

THE EUROPEAN VOCATIONS SERVICE - EUVOCATIO

Conference at Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, 30th June - 3rd July 2005

The European Vocations Service (EVS) held its annual meeting from 30th June to 3rd July 2005 in the diocesan seminary at Banská Bystrica in Slovakia. There were about 60 participants from the national vocations services of the following Bishops' Conferences in Europe: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and, of course, the host country Slovakia. In a new departure, the EVS conference this year was opened up to diocesan and congregational vocations personnel from the host country. As a consequence Slovakia had an enormous delegation of 14 people plus a team of technical assistants. There were representatives from 3 Vatican departments and from the Secretariat of CCEE (Mgr. Peter Fleetwood). Paradoxically, although the conference took place in Eastern Europe, some of the Bishops' Conferences of Eastern Europe who have been represented in previous years were not represented this year.

The theme this year was "Jesus himself drew near and walked with them: vocational accompaniment and decision-making." The speakers were Father Terry Draine, the rector of Ushaw College, the northern provincial seminary in England; Father Bernard Mendiboure s.j., from the Jesuit centre of spirituality in Vanves, in France; Father Frans Bonnici, from the Congregation for Catholic Education. Father Draine spoke of the characteristics required of someone who is able to accompany a person wondering what his or her vocation is in the Church. He spoke of the conflicts that inevitably exist between generations and asked delegates to accept that older people do not necessarily have all the answers, and probably need to listen much more and much more effectively. He suggested that it is wise neither to idealise nor to demonise the younger generation, and to be generous in interpreting their apparent attitudes, which are often completely misread. Father Mendiboure spoke from long experience of Ignatian retreats designed to help younger people come to good decisions about their lives. He suggested that there are 4 stages involved. The first is to be a caller, like Jesus, who was always on the move (towards Jerusalem), never worked in isolation, and was at the centre of a community of service; the second is to call and point the way; the third is to go beyond legalism in order to demonstrate to others one's preferential love for God the Father; the fourth is to help young people choose not only life, but a state of life. A retreat like this cannot be the beginning of a process of decision, but needs to come when people are ready, in a sense when they have been prepared for the quiet and concentration necessary for something so important in their lives and in their orientation towards God.

Various successful initiatives were brought to people's attention, like the Galilee programme in the Archdiocese of Dublin, an internet service in German called www.Touch-me-Gott.com, vocational coaching in Vienna. There were also two quite moving personal testimonies from two young religious who spoke of their own experience of vocational guidance in Slovakia.

In the brief presentations from the various countries represented, it was interesting to see that they often face similar challenges. Responses are enormously varied and creative, ranging from a DVD on young people's questions to priests to the use of a flight in a military jet as the backdrop to an interview on just what it is that makes some people offer their lives to the service of God and the Church. Some participants stressed that vocations ministry ought not to be separated from youth ministry in general, and others mentioned the change in the quality of people presenting themselves for priesthood and the religious life, with a greater need than ever to attend to elements of religious culture that are slowly disappearing in some countries, and the need to identify candidates' human maturity. A general unease about commitment is having a backlash with respect not only to priesthood and religious life, but also to marriage and family life.

CCEE's delegate bishop for vocations ministry, Archbishop Alois Kothgasser of Salzburg, spoke enthusiastically about the growth of EVS over the last few years, and hoped the very few countries who have still not sent representatives might do so in the next couple of years. He is convinced that we need to pray, to call and to accompany people who are called as Christians to a life of service and sacrifice.

Father Kevin Doran, the co-ordinator of the European Vocations Service, commented at the end of the conference: "Those who are considering priesthood or religious life these days are people who have reflected seriously on the meaning of life, and who have recognised the value of relationship with Jesus. They are sometimes held back from following him more closely by cultural factors or by their own personal struggles and fears. The role of those who work in vocations ministry is not to push people into priesthood or religious life in spite of themselves, but to help them - through dialogue, friendship and prayer - to find the inner freedom that will allow them to follow wherever Jesus is leading them."

EVS and World Youth Day

Some years ago, when it was decided to hold the World Youth Day in Cologne, the German National Vocations Service (on behalf of EVS), requested that facilities be made available for a significant vocations opportunity at the World Youth Day. The outcome of this request was the designation of the Church of St. Gereon as a spiritual centre for World Youth Day with a specific focus on the theme of vocation. St. Gereon was

staffed by vocations personnel from all over Germany, and by some EVS members from other European countries. Within the limits allowed by the World Youth Day organizing committee, the Zentrum für Berufungspastoral organised a programme for St. Gereon, which involved young people from all over the world being welcomed and offered a guided meditation for their visit to the Church on the theme of the vocation to be a person, to be a Christian, and to be a disciple. Large numbers of young people visited the crypt where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed 24 hours a day.

The spiritual centre might have been more effective had the facilities also been provided for one-to-one dialogue and / or the distribution of some form of vocations promotion material. Young people were not really exposed to the invitation to specific commitment in the way that they might have been. Other privately organized ventures in the city seem to have done this.

Co-ordinator

The present co-ordinator of the EVS, Fr. Kevin Doran was elected in 2003 for a three year term. His term will expire at the next EVS conference, which takes place in Belgium in June 2006. In accordance with the Statute of EVS, the director of any national vocations service operating under the auspices of the CCEE is eligible for election as co-ordinator. Nominations will be sought prior to the steering committee meeting which takes place at the end of November 2005.