

SECOND MEETING OF MISSIONARIES IN EUROPE

Turin Valdocco: November 1 – 3, 2013

At the Second Meeting at Valdocco, Turin, from the 1st to the 3rd of November 2013, of the missionaries who came to Europe over the past 10 years, 44 missionaries from 12 European provinces and the following countries: Ireland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Lithuania, Albania and Bulgaria were present, together with some Salesians who are accompanying them in their respective countries (Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, France, Austria and Bulgaria).

Fr. Václav Klement, the General Councillor for the Missions, Fr. Francis Cereda, the General Councillor for Formation, and Fr. Jose Miguel Nuñez, the Regional Councillor for West Europe took part in the meeting, as also Fr. Alfred Maravilla and Fr. Chryst Saldanha, members of the Missions and Formation Sectors respectively.

To stimulate the reflection of the participants, Fr. Klement spoke of Europe as a mission land, Fr. Maravilla presented an example of how the SVDs conduct their Project Europe, while Fr. Cereda developed the theme of the sending and reception of missionaries in Europe. There was also a presentation by Fr. Mauro Mergola of the work done by the Salesians on behalf of migrants and other categories of people at San Luigi Oratory, Turin.

1. Reflecting on their own experience, the missionaries shared among themselves on **WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS FROM THE EVANGELIZING MISSION OF THE CHURCHES IN EUROPE**. Here is a summary in their own words:

We have come to realize that it is a privileged responsibility to be a missionary in Europe at a time when a new model of the Church is appearing in this continent. Some of the age-old systems of faith-formation are breaking down and in their place newer and better forms of pastoral animation and formation are appearing.

Europe offers us an opportunity to share our faith with others in order to re-evangelize Europe. For this, we must have the courage to speak of Jesus Christ. Here is where we can learn from non-Catholic groups of Christians who focus on bringing Christ to people and on engaging from the start in faith-formation, whereas we can sometimes get caught up with organizational activities rather than with evangelization.

There are mission groups, like the Shalom from Brazil, that inspire us by the way they work with the young by making them feel comfortable in a new environment, firing them up with enthusiasm, and giving them responsibilities.

We sometimes meet informally with other religious missionaries on the university campus and interact with them about our apostolic activities, evangelization and youth ministry. From time to time we give a helping hand to parishes in the pastoral ministry. We come across some religious congregations that show a great dedication to the study of language and culture, and inspire us to integrate ourselves in the culture in which we have been called to live and work.

We also have before our eyes the experience of how migrants have brought about a rebirth of the spirit in some of the churches they frequent.

All these experiences make us realize that a missionary in Europe today can make a positive difference. He is recognized and appreciated by lay people. His background makes it easier for him to accept the multicultural and multireligious diversity of people around him, and to be open to the newness and diversity of Europe. He feels a dedication and love for his newly adopted country.

What he needs is a renewed vision of pastoral work: he needs to go to where the young are, to be among them, “to turn our place of work into a new Valdocco”. In dealing with the young, he needs a lot of faith, patience and humility. Above all, he needs to pray for the young and to give a witness of his priestly and religious life.

2. Another theme on which the missionaries shared among themselves was: **HOW THE PRESENCE OF MISSIONARIES HAS ENRICHED THE PROVINCES**. This is what they themselves felt:

The coming of the new missionaries has led some provinces to launch works among the migrants and refugees. Because of their closeness to migrant youth in particular and their ability to relate easily to them, the missionaries act as a bridge between these youth and the confreres of the country.

Within the community itself, the missionaries bring a presence that is enriching for all. They share their gifts and talents. The cultural interchange with the confreres gives the community and the province as well a different perspective on distant lands. The missionaries’ openness to meet the young encourages the confreres to do the same.

They are a stimulus to the community by their good example. No doubt, the missionaries are taken aback or confused when they notice a certain indifference towards the spiritual life and activities, like concelebrated Mass and the wearing of Mass vestments. But, it has been noticed how they are gradually helping to strengthen the prayer life of the community and its regularity in the practices of piety (the daily rosary, spiritual reading, meditation...).

They endow the community with a certain vitality and through their joy and optimism foster a good spirit of community in the house.

The receiving provinces appreciate the new energy and youthful dynamism that the missionaries bring. The missionaries see pastoral needs differently; they dare to do things with young people that the local confreres no longer dare, and in this way are catalysts for change. They are an asset in promoting vocations to the Salesian life.

The missionaries are involved in the works of the province, such as teaching in schools, taking charge of the youth centre, organizing trips for youngsters, and so on. Their presence has brought about changes in almost all the provinces in Europe, e.g. the revival of the formation commission in the provinces and a formation house, to mention just two.

More importantly, their presence is a witness that the Church in Western Europe is not dying, that religious and Salesian life are still very much alive.

3. A third area of reflection and sharing among the missionaries followed on: **FOSTERING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF “MISSION” AMONG EUROPEAN CONFRERES AS WELL AS AMONG MISSIONARIES IN EUROPE**. The main ideas that emerged were the following:

If missionaries are to contribute to a deeper understanding of “mission” among European confreres, it is important in the first place that they be accepted by the confreres themselves.

The fact is that most European provinces have had a long and strong tradition of sending missionaries to Africa, Asia and South America. They are used to sending missionaries rather than receiving missionaries. That is why the missionaries of Project Europe are perceived differently: they are welcomed as individuals, not as missionaries. Europeans tend to look at missionaries from non-European countries with a certain curiosity: why are they here? Or, there is a tendency to see missionaries as persons who merely fill some gaps in communities.

However, the concept of “mission” is gradually changing, and the Europeans are slowly beginning to accept missionaries. However, there is still some way to go. Missionaries need to be involved in some creative thinking and planning of the province’s mission for the future.

In this respect, the missionaries themselves can help foster a better understanding and acceptance of themselves in the community by taking the lead in interacting with their European confreres, viz. by speaking to them, working with them, asking their advice and suggestions for the apostolate in the locality, and getting into their mentality and their cultural background.

At the same time, however, there is a need of a meeting of all the missionaries with the confreres of the country in order to speak of the new vision of the Salesian mission and the idea of Project Europe as envisaged by the General Chapter. Local confreres need to be involved in this dialogue / conversation, become part of the process, and so renew their understanding. In particular, Rectors of communities need a clearer understanding of Project Europe and of missionaries.

Along the same lines, the integration of the missionaries and the confreres would be helped if every year or two years, during specific formation, there were to be a joint meeting of the missionaries with the local SDBs.

Missionaries do have a specific contribution to make to the mission of the province. The celebration of the Eucharist in the language of the immigrants makes a lot of difference to them: it fills them with new hope and brings immense joy and satisfaction. So too does the lively style of animating the liturgy: it makes an impact and attracts more people to the liturgical services.

Missionaries believe very much in combining education with evangelization – the two are inseparable - because through education they are able to approach the youth and evangelize them. They tend to establish warm relationships which help to reach the hearts of young people. Their personal meeting and conversing in a Salesian way has its impact on everyone.

Their presence combining initiatives with spontaneity means a lot to the local church and brings a joy and freshness to the European context.

Since they know the language and the ethnic background of the immigrants, they become a reference point for the immigrants and the local church. Their initiatives and services in music, sports and education are a valid and specific contribution.

At the same time, missionaries recognize that they are not always well prepared to deal with the laity. They need to learn from their European confreres about the educative and pastoral community and the educative and pastoral council. And they need to learn how to form the laity.

4. Since the third area of “Project Europe” was concerned with the sending of missionaries, it became a theme for sharing among the missionaries. A first topic, **THE PROCESS OF SENDING A MISSIONARY**, elicited a few comments:

The Congregation’s preference for young Salesians to be sent to the missions after their postnovitiate still stands because of their flexibility in fitting into a new situation, picking up a new language and adapting to a new culture. While receiving provinces may prefer that the study of theology be done in the new province as part of the insertion process, they also recognize a value in the study being done in an international intercultural setup.

A desire was expressed for more dialogue between the Councillor for the missions and the missionary confrere, involving at the same time the sending provincial and the receiving provincial. This in order to help in choosing a destination more suited to the capabilities of the missionary and also to provide him with opportunities for preparing himself in his home country as much as possible before leaving for his missionary destination.

It was also said to be desirable that missionaries be not sent alone to a community but at least with one or two missionary companions, if possible.

5. A second topic, **THE PROCESS OF INSERTION OF THE MISSIONARY IN HIS NEW PROVINCE**, drew a number of ideas and suggestions from the missionaries:

Once a missionary is informed of his destination, and even before he commences his journey to his new field of work, he learns all that he can about his country of destination and, to the extent possible, begins to learn its language.

The host province, for its part, seeks to make the new missionary feel welcome not only on his arrival but even before. Here are some simple initiatives that have helped to make missionaries feel welcome in recent times:

- The receiving provincial writes a letter to the missionary while he is still in his home country.
- On his arrival, the confreres show interest in taking the missionary around the province and introducing him to the communities and the confreres. They give him a background knowledge and history of the province.
- The Provincial from the receiving province, and sometimes accompanied by a group of his confreres, takes part in the Mass during which the missionary cross is given to the missionary, and then they accompany the missionary to his new province.
- On arrival in the province, the missionary is warmly received by everyone and made to feel at home. He is provided with what he needs by way of clothes, stationery, etc.
- At the next province-level meeting, the new missionary is introduced to everyone, and the province publishes his photo and a write-up about him.
- The young confreres of the province make contact with the missionary and, while welcoming him, provide him with their own contact details.
- The missionary is given enough time to learn the language, to pick up the culture, and to plan his desired field of apostolate with the Provincial.
- In a particular case, the Provincial took the trouble of visiting the missionary’s family in his home country, even before he left for his missionary destination in order to get to know his new confrere better.

Care needs to be taken to prepare the confreres to receive the missionary. It helps too if there is an experienced and understanding confrere assigned to accompany the missionary in the first months after arrival in the province and to introduce him to the reality of the Church in the country, the Salesian province and its history, and the culture of the people.

A delicate question concerns the kind of work the new missionary will do. A missionary may initially feel frustrated if he is not immediately involved. But language and cultural constraints may preclude him from being put into a mainstream ministry immediately. However, it is important that the province have a specific and concrete plan to propose to the missionary at an appropriate moment. The ideal would probably be to have a couple of well-focused projects in which the missionary can work together with some of the confreres of the province.

The missionary, for his part, needs to adopt an attitudinal attitude from the very beginning: he must eschew all comparisons with his province of origin and seek to insert himself fully in his new province.

6. Finally, the missionaries engaged in a reflection on the specific **PROFILE OF A MISSIONARY IN EUROPE**. Here are the key elements that emerged:

The document, “The missionary formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco”, spells out the criteria for a Salesian missionary vocation destined to any part of the world. However, each Region and country has its own particular requirements. Some of the criteria that would seem to be specific to Europe are the following:

Openness to an intercultural experience which implies: a readiness to insert oneself in an international community; a willingness to enter into the mentality of European confreres and young people; a respect for their culture; a non-judgmental approach to their lifestyle; a recognition that there can be different ways of living the Salesian charism;

Aptitude for languages: not only the language of the European country of destination, but also other international languages like English and Italian;

Ability to work in collaboration with lay people, and even under them, be they religious or women, acknowledging that some of them are sometimes much more qualified and experienced than the missionaries themselves;

Ongoing formation together with the confreres of the Province and a readiness to qualify oneself to be effective in one’s work;

Humility and patience: avoiding comparisons; making allowances for perceived defects or weaknesses; taking things in stride;

Unity: recognizing that the elements Salesian missionaries hold in common with their European confreres are far more than the points of difference between them.

Compiled by Fr. Chrys