

20th International Congress of Renovabis, Freising (D) - August 31-September 2, 2016

"Witnessing to the Gospel – Shaping the world."

The role of Religious Orders in Central and Eastern Europe"

Under the topic "Witnessing to the Gospel – Shaping the world", about 280 participants from 29 countries discussed the spiritual and historic role as well as the future of religious orders at the Catholic Aid Organization for Eastern Europe Renovabis in Freising.



After a brief introduction about the development of religious life in the 20th century, especially in the light of the political and social upheavals in the last quarter of a century, the involvement of some religious orders in areas such as school, caritas, pastoral care and aid to refugees was presented. Other topics were the diversity of religious life in the 21st century and the prospects for the development of religious orders in the coming decades.

The Managing Director of Renovabis, Dr. Gerhard Albert, explained in his introduction that ever since the beginning of the solidarity action, religious orders belonged to the central partners which Renovabis supported in their projects and concerns in Eastern Europe. *"We not only consider the valuable service of religious to mankind as essential, but also see in the form of consecrated life a gift of God to his Church, which we want to help to transmit"*, said Dr. Albert. In various ways, the religious orders in the partner-countries of Renovabis allow the Mission of the Church to become real and they thus contribute to "shape and renew society".



The Congress was opened by Archbishop Dr. Heiner Koch (Berlin) on August 31, 2016. Religious people live their following Christ in a generous and credible way and give themselves away. *"With religious persons we feel: faith costs the whole heart. They give themselves away, their life, their whole big heart - trusting in God and in the service to the people"*, said Archbishop Koch.



During three days, members of religious orders from Albania, Hungary, Ukraine, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, Belarus and Russia presented the various charisms and activities of their communities. This showed a rich abundance of realities and many impressive testimonies of religious life in Eastern Europe. The exchange in Freising as well as the opportunity for networking were welcomed by many participants.

On the 2nd day of the Congress the participants came together in seven workshops to reflect and share with one another about education, pastoral care, commitment for marginalised people such as victims of human trafficking and refugees, the prophecy of the orders, monastic life in the Orthodox Church and the crisis of religious life.

Fr. Giovanni Peragine was one of the speakers at the panel discussion on the last day of the Congress on the topic «*Religious orders in the 21st century: New challenges - New ways*».



As a privileged observer of religious life in Western as well as in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Fr. Giovanni, an Italian religious who has been active as a missionary in Albania for more than 18 years, is the President of the European Conference of Major Superiors UCESM and of the Albanian Conference as well), he explained referring to the communist and atheistic past of Albania with its numerous martyrs and the tragedy of the refugees: "*We as religious must also take up this challenge and not only avoid simplifications, but above all be a model of the prophetic freedom based on the following of Christ. The martyrdom of our brothers and sisters in faith urges us to face a fundamental requirement: let the Christian faith emerge as a positive force that does not condemn, but save, a voice that brings hope and not evil, which is able to read the work of grace in the heart of history*". Owing to the religious diversity in the countries of Eastern Europe and the strong religiousness, i.e. the demand for spirituality and sense of life, especially in Albania, Fr. Giovanni underlined the great challenge of working with the laity and also the problem of vocations which is of quality and not merely of numbers.

Another notable report was made by Sister Teodora Shulak from Ukraine. Since 2013, the co-founder of the community of the Sisters of the Most Holy Redeemer in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in Lviv has been the superior of the Community of the province of Ukraine: "*After the fall of the wall, our Church awakened to new life and quickly gained ground. In the meantime, our community counts 27 sisters, 25 of them being Ukrainians. Our young sisters get involved in different areas and in different places. However, the current difficult political situation in the Ukraine is a new and serious challenge for us. The war in the East of Ukraine has reinforced the old problems of our country. Strong corruption, unemployment, alcoholism, AIDS, human trafficking, forced prostitution abroad, migration – all these themes bring huge problems to the Ukrainian society. Many families are torn apart. Many young people go abroad because they see no real prospects for the future there*".

Faced with declining vocations and the increasing selfishness and secularism in European societies, religious communities in Eastern and Western Europe are facing major challenges. The current situation must be considered not only a crisis, but an opportunity, too. The Redemptorist father Stanislav Přebyl from the Czech Republic expressed this in the following words as a conclusion to the Congress: "*In a secular society, religious people are perceived as a curiosity rather than as an alternative. However, this fact has also the potential to generate interest - and not with a strange and mysterious lifestyle, but through an authentic life*".

From the UCESM-General Secretariat in Brussels, September 2016