

For a religious life in Europe Anno 2006



Father Mark Rotsaert sj

Presentation of Fr. Mark Rotsaert sj by Sister Ana Maria Garbayo odn, General Secretary UCESM

On the curriculum vitae of Father Mark Rotsaert sj, the President of the Conference of European Provincials of the Jesuits, there are three very important stages in his life: his eight years of experience as novice-master of the Northern Province of Belgium and the Netherlands, then the fact that for five years he was the director of the Ignatian spirituality Centre in Hasselt and the fact that for ten years he was the Provincial of the Northern Belgian Province.

His experience accrued over all these years of service in the Church is definitely the source of his many publications and lectures that we find in your writings the deep inspiration.

Let me just mention an extract from "The Ignatian Spirituality: a way of living the Gospel", 2001:

"The time of Ignatius of Loyola is similar to ours. The scientific and geographic discoveries... of the Humanist of all over Europe were challenging the Church...the social local structures left the way for new larger structures at a national and international level... How can one live within this tension and how can we follow the inner movement of the Spirit and how can we remain loyal to the Church within all this?"

"At the same time how can we place our confidence in God and how can we devote all of our energies and strengths to building the world which is ours? How do we become deeply engaged in our world in a state of contemplation while at the same time endeavour to live profoundly our familiarity with God?"

These are questions which no longer apply to the XVIth century for they are our very own today. Today in Fatima, we represent the research of Consecrated men and women from all over the world: people who are looking for answers, people who are still questioning things.

Father Mark, thank you for being here, for your lecture for a "Religious Life in Europe 2006", for having accepted to be with us and to accompany us in our quest.

1. Some lessons from history

The start of Religious Life

The Roman Emperor Constantine recognised Christianity as the official religion in the whole of the Roman Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313. He was converted himself to Christianity later. It was in those years that Religious Life emerged within the Church and it was not by chance. Before this time Christianity had experienced several persecutions. To become a Christian was a dangerous affair, difficult, risky. Christians had no rights, they were considered as living on the edges of society. They had their meetings and their rituals. They were suspect, especially as they distanced themselves from the way of living that was in fashion at the time. After 313 everything changed for Christians. They no longer risked their lives. On the contrary, to be a Christian became

acceptable. To carry a little cross around one's neck helped one to find work and to rise in the social scale. To an increasing extent Christianity became a complete part of society, as more and more of society became Christian...

It was in this climate that we can see emerging the first attempts at a Religious Life, or let's say rather a more evangelical life. Some Christians began to ask themselves if the effects of the Edict of Milan were all so positive. Have we not accepted too easily the values of the society in which we live? Are we still the salt for the world in which we live? Are we still bearers of the light which lights up our world?

A Sunday homily in a parish in Alexandria was enough for Antony to react with his own life: he retired into the desert on the edge of the town so as to live a more

evangelical life. So he took his distance with respect to how the Christians of Alexandria were living. He was aware that a life of intense prayer would help him to find true evangelical values. He sold what he possessed and drew himself outside of the town to be better able to follow Jesus Christ. At the same time he kept up some links with the Christians of his town, with the Church. A double movement was set in motion: more and more Christians came to the desert to meet Antony and to profit from his teaching. That means that they recognised in him a call to a life more according to the Gospel. Antony himself returned regularly to Alexandria to meet the Christians there and to comfort them in the midst of the Christological disputes which were tearing the Church apart.

But Antony was not an isolated element. **More and more Christians were drawing apart and going to live a sober and prayerful life in the desert on the edge of the town.** The hermit's life had found a place in the Church. At the same time there was also Pacomius, who began a cenobitic life in the desert: several Christians gathered together in bigger and bigger monasteries to seek and find there a life in the footsteps of Christ. It was a great movement which spread out into the deserts of Egypt in the fourth century. But there were still other forms which appeared: there were the stylites who lived at the top of a pillar; others went to live in caves, etc. Their solitude was a guarantee for their life of prayer.

Characteristics

That which characterises the beginnings of Religious Life is first of all **its spontaneous character**, nothing organised or foreseen. One day Antony left his house to go and live in the desert, driven by the Holy Spirit. His example raised up others hermit vocations.

A second element: there is **a multiplicity of forms for a more evangelical life**: there are hermits who live a solitary existence, there are monasteries where community life is an important aspect of a new evangelical life, and there are the stylites and many other forms. No-one knew at that time what forms would survive their initiators. Time would sort them out necessarily. **The life of the hermit and life in community would find their place in the Church.** The forms which were somewhat extravagant would disappear very quickly.

A third element, **retiring from life in society, from life in the Church** - Anthony and Pacomius and many others left the town and they installed in the desert.

This turning to the desert signifies very well what the first Fathers of the desert wanted to express. There is in their action a sort of criticism of the way in which the Christians of the time were living their faith. In becoming the official religion Christianity ran the risk of losing its capacity to be the salt which gave savour to the world. Antony, Pacomius and others searched for ways of living out the Gospel in all its rigour. **This is what is called the prophetic function of Religious Life.** The beginnings of Religious Life have, therefore, for their end, to be a living reminder of the Gospel.

It is perhaps, still today, the best definition of Religious Life: **to be within the Church a living reminder of the**

Gospel. And so in this sense it is a 'gift of the Spirit to the Church', as the Council of Vatican II.

History repeats itself

After the beginnings of a more evangelical life in the Egyptian deserts a similar movement was deployed in the deserts of Palestine. Already towards the end of the IVth century this movement stretched out towards Europe. Saint Martin, Bishop of Tours, became a monk. In North Africa Saint Augustin, Bishop of Hippo Regis, set up a community of monks and a community of nuns for whom he wrote out a Rule, short and full of good human common sense. Also in Europe the monasteries of monks were propagated at a great speed.

The Rule of Saint Benedict, written in the VIth century for his monks, would have an enormous influence on the monastic life in Europe, especially from the time when, during the reign of Charlemagne, the Rule was imposed by the political regime in all the monasteries of the empire. But let us not be mistaken: the success of the rule of Saint Benedict, up until today, is due to his wisdom and his great human equilibrium.

Benedict envisaged a community of a dozen monks where the abbot was the *pater familias*. His monastery was, as in the East, far from the town, in a desert place. The *opus Dei* – Liturgical prayer – was at the centre of the monastic life. **The welcome given to visitors - hospes venit, Christus venit** – was the privileged connection with the world of the living. We are in the VIth century. But times change, and the Benedictines adapted to the changes. Europe was conquered by the Barbarians, who left behind them a trace of the enormous ravages... **And thus the abbeys became places of refuge in a Europe full of dangers. They also became a place where culture - ancient and modern – was conserved and transmitted.** The Abbeys started schools; their properties grew increasingly and gave **work to the peasants in the surrounding districts.** Abbeys where there were more than a hundred monks were not uncommon. The Abbey became in some sense a town in miniature, where the monks were specialists in prayer. We are far from the ideal decreed by Saint Benedict some centuries earlier.

When, after the invasion of the Barbarians all the roads were repaired and the towns that we know today emerged, a new aristocracy was installed, that of money. The first banks and the first stock exchange appeared in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries. The difference between the rich and the poor became accentuated. The Church, meanwhile, and with it the monasteries and Abbeys, became more and more rich and often flaunted its riches.

In the middle of this change of civilisation the Church would see several new religious foundations come to light. In the Benedictine tradition there was the foundation of Citeaux: a return to the Rule that Saint Benedict wanted. They distanced themselves from the richness of Cluny **to live a more sober life, a poorer life.** The monks would live from their manual work. Saint Bernard took on the struggle with Cluny. Saint Norbert founded a new Order which joined community life and pastoral service in parishes to the *opus Dei*. He would choose the Rule of St. Augustine. **Saint Bruno**, thanks to

his friend Saint Hughes, Bishop of Grenoble, found the ideal place for those who were looking for solitude, the Grande Chartreuse. The monks, Carthusian would insert the *numerus clausus* and the *termini possessionis*- no more than twelve monks, so that in this way the monastery would remain at a human level and would have no need for great lands. The number of lay brothers, however, who would live in a dependence of the monastery, was not limited. The Carthusians, monks lived a solitary life, each in his cell with a simply equipped kitchen and a workshop. The community was formed around the Eucharist. The *opus Dei* was their main work.

In the XIIIth century, in the midst of this new world which was being built new foundations also emerged. Several of these new communities put their accent on poverty and thus reacted against a situation in society as well as in the Church. Several of these communities would not survive the founding group.

There are two which we still know today, the **Franciscans** and the **Dominicans, two mendicant Orders.**

Touched by the poor and crucified Christ, Francis of Bernardone founded in Assisi the Order of Friars Minor, where the accent was placed on poverty and simplicity of life as well as on fraternity. The struggle for peace was at the heart of the project of Saint Francis. Dominic de Guzman, a Spanish Canon, came back with his Bishop from a mission in Scandinavia, and stopped in the South of France where he was invited to a synod which gathered Bishops and Abbots from this part of France where Cathares and Albigeois were separating the Church. How was he to silence this heresy? Saint Dominic knew that the Bishops, the abbots and the priests ought to be the first to give good example in following Christ poor and humble. 'Let us change our style of life and then we can preach the truth of the Gospel. Our credibility is at stake.' It was the fundamental intuition of the Friars Preachers. **Thus, here also we see a certain criticism of what was seen in society and in the Church.** Here again there was a multiplicity of research for a more evangelical and poor life. Many of them would disappear. But unlike the others of the time, the beginnings of the Mendicant Orders were installed in the new towns. However, the separation from the surrounded world was maintained by a cloister and by the obligation to recite the Office of the Hours in choir, as was done by the monks.

At the **end of the XVth century and the beginning of the XVIth** society in Europe saw a new crisis of civilisation. It was the time of the Renaissance and of Humanism in Europe, the time also of the discovery of the New World. The values at the end of the Middle Ages no longer corresponded to what the modern man was looking for. **This new data raised up a new spirituality and a missionary openness to the recently discovered world.** In several places in Europe priests were going to live in community and to consecrate more time to prayer. These communities of priests felt the need to be better prepared for pastoral work. The brotherly support and the life of prayer were a help for the credibility of their pastoral commitment. Here again there was a criticism on the way of life of many clerics at the time, and not least in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The discovery of the

Americas and the Far East also raised up a missionary desire within the existing Orders, such as the Mendicant Orders, as well as in the new groups which emerged at the beginning of the XVIth century. So here also a multiplicity of new forms more adapted to the new times.

The **Company of Jesus** was one of these new groups of priests in the Church. A strong spirituality, coming from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, and a life centred on the mission *ad extra* meant that the Company of Jesus would see a rich and eventful future, with ups and downs obviously. The Company of Jesus is considered as the first Apostolic Religious Order. An innovation, difficult to be accepted at the time, was the absence of the choir. The *Opus Dei*, which characterised up till now all the religious groups in the Church, completely changed its outlook: **the work of God was no longer the Liturgy of the Hours which gathered the community in prayer, the work of God became the mission.** And this mission was exercised in the world: the world is our house, they said. Very quickly they characterised their style of life as being 'contemplative in action'. The Jesuits, from the beginning, put themselves at the service of the Pope, which means to say of the universal Church. They were sent in mission there where the needs were greatest. The retreat from the world, which had characterised Religious Life up until the beginning of the XVIth century, was replaced by an insertion into it. But this retreat remained important, it became chiefly interior. To be in the world without being of the world, to be in the world for the life of the world, new challenges each day.

Many other Religious groups were to emerge in this apostolic and missionary movement, some took on Ignatian spirituality, others having a spirituality of their own, like the Congregations founded by **Saint Vincent de Paul**, to name only one. Certain groups were specialised in one apostolic domain or another, as for example in the area of teaching or in care of the sick. **It was towards the end of the XVIIIth century and the beginning of the XIXth,** at the time when social awareness was growing in our society, that numerous Congregations of Sisters, Brothers and Fathers were founded, certain of them being and remaining both very local and very fruitful.

In this history of Religious Life there was the **following constant: a crisis of civilisation brought about new forms of Religious and Evangelical Life. A new awareness, a new mentality, other values required other forms of Religious Life.** But often that went hand in hand with a too great adaptation to the surrounding world for the existing religious groups. They were too often mixed up in the world. They were no longer salt for the world... And it was as if the Spirit woke up such and such a woman, or man to create something new in the Church: **Saint Theresa of Avila, Saint Catherine of Sienna, Saint John Bosco and so many others.** Too fixated on such and such a charitable work, some religious Congregations found it difficult to survive when the State began to fulfil the tasks that the Congregations had taken upon themselves at a time when no other persons were involved with them.

Since the **second half of the XXth century** and at the **start of the third millennium** we are once **more at a time of great changes**. The Church has need of a **breath of freshness, and the Spirit breathes where it will**. For fifty years new movements have been born in the Church and almost everywhere *new communities are growing*. There is *Charismatic Renewal which is like a solid tree with a multitude of branches, but there are also San Egidio, Comunione and Liberazione, the Brothers of Taizé, the Bred of Life, the Legionaries of Christ...* There is a great diversity. Just as in each epoch, time will be the testing, **but today it is clear that we are assisting at a spiritual renewal in a great number of evangelical movements in the Church**. We shall return to this present movement in the third part.

But first of all we shall make a stop at what history has handed on to us as an essential part of Religious Life, the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

2. At the heart of Religious Life: poverty, chastity and obedience

So Religious Life has seen many different forms. Certain forms have known how to adapt themselves to the new times and are still in existence after centuries. *But throughout all these changes some elements have nearly always been present: Religious men and women of all time have tried to live a life of poverty or sobriety, a chaste life in celibacy, and obedient to Another*. During the first centuries there was no such thing as religious 'vows', but the content was already present. The Rule of Saint Francis, at the beginning of the XIIIth century, speaks of three religious vows and then it became general. Of course, there were other vows taken by Religious. Some have disappeared. Others, like the fourth vow taken by the Jesuits – obedience to the Pope – are still in existence. But we can say that across history it was the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience which formed the very heart of Religious Life.

Three fundamental dimensions of the life of every person

Why has the history of Religious Life handed on to us these three vows and not three others? Is it due to the ups and downs of history or is there a deeper reason?

I believe that *the deepest reason is of an anthropological order*. The three religious vows are concerned with three fundamental dimensions in the life of a person. Everyone has need of a minimum of material things to be able to stay alive: food, a roof over one's head, clothes to protect one against the weather. Every person has also a need to be recognised, comforted, loved, for without that one can never become a person. On the contrary one will waste away psychologically. And everyone has need of a free space where one can decide by oneself what one will become. Without that one will not get past the robot stage. **It is a matter of three fundamental dimensions: the material aspect of our life, the fact of being loved by another, the autonomy which makes true decisions possible. No one can pass over these three dimensions which are an integral part of what it means to be human. They are so important that here is a real danger that one, everyone, wants to monopolise**

them. And it is here that the misery of our world begins: what I take too much of, another will have too little of.

The three dimensions which I have just described are thus absolutely necessary for the life of a person, they are an integral part of the person. But at the same time the Gospel teaches us that these dimensions are relative. They are not absolute, they are not the *nec plus ultra*. That goes for every Christian, for each one who wants to live the Gospel. The Gospel relativizes these three dimensions of our life. **God alone is absolute, He alone is unique**. So all Christians will try to relativize this, in a real way in their own lives. Religious will do it in a more explicit way. What each Christian carries within, the religious shows externally! This means that our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience speak about things which are not strange to any Christian.

Let us look for a moment at the world which surrounds us, and especially its publicity. All publicity, in newspapers, on the television, along our roads, etc., speaks to us of these three dimensions so important in our lives. It is not surprising that publicity fixes itself on these important areas. I 'need' to buy, for I 'need' to have this and that. And there are always new products on the market. And I want to be someone today, if I want people to respect me, to admire me, it is 'necessary' that I acquire such and such a product. For with this product I can appear younger than my neighbour, more handsome, thinner, and more fashionable. If I use this soap or this kind of shampoo, I shall seem more attractive... can you feel the deceit of the seduction? And when you have a lot you want even more, always more. The publicity will then invite you to buy a still bigger car, stronger than that of your neighbour. In this way you will have this strong feeling of power to dominate all the others on the motorway. Wanting to dominate others, as if it was an ideal to be pursued! Publicity is full of hidden seductions. **By whom or by what are we letting ourselves be seduced?**

No one can live without a minimum of material things. Without 'having' a person cannot 'be'. And yet we cannot make of them a god, an idol: here is what is essential to the **vow of poverty**. To freely renounce a certain number of things – good and even necessary things – because there is something, Someone, more important who fills our life. Of course it is indispensable for everyone to be recognised and loved and to be able to love. Who does not know the want to live a totally fulfilled sexual life? However let us not make of it an idol. What is the deep meaning of our **vow of chastity**? It is that we hope that our concrete way of loving those to whom we are sent, like those who are around us, will make the love of God for each person transparent. And finally, one will die spiritually if a space cannot be found to decide what one wants to be. Without a minimum of freedom and independence no-one will become an adult. But, here again, let us not make of it an idol, a god. By our **vow of obedience** we want to express that we are not ourselves the last criterion of our decisions, but that we want to be attentive to the voice of the Other.

In the footsteps of Christ

If we try to live the three vows in the way that I have just described, we shall be walking in the footsteps of Christ. And 'Following Christ along the way' is really vital thread running through Religious Life, all through history. If we follow what **Saint Mathew writes on the temptations of Jesus in the desert 4.1-11**, we find these same three dimensions so important in the life of a person. If we look closely at what is written and we ask ourselves what the seducer is appealing to in Jesus, we see that **the first temptation** touches on this dimension of need for a minimum of material things: 'You are hungry? Eat! Make these stones into bread!' No-one can live without food.

The second temptation touches more on the second dimension that of being applauded and recognised accepted and loved. 'Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the Temple, the angels will carry you, and the public will applaud you! Assured success!' Each person has a need to be recognised, Jesus too.

The third temptation comes back to this dimension of wanting to dominate, to be master over the others. 'All the kingdoms with their glory I shall give you, if you bow down and adore me!' The tempter tries to touch in Jesus this deep dimension where everyone sees the need for independence, which very quickly can become converted into a desire for domination.

If we read the text of Saint Mathew, we see how the tempter gets to him. 'If you are Son of God...' The tempter invites Jesus to put himself at the very centre of his life. 'If there is anyone who can do it, it is you, Son of God'. In the long run it is the same tactic three times: 'You are Son of God, so do what belongs to you, do what you want'. But the response of Jesus – three times – is exactly the contrary 'I am not the centre of my life, there is the Other.' **God is the first and the last criterion in the choices that he has to make.** His whole life cannot be other than a witness of God who is only Love.

The synoptic Gospels place the account of the temptations at the start of the public life of Jesus, after the baptism of Jesus. At his Baptism Jesus had receive his mission from the Father: '*You are my beloved Son, whom it has pleased me to choose*'. This quotation goes back, among others to the song of the servant of Yahweh in the prophet Isaiah 42.1-7:

"This is my servant whom I support, my chosen one in whom my soul is pleased. I have put my Spirit on Him. He will present righteousness to the nations. He will not cry aloud, nor raise his voice. He will not let his voice be heard in the streets; He will not break the bent reed, he will not put out the feeble flame, faithfully he will present righteousness... I have made of you the alliance of the people, the light of the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring the prisoner out of his cell and to free those who live in darkness."

This is the mission which Jesus received during his Baptism. The account of the temptations lets us glimpse that Jesus, like everyone else, knew temptation. **'This road of silence and gentleness: he will not shout out, he will not raise his voice, he will not break the crushed reed, he will not put out the feeble flame,' is this really the road that I must take?** Are there no other ways of witnessing to the love of the Father? Perhaps there is a less difficult

path, more gratifying?' We know Jesus answer by heart, which makes us sometimes forget that the answer did not come until after the time of temptation, and that was the case throughout his life. The evangelists show us again another time in the life of Jesus where Jesus had to fight so as **not to succumb to temptation and that was during his Passion, in the garden of Olives, in Gethsemane.** Jesus, who knew during these moments that his life was as stake, prayed to his Father: "*If it is possible, let this cup be taken from me!*" Mt 26.39. Jesus, faced with death, was afraid. Jesus did not want to die. He spent moments of anguish and distress, extremely difficult moments. But after these moments of crisis, his prayer finished with this phrase which we all know: "*But, not as I will, let thy will be done!*". Right at this difficult moment Jesus accepts, after an interior combat, not to let him be the last criterion of his choices.

The Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises

The three Religious vows go back to the three fundamental dimensions of all persons. The three temptations of Jesus in the desert go back to the same fundamental dimensions. Allow me to pause for a moment on an important text in the history of Christian spirituality, the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, where we find a text which will guide us along the same lines.

After the first week of the Exercises, when the retreatant has meditate on sin in the world and in his own life, and when he has been able to discover again the mercy and pardon of God, the retreatant is about to contemplate the life of Christ in the Gospels. It is a matter of looking intensely and at length at Christ to discover how he/she, the retreatant, can follow Christ on the road of his life. After several days of contemplation Ignatius proposes a meditation on Two Standards. He marks out a great battlefield with two armies where each of the two leaders - Lucifer and Christ – have their Standard.

These Standards are like strategies or dynamics employed by their leader. Lucifer follows the **strategy of evil.** Ignatius reveals there three stages. The Evil One tries first of all to attach us in an inordinate way to riches, to what we possess. That can be money, and it often is, but we can make of any material thing our riches. Our disordered attachment can also be fixed on persons, on our qualities, our work, our mission. It is a matter of an inordinate attachment to that which in itself is good. But the one who 'possesses', always wants to possess more, and will behave as an owner. This person will demand that the others respect him/her for what he/she possesses. He/she wants to be recognised and appreciated. Ignatius speaks here of human respect. Not what is, but what has become the motive of all his/her actions. It is the second stage which follows a logic opened up in the first. Finally, the third stage, the one who sees himself/herself as the 'great owner' will live more and more as one who has no need of others. He feels superior to the others. He is sufficient of himself. He does not need God or others. It is self-sufficiency itself, pride.

The strategy of Christ or of the Gospel is obviously very different. In the first stage Christ invites us to interior

freedom. So it is the opposite of inordinate attachment, by which the Evil One begins his strategy. Ignatius speaks of spiritual poverty as a condition for effective poverty. The one who is truly free will no longer let him/herself be moved by success or recognition, nor by failure or ignorance or misunderstanding. This does not mean that he/she will no longer be affected by the sympathy that is shown to him/her or by the scorn that is borne towards him/her. But it is no longer sympathy or scorn which will decide how he is going to live. He will let himself be moved by the love and compassion of God. This is the second stage in the strategy of the Gospel.

The one who is truly free no longer lets him/her be moved by what others say or think about him/her, he/she will find the right place with regard to the others, before God. He/she will become a person for others, a person with others. This is a person who has discovered true humility: the third stage in the strategy of the Gospel.

Ignatius then requests that the retreatant puts these two strategies as a programme for his/her own life, to see better where the evil one is getting to him/her each time, so that he/she will be better armed against him. At the same time it is important to discover also where the strategy of Christ is already at work in his/her life and to ask for the grace to be able to follow him always to a greater extent. This meditation of Ignatius can help us to make a regular spiritual revision of our religious life.

Conversio morum

In the Rule of Saint Benedict it is not yet a question of 'vows'. Setting aside an important text on obedience to the abbot, the Rule does not explicitly speak about three religious vows. **Saint Benedict prefers to speak about conversio morum, the conversion of our way of living.** This conversion will always be a new conversion towards Christ and his Gospel.

The Gospel asks us to turn away from a life dominated by money and riches and **to choose a life** where we learn to share what we have, what we are, like Christ shared out the few loaves and fishes brought by the disciples Mc 6.35-44, and just as he shared his own life in giving us the bread and wine at the last supper Mc 14.22-25.

The Gospel asks us to turn away from a life where we constantly expect recognition, attention and love from others for ourselves and **to choose a life** which may be a given life in the example of Christ. He loved us with a love which went as far as giving his life for his friends and he asks us to love one another with this same love. Jn 15.12-13.

The Gospel asks us to turn away from a life where we want to dominate others and **to choose a life** where we want to serve others – like Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life Mc 10.45.

3. For a Religious Life in Europe Anno 2006

The history of Religious Life, of which I have given you a quick overview at the start of my conference, still continues today in our lives. Certain Congregations are going to disappear; it is not the first time in history that

has happened. Others will adapt themselves to the new times. What will allow them **to find a new expansion will be the quality of the spirituality proper to each Institute?** The monastic Orders and Congregations will survive more easily, for their confrontation with the modern world is clearer. *Solo Dios basta*. God alone is the aim of the monks and nuns. The apostolic Orders and Congregations who live and work in the world will need a strong spirituality to be able to find new forms adapted to the sensitivities of our days.

New or forgotten values in Europe anno 2006

Without wanting to make a complete picture of our times, always a risky business, **it can be enlightening to see what the forgotten values are in our culture in Europe today and what are the new values or challenges.** For this will be to the extent that we are able to respond to them, in our way, so that our Religious Life will have a meaning, not only for ourselves, but also for our world.

There is in our world in general, and in Europe in particular, a need for **reconciliation, between persons, between nations, between peoples.** Let us not forget that it was this need for reconciliation which was at the origin of the European Union. To reconcile peoples at war for centuries, this was the challenge taken up by the founding fathers. If we look at Europe today, the Greater Europe, it is obvious that there is still a great need for reconciliation. The absence of war does not mean to say that everyone has been reconciled, far from it. But by making reconciliation an essential dimension of our mission as religious, contemplative and apostolic, we are at the very heart of the Gospel, of the Good News of Jesus. Pardon, this gift 'par excellence', ought to be at the very heart of our communities. It is in pardon, just as in the Eucharist, that the Religious Community, can be born anew once more receiving this gift from God who is love itself. Each Order, each Congregation has to look at how it can live this pardon and reconciliation in a real way and how it can witness it.

Reconciliation brings us peace, reconciliation is a pathway to peace. In a world where there are so many divisions, so many wars it is the duty of each man, of each woman, but also of all the Religious men and women to become involved in peace. Here also the absence of war is not yet peace. And peace is much more than treaties of peace. Peace makes real well-being possible, 'Shalom', true peace makes of my enemies' brothers and sisters in humanity. Peace is built on this experience that we are all part of this great human family. If in the greater part of Europe there have been no more wars for these last 60 years, if we know peace, it is thanks to this slow but fruitful work of reconciliation which has taken on a political dimension. And peace among different peoples and countries can open up our contemporaries to a still deeper peace, that which is the work of God.

The construction of Europe teaches us still more. The real pathway of reconciliation has been that of **solidarity.** Of course it was first a matter of economic solidarity, but the precursor of a financial and political solidarity.

Without a just and desired solidarity Europe could not be built. Solidarity started at the level of coal and steel. Had they not been the means 'par excellence' to manufacture arms to fight one another? After this significant start solidarity was spread out to other areas of our economy in order to arrive at financial and political areas. This rich Europe, which willed the enlargement from 15 to 25 member countries, is today hesitating to continue on the path to solidarity, while in the enlarged Europe this solidarity is more necessary than ever.

How can we express this need for solidarity in our religious communities and in our missions in this European world? It is the fight for justice which is an integral part of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Of course, this solidarity is not only necessary in Europe, it is still more necessary with the poor countries of our globe. A lot of religious families have great experience in this area of international solidarity. We must find new ways to experience this solidarity, at a personal and community level, but also at the level of international structures. **Are we sufficiently aware of our possibilities in this area?**

The Europe which is being built up today is no longer the same as that which the founding fathers of Europe knew. Europe with its diversity of languages and cultures is on the way to become an **inter-cultural Europe**. The different waves of migrations, *people on the move*, are not going to come to an end, on the contrary they are going to increase, whether we want it or not. There have been migrations for political reasons, there are migrations for economic reasons, there will be in a few years, as the study of specialists throughout the world confirm for us, migrations for ecological reasons. The

number of migrants will increase for several years yet. Europe is becoming a brew of very different cultures and religions. *The political response to this situation does not seem simple. But what is our response, as religious men and women at the beginning of the third millennium? Are we ready to dialogue?*

Are we capable of searching into and **finding in other cultures the traces of the one God? What is our attitude with regard to Islam, which is becoming an important presence in more and more towns in Europe?** Of course dialogue has no meaning if we have nothing to say ourselves!

Dialogue begins in our communities, in the streets where we live, the districts we inhabit, and it is indispensable in our study Centres, in the formation of our young religious men and women, etc. We ought to speak here also of Ecumenical dialogue and give homage to Roger Schutz of Taizé. Other Congregations have opened themselves up to Ecumenism since.

These few values which question our Religious Life make us enter into this world of globalisation which characterises our world anno 2006. A reflection on the future of Religious Life in Europe has to be able to take this into account.

To do a work of reconciliation and peace, to open up our minds to dialogue and to build a world more in solidarity, is to make a choice for a **culture of life**, and that in a world which has a tendency to choose a culture of death. Within this culture of life all that touches the life of the family, another forgotten value, should have an important place.

How can we witness to that in Religious Life?

The new communities question us differently

It is not only the world which is questioning us, there are also the new communities, the new movements in the Church, which are experiencing a certain expansion. Without getting into a dynamic of competition, I should like to finish my conference in allowing ourselves to be questioned by these new communities. **There are five elements which strike me in the great majority of these new communities.**

First of all there is in their vocation **certain clarity**. These communities are young and they have a clear vision of their identity, their reason to be, their mission in the Church and in the world. This clarity is attractive. What is there that is clear in our religious Institutes? I suppose that the answers will be very diverse...

Secondly, these new communities are characterised by **certain fervour**. Their prayer, and especially their prayer in common, is a prayer where warmth has its rightful place. But this fervour goes beyond their prayer assemblies. Often a simple joy shines out from these communities. What is our fervour like?

Thirdly: a lot of time is given to the community, a community in joy and simplicity. Typical in several of these communities is the way in which they are constituted.

There are like three concentric circles:

In the centre there are those who are committed definitively, nearly always single people;

In a second circle, those of 'the house', who live there and participate in the life of the community, women and men, married and single, young and not so young, and who are committed for a certain time, fixed or open-ended;

In a third circle, those of friends who come on Sunday to take part in the Eucharist and often a frugal meal.

That can pose questions for us with regard to our structures for admission and the quality of our communities.

Fourthly, an important point in all our new communities is their **love for the Church, for the hierarchical Church**. That seems to be the most evident thing. This does not mean that in some of these communities there would be

no criticism of the Church, but they would always insist upon their love of the Church. Was it not the case with the founders, men and women, of our Orders and Congregations? Do we love the Church? Just like acid rain kills of all natural life, so our acid remarks kill all vocation for the Church.

The last element present in many of these new communities is **Mary, the Mother of Jesus**. Here too, it is something obvious: how can we follow Jesus on the way and forget his mother, Mary?

Prayer from the heart is made close to Mary, but also the presence of women and especially married women living in the community with their children, sees to it that Mary has the place which belongs to her, not only at a purely family level, but also in the economy of salvation.

Let us confide the future of Religious Life in Europe to Mary, here in Fatima, in this place where she made herself close to us.

Reactions of members at the General Assembly

In the third part of your presentation you spoke of the values that are marking the situation Europe actually, in the present day, mentioning: reconciliation, peace, solidarity, struggle for justice, multicultural Europe and dialogue and I agree. I think these are the main issues. On the other hand when you were speaking about the new movements within the Church: you said that they question us and you mention some characteristics.

The underlying idea is that there is new life in these movements for the Church whereas in our traditional Orders and Congregations this life seems to be ebbing away or fading. But I notice a very big and problematic contrast between the values in Europe and the characteristics of these movements. There is an absence of these values in the characteristics that you mentioned. These new movements are characterised by clarity of identity, by fervour, by joy, by investment in the community, love for the hierarchical Church, by devotion to Our Lady and **there is no mention of reconciliation, peace, justice, dialogue and pluralism. I wonder to what extent these new movements could be a model for us to develop in terms.**

You had said in terms of going through the history of Religious Life where at each moment Religious Life seemed to respond to the needs of society and it was the way in which the Spirit was guiding the Church to give to the people of God what they were thirsting for.

Fr. Rotsaert answers

There are **two things** I'd like to say:

If I finished up with the new communities, indicating certain elements which could question us, we as Religious men and women because I feel and I know, that in many Religious communities of both men and women there is a certain aversion towards these new communities. I think that perhaps we do not let ourselves be questioned sufficiently by them.

I think if we want to think about the future of Religious Life there are certain elements that we need to consider, elements that have to do with the inside of our religious life that call us to reflect.

Several of these new communities are committed to these European values, not all of them. There is a certain clarity in their vision and in their mission. Some in their mission, as part of their mission work to promote solidarity and justice. They work to promote these values in the world. I did want to open our perspectives to something that we do not like to see and look in the eye. It is something that I think we need to consider directly. We also need to select, choose what we need to learn from these movements and what we can discard.

Information from the Belgian Conference:

We organised a meeting with thirteen of these new movements, these new communities. It is a unique happening. It is something that never occurred before. So we decided to get to know these groups. Now we know a little bit more about them.

Other reflection

You told us that within history there have always been new foundations that followed new challenges; but we have not heard much about the old communities that renewed themselves. Instead we have the feeling that the communities find themselves in a frozen state, if you will. They seem to have come to a standstill. I mean the old communities should have the opportunity to renew themselves and should allow for new initiatives, if only ad experimentum. The Cistercians for example, have just built a modern new nursing home. They were almost excluded from the Order, these sisters. Instead, now, the Bishops go there to get treatment. So it is a real struggle for the old communities! They must be given the opportunity to renew themselves with new forms.

Fr. Rotsaert:

In certain areas we are too closed off or too immobile. We bear a tradition which we simply cannot renew from within and that is why I suggested that we could begin in the Congregations and in the Orders that wish to do so, of course, or in certain areas or places where there is the will to do so. We could perhaps review our criteria for admission. Normally a candidate enters, then he takes

vows and then that is the process. It is quite regimented. There is not much flexibility. I'm not saying that we need to do away with that altogether. It has got some value **but we need to open up to other ways at the same time.** I think that again this could help us to select our candidates. Our young candidates today are so afraid of making any final commitment whether it is in marriage or Religious Life or anything else. However there are just as many idealistic young people as there were fifty years ago. So we need to find ways and means to accept young candidates who will be a bit more flexible. We need to be a bit more daring and perhaps embark **on formulas 'ad experimentum'** and perhaps have a little bit of time set aside to see whether or not the experiment works

Another question

You mentioned the challenges of the Religious Life in Europe. There are some I see. There are some lay movements, also in my country, Poland. They are trying to fight against the, as they say, liberal values. They are fighting against these movements of pro-abortion, euthanasia and so on and they are turning to us, as Religious, for help and inspiration.

So how would you see our stance which is taken more by the lay people at least in my country? What should we do or how should we react? You see also this problem in Europe. You mentioned clarity and this liberal way of thinking is against this clarity.

Fr. Rotsaert

I should think that this is an area that we are not tapping into all the possibilities that we have as Religious Orders and Congregations. This is an area in which we need to work together jointly. Many of these challenges that arise in Europe are challenges that arise not only for Religious Life, but for all Christians in general.

We are talking about 'huge' challenges that we are not going to overcome easily. It is a matter of changing mentality. If we need to change mentality and preserve values we need to join forces. I see that in the European Parliament the non-Christians are much more active than Christians.

The Christians that we choose to send to the European Parliament we need to support them. We need to train them, to form them. There is a lot of work to be done on that.

I think there is a certain stance or position, a common position to be taken in Religious Life on this problem or that. If we were to take a common stance I'm certain that, it would help things to make sure that the scale is not tipped in favour of those who don't have these values.

Another intervention

We are strongly challenged by these movements. We are called to dialogue with one another and we are also called to try out new ways of community life that will be lighter perhaps from certain points of view and firmer perhaps from other perspectives.

So perhaps we could shrug off this sense of individualism, this sense of fatigue and this obsession with multiplying services that constantly take us away. **So I'm thinking about dialogue with movements that needs to be fostered and perhaps the decision to try out new forms of Religious Life.**

Personally in my community, there are only two of us for the third is sick, but we live with five young women. They are from the Moslem world. They are newly baptised and they live with us 24 hours a day. Personally I think I have learned something from the Albanian culture and I hope that I have given something to them.

Although I do work obviously I'm not obsessed with it. I visit a lot of communities but the sisters always run off somewhere, they never stop. Then when I go to less-structured communities I see that the sisters are willing to take the time and stop and talk. May be there is something that we need to review in the way that we live.

Of course considering the historical aspects that you very brilliantly presented to us: the crises of civilisation, **we need to come to life again.**

I think that the Spirit is speaking to us.

Father Mark Rotsaert

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Publications:

Flemish translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of saint Ignatius of Loyola

God vinden in alles (on the Ignatian Prayer – *Finding God in all Things*), Averbode 1996, 2003 (5th edition)

Several articles of Ignatian Spirituality in various international revues.