

**DATE: 10.07.2015**

**LANGUAGE: ENGLISH  
(Translation)**

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## **Parents: first witnesses, first guardians of a vocation**

### **European Vocations Congress**

### **Prague 6-9 July 2015**

July 6 through 9, 2015, the 36th Congress of the European Vocations was held in Prague on the theme: *"How to guide young people to priesthood and consecrated life in the family today."*

The event was sponsored by the Commission for Priestly Vocations of the Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) - European Vocations Service (EVS), in collaboration with the National Service for Vocations of the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference, in the role of the host country.

The 65 participants included the Bishops responsible for the pastoral care of vocations (9), the Directors of the National Office for Vocation Ministry, and representatives of European vocational organizations. The event, of great pastoral importance, has enabled the achievement of two objectives: a) to promote, among experts in this area, a comparison of the different vocational realities in their respective countries (19 nations, including the U.S.), to share hardships and obstacles, and to pray for vocations; b) to suggest criteria and guidelines for the vocational service.

But, above all, the Congress expressed the desire to offer some input of reflection and send them to the Synod Fathers, in view of the next Synod on the Family, summoned by Pope Francis, on the theme: *"The vocation and the mission of the family in the Church and in today's world."* The working days of the Congress included moments of sharing and reflection, but also moments of relaxation and cultural opening, with a visit to the city of Prague (including a Mass at the Church of the Glorious Virgin Mary, home to the Infant Jesus of Prague) and a cello concert offered by the four young musicians of the *"Prague Cello Quartet"*.

The first day - after the initial greetings of H. Ex. Mgr. Josef Kajnek, Bishop Delegate for Vocations of the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference; Jan Wolf, councillor of the City of Prague for Culture and Fine Arts, and representative of the Magistrate of the City of Prague; H. Ex. Mgr. Oscar Cantoni, President of the CCEE - EVS Commission; Fr. Michel Remery, Deputy Secretary General of CCEE, and Mgr. Nico Dal Molin, Secretary of the CCEE - EVS Commission – the programme went on with the witness of faith and life of a young Czech priest, Fr. Kamil Skoda, along with his parents, who shared his experience: "What can be the influence of one's own family on a priestly vocation." The second day was equally marked by some significant experiences: Fr Jan Balik, National Director for Youth Ministry of the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference, focused on the "Service of the Church to young people under communism and the youth ministry in the time of consumerism," in particular presenting the experience of the youth centres which have been created for the dioceses; Fr. Filip Hacour, National Director for the Pastoral Care of Vocations of Belgium (Flemish area), offered a reflection on the reality "of the family and young people in the context of secularization: the style of pastoral ministry in the Church of Belgium."

The last witness on the vocation to consecrated life has been proposed in the last day of the congress by Fr. Krystof Javurek and Sr. Judith Tulejova.

In addition to testimonies, some proposals for reflection have proved essential. Spouses Attilio Danese and Giulia Paola Di Nicola, both authors of essays and professors at the University of Chieti, Central Italy, proposed a "reading of the socio-cultural situation of the family in Europe: criteria and guidelines for education in the faith and vocational reception." Based on some sociological and anthropological data, they have analysed the reasons underlying the current crisis of marriage and the family as an institution so that, having identified the causes, young people can be helped to rethink marriage in terms of quality and motivation of this choice.

A second report - "How to guide young people to the priesthood and the consecrated life in the current family context?" - was introduced on Wednesday by H. Ex. Mgr. Jorge Carlos Patron Wong, Secretary for the Seminaries in the Congregation for the Clergy.

The contribution of Mgr. Patron Wong was divided into three steps: a) the connection between family ministry and vocational ministry; b) what is required as a contribution to youth ministry; and c) the personal and ecclesial accompaniment of young people. Especially with regard to the first point, Mgr. Wong made reference to a passage of *Familiaris consortio* (no. 53) by Saint John Paul II, according to whom much could be done to help the families to "become the primary and most excellent seed-bed of vocations to a life of consecration to the Kingdom of God."

About this aspect, a fundamental orientation toward the pastoral care of vocations has been highlighted:

"Parents are not the promoters of the vocation of their children, nor its designers, but they are its first witnesses, the first guardians who watch over, encourage, and confirm. It can also be the case that they are not Christian, they may have a withstanding attitude, or they do not agree with the vocation of their children. These attitudes are the reason why, as vocations animators, we must take great care of the relationship with parents and with the families of the young people we meet."

The experience we lived has enabled us not only to discuss about the family but also to live together in a "family atmosphere", made up of prayer and fraternal relations, communion and esteem for the beauty of the various vocations, while recalling one's

own family of origin in reference to the big Family, which gathers and unites all of us, i.e. the Church.