

Vocations Personnel at the Heart of Europe

Members of the National Vocations Services of a large number of European countries gathered in Strasbourg from July 1st – 4th for their annual congress. In this year of European enlargement, the choice of Strasbourg, the capital of Europe, was symbolic.

The theme of the Congress was “*Good Master, What Must I Do? : The Vocational Accompaniment of Young People in Europe*” (This question, originally posed by the Rich Young Man to Jesus (Lk 18,1), reflects in some sense the questioning in the heart of every young person who seeks the way to happiness.

The first day of the congress included an opportunity for delegates, coming from 25 countries, to visit the European Parliament. Fr. Gilbert Caffin, an Oratorian priest working at the Council of Europe, explained to them something of the work of non-governmental organisations in particular those which address the concerns of young people. He explained how the growing multi-culturalism of Europe, the increasing complexity of society, and the lack of career security, all contribute to making commitment more problematic for young people. Fr. Caffin’s exploration was complemented by Fr. Michael Kuhn’s presentation on the theme : *The joys and the hopes, the anxieties and the grief of young people today* (the opening words of Vatican II’s document *Gaudium et Spes*). Fr. Kuhn, director of youth ministry in the diocese of Dusseldorf, using the results of a recent sociological survey, explained that the majority of young people in Germany today are pre-occupied with the need to succeed, to experience as much as possible, and to enjoy life.

Fr. Riccardo Tonelli, director of the Institute of Youth Ministry at the Salesian University, Rome offered some reflections on how the Gospel speaks to the experience of young people today. He reminded delegates that the foundation of every Christian vocation is encounter with the person of Jesus – an adventure of faith. “*The foundation of our passion for life and of our compassion for the life of all*” he said “*is to place the agenda of Jesus at the centre of our lives. This is what enables us to make challenging proposals to young people which will help them to hear the words “Come Follow Me” in their own lives.*” A number of short presentations were made in the course of the conference, outlining concrete projects which are being undertaken in different European countries, to help young people to recognise and respond to the call of God in their lives. Jean-Luc Pradels described an inter-denominational project, supported by the Council of Europe, which facilitates young people in offering a year of their lives in voluntary service. Sr. Katja Roncalli described a programme based in Assisi, which offers faith development and vocational accompaniment for thousands of young people each year. The project is run by a community of eleven Franciscan sisters, all in their thirties.

The experience of the Church in Europe is quite diverse: the countries of Western Europe where the climate is not particularly supportive of vocational growth; the countries of Eastern Europe where the Church has regained its religious freedom, and where signs of hope are to be seen, and the Scandinavian countries where the Church is only a tiny minority. Transcending this diversity a new Europe-wide consciousness is taking shape:- through a generous acceptance of his or her own vocation, and a sense of responsibility for the vocations of others, each person is also called to be one who calls.

The European Vocations Service was formally established in 1999, but has existed informally for almost twenty years. Because of the diversity of the Church’s experience, EVS does not

seek to development strategies or to issue directives which will be implemented throughout Europe. It seeks rather to provide a forum in which vocations personnel can share their experiences and their insights, and then apply what they have learnt from one another in a manner which is appropriate to the experience and the needs of each country.

The next Congress will take place in July 2005 in Bansk Bistrica, Slovakia.