

Report at the Congress of Renovabis

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It is not easy to define what is meant by Eastern Europe. It is not a question of defining a geographical or cultural or religious reality. Indeed, Eastern Europe proves to be very diversified and little homogeneous. I want to start from what has characterized and marked the recent history of the countries of the Eastern-European block and hence the dreadful experience of the pain gone through under terror and deprivation of physical and religious freedom on the part of the Communist regime. For Eastern Europe in particular, what John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* is relevant: namely that the twentieth century was for Christians and Churches especially the century of martyrdom. While it is true that martyrdom is very important for the growth and renewal of the Church, religious life must contribute to grow this "seed" as a vital food to the Church of today by discovering in itself the work of grace in history.

On November 4, in Albania, the first 38 martyrs of the Communist dictatorship will be beatified. It is not a question of recalling martyrdom in a sort of exhibition of the endured pain to generate compassion, but to reap the benefits of the experience of martyrdom by discovering the work of grace in history. The fall of communism, experienced historically as the victory over evil and interpreted theologically as the salvation by God, is very important for strengthening hope. Looking back at the experience of martyrdom is important to discover the work of grace also at the dark moments of history when evil seemed to prevail. In recent years, many of these countries remember the 25 years of freedom after the Communist dictatorship. But many are disappointed by freedom and tempted to see it as a danger. For many, freedom has become an empty word because instead of giving work it provided a passport, turning native people into beggars and vagrants in the world.

In Europe, we are powerless and divided witnesses to the drama of the immigrants from Syria and other countries at war and unable to find balanced and common solutions, even inside the Church. But it is important to stress that the migration from the Balkan countries to Western Europe also continues relentlessly. Over the last years, requests for asylum of Albania to Europe and particularly to Germany have grown by 51%, and by 81% from Kosovo. According to surveys of 2015, 66.7% of the young Albanians expressed their intention to leave the country.

It is also up to us, religious, to accept this challenge and not just to avoid simplifications, but above all to provide an example of prophetic freedom based on the following of Christ. The martyrdom of our brothers and sisters in faith confronts us with a fundamental requirement: foster the emergence of Christian faith as a positive force that does not condemn but saves, that is not a sign of misfortune but of hope, that helps read the work of grace in the middle of the story.

Pope Francis keeps recommending to young people not to let themselves be robbed of hope. In this part of Europe which we are examining, the religious are called to rekindle this hope which has already been robbed to many of them, in a context where the ability to plan the future is weakening continuously. Where, after the initial euphoria of restored freedom and unkept continuous promises from politicians, what matters now is the today followed by the tomorrow which is the exact copy of the past.

Another aspect illustrating Eastern Europe is religious pluralism. Here are some data that helps us understand the challenges of religious life. Very different social and religious dynamisms exist side by side; different religions live side by side but often do not cohabit giving rise to forms of radicalism. In Albania, 70% are Muslims, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholics; in Greece, 90% are Orthodox; in Croatia, 70% are Catholics, in Bulgaria 80% are Orthodox; in the Ukraine, only 30% are believers out of whom 6% are Greek-Catholics. In the Czech Republic, 70% declare themselves as atheists and in Slovenia, 65% are Catholics. This shows an amazing religious plurality in Europe.

In addition, we witness the strong secularisation process which seeks to exclude God from public life and therefore also from families. But unlike what is happening in the Western part of Europe, the spiritual void inherited in those Eastern countries from the Communist regime fostered the emergence of a strong religious sense. As you know, Albania has been the only country in Europe to declare the State atheism. Today, Albania is one of the countries where the population, both Catholic and Muslim, has a strong religiosity.

This religiosity, which is often mistaken for superstition or magic, or which expresses itself through a popular religiosity, stands for a quest for spirituality and the meaning of life. In this context the religious, with their strong tradition, can and must stand as a light and a guide in this quest for meaning. In addition they maintain still today very important places of European spirituality, places which are able to speak to all - believers and non-believers. Nobody like them can boast about such a large heritage of people and places to initiate a spiritual rebirth. Indeed, due to their charisms, religious have always put themselves next to the man who is injured and thrown at the edge of the road of today's Europe.

Need to open our communities and convents. It is necessary to rethink our community life which must not only meet the needs of the Community (schedules, rules...) but adapt to the needs of the people. Here comes into play the great challenge of the relationship of religious people with lay people: lay people are not the object of our pastoral work but above all subjects of evangelization, they are not only employees and collaborators but share the same spirituality. A change of mentality is necessary, allowing us to recognize that, next to the need to train lay people, there is the need to be trained with them: give them a role not of replacement but of - not only spiritual - active sharing.

Another challenge of religious life, also related to the vocations issue, arises from the concern of a pervasive superficiality in consecrated life, of interior poverty, of a life without horizon, without a deep spirituality. Fruitfulness is not a question of numbers but of quality. The moment of vocational discernment and initial and especially ongoing formation turns out to be decisive. Often, we are concerned about the vocations we don't have and we do not care about those we have. We are close to the needs of the people we meet outside the community, but we do not listen to the needs of my brother or sister of my community.

Consecrated life can still wake up the world if it remains awake since it is the world that, basically, wants to be woken up as it is thirsty of the infinite, it is thirsty of these ideals of beauty and freedom that consecrated life is still able to bear witness to.

Freising, September 2, 2016