Those who have worked in Europe for sometime consider their experience as helping them to have a broader horizon. Yet, negative experiences are mainly with their European confreres and less with non-Europeans. They expressed these in terms like : “some confreres dominate,” “some insult us,” and “some are gruff and regard us as beggars or second-class persons.” In the

⁵ Ladislav Nemet, 100, 106-107

⁶ Idem, 110.

final analysis the presence of non-European SVDs has been seen as an asset in fostering the international face of the SVD in Europe.⁷

Analysis of the Survey

The presence of non-European SVDs in Europe reveals that there is a necessity, a lacuna which Europeans themselves cannot fill. However they cannot be considered merely as ‘stop-gaps,’ or ‘secondary objects’ in the missionary work in Europe. They need to be given space to enrich and somewhat change the hue of the SVD presence in Europe.⁸

In this regard it is an absolute necessity to have a thorough and well constructed introduction programme which consists of thorough language preparation, introduction to local European history, traditions and customs are a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of their stay in Europe. Corollary to this is the theological formation in Europe as the preparation of non-Europeans to their service in Europe. It was also suggested that formation houses in Europe welcome SVDs who are interested in having their formation in a multicultural context as a preparation to work in Europe as well as in other continents.⁹

The presence of non-European missionaries in Europe drive home the important message that mission is not a one-way street but a multi-directional movement of missionaries who “are not visitors, arriving today and leaving tomorrow, observing us as outsiders, but rather fellow pilgrims carrying a load of questions, who are nevertheless prepared to accept the incomprehensible as part of their way to Him who has called them to follow Him.”¹⁰

Salesian Reflections

It is not rare to hear Salesians from technologically developed countries asking “***Why send us missionaries, we are not a poor country?***” Similarly, some missionaries from countries once considered ‘mission land’ also wonder the sense of being sent to a materially well-off or technologically developed countries. To many Salesians here lies the non verbalised ‘problem’ regarding the last General Chapter’s directive to relaunch the charism in Europe by making the necessary interventions to

⁷ Waldema Wesoly, “Non-European Confreres in Europe,” in *Non-European Missionaries in Europe*, 13-74.

⁸ Polykarp Ulin Aga, “Paradigm Shift Bon from Necessity. Analysis of a Survey among Non-European SVD Confreres in Europe,” in *Non-European Missionaries in Europe*, 104-106, 107-108.

⁹ Martin Ueffing, “Non-Euopean Missionaries in Europe: A Missiological reflection, in *Non-European Missionaries in Europe*, 145. See also 147-149.

¹⁰ Polykarp Ulin Aga, “Paradigm Shift Bon from Necessity,” 103

renew the Salesian presence in the continent (GC 26, 108, 111) now known as ‘Project Europe.’

Actually the problem is deeper than mere socio-geography! It is rooted in the **selective comprehension** of ‘mission’ expressed in *Ad Gentes* no. 6 understood solely as unidirectional movement from ‘Christian’ countries to ‘pagan’ lands and of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 31 where human promotion and development are seen as the most important components of mission. It seems that the understanding of mission of many has fossilised here. Thus, some consider it almost offensive or even humiliating to call Europe “mission territory”!

Yet, already way back in 1991, John Paul II had insisted in *Redemptoris Missio* nn. 33-34 that **mission cannot be seen anymore solely in unidirectional geographic terms** but primarily as the **proclamation of Jesus Christ in interpenetrating contexts** where there is a need of either *missio ad gentes*, *ordinary pastoral activity* or *new evangelisation*. Thus, he called for interdependence and mutual assistance between churches in what was traditionally called ‘Christian countries’ and ‘mission countries.’ It is in this light that Pope Benedict XVI invited the Church in Africa “to contribute to the new evangelisation in secularised countries” which “are today sadly lacking in vocations.” This, he underlined, is not a weakening of missionary impulse *ad gentes* but “a concrete sign” of its “fruitfulness”! (*Africae Munus* no. 167). With this renewed vision of mission Pope Francis continually invites Catholics to go “to the fringes of society” to proclaim the Gospel.

Thus, the Rector Major’s insistence that **Project Europe** is a “Congregational Project” which involves “all Regions and Provinces” (GC 26, p.147) primarily demands from **all Salesians a conversion of mind and heart** to appropriate this epochal change in the understanding of ‘mission.’ Only then will there be a multidirectional exchange of Salesian missionaries animated by mutual trust and openness which, in the final analysis, will enrich all Provinces and renew the whole Congregation!

For Group Reflection & Sharing

1. Preparation

- could you share your own insights regarding reception of missionaries in Europe in the light of the experience of the SVDs

2. Understanding of Mission

- how could you foster a deeper understanding of mission among European confreres as well as among missionaries in Europe?

3. Enriching your Province

- In what way has your Province been enriched by your presence?