

European Vocations Conference

The annual conference of the European Vocations Service (EVS) took place this weekend (July 4th – 7th) in Sarajevo (Bosnia). Delegates participated from sixteen European countries, East and West. The theme of the conference was "The challenge of vocations ministry in a multicultural Europe." Multiculturalism has been making itself felt in a particular way since the end of the cold-war, and because of a higher level of immigration from outside Europe. Indeed, there is nowhere that this is more evident than in Sarajevo itself, which is on the fault-line between East and West. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a single state divided into two semi-autonomous regions. One of these is the Republica Srpska. The other is the Muslim-Croat federation, in which Catholics form only about ten per-cent of the population.

During the Congress the delegates spent one evening in a suburban parish which had been a target for Serb attacks during the recent civil war. The parishioners spoke of their efforts to rebuild, and to maintain their Catholic identity while living as an ethnic minority among their Muslim neighbours. Auxiliary Bishop Pero Suder of Sarajevo pointed out that the voices of Muezzin from the minarets of Sarajevo will not irritate a convinced Catholic, because it is another reminder of his own faith in God, and his own vocation to be a person of prayer.

Fr. Melchor Sanchez of the *Pontifical Council for Culture* pointed out that Europe has always been multi-cultural. He agreed that the real challenge in our time is not coming from other faiths. (Indeed, if the number and quality of seminarians is anything to judge by, the mixture of culture in Bosnia is not causing problems. There are approximately as many seminarians there as there are in Ireland, even though the Catholic population is much smaller). The problem is when multi-culturalism becomes an ideology, and when there is a denial of the essential link between faith and the development of civilisation, as happens so frequently in Europe. To carry out vocations ministry in the context of this counter-culture involves a new proclamation of the Gospel. Young people today, Fr. Melchor said, are no less open to the Spirit of God than the generations which went before them, but the difficulty which they experience in living their faith and in making faith commitments are greater than they were in the past. Mons. Rainer Birkenmaier, co-ordinator of the EVS suggested that there is no way to invite young people to follow Christ more closely, unless we ourselves are prepared to take risks, and to let go of some of our own securities. We need to understand the culture of today's young people better, and to engage more directly with them. To use the gospel image, which Pope John Paul uses in his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (at the Beginning of a New Millennium), we have to put out into the deep, which by definition is often the unknown.

The openness to faith on the part of young people was reflected in the comments of another key-note speaker, Fr. David Hulsof, President of the United States Conference of Diocesan Vocations Directors. Fr. Hulsof spoke about the North American Continental Congress on Vocations which took place in Montreal, Canada, last April. (A similar conference for Europe took place in Rome in 1997).

Fr. Hulsof explained that an essential element of the Continental Congress was the preparation which took place at Diocesan and regional level in the United States and in Canada. This involved parishioners, youth-ministers, priests and religious in an on-

going dialogue about the development of a vocational culture in the North American church. When registration for the North American congress closed, it immediately became apparent that there were very few young participants. A decision was taken to ask dioceses and religious congregations to offer support to young Catholics who would wish to attend.

When the Congress was being planned, of course, nobody thought for a moment that it would take place against the backdrop of the recent controversy about child abuse. Many of the speakers at the Congress adverted to this issue, and urged that it be addressed honestly in the Church, without resorting either to denial or to despair. Nobody, however, saw it as a reason to stop promoting vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

It seems that the young participants at the North American Congress played a very active part in the proceedings. They held an all-night meeting to prepare a statement, in which they made it clear that they understood the distinction between individuals who had failed in their responsibilities, and the Church as a whole which is entrusted with the responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel in word and in action. They asked priests and religious to be “authentic joyful witnesses” to their way of life, and to actively support all Catholics young and old, men and women in taking active ownership of their Church in a spirit of service.

The European conference was hosted in Ireland last year. Next year it will take place in Warsaw.