

# INTER-CHAPTER REPORT OF THE CONTINENT OF EUROPE

*Rome, 9-29 September 2018*

## Premises

During the continental assembly of provincials held in Sunningdale from 12 to 14 July, 2018, we indicated some points which ought to have made up this continental report. We started, not from the life or the journey of Europe but from the aspects indicated in the “Guide to the Implementation of the XVIII General Chapter and the Planning of Activities”, of 15 March 2016, where the duties that each one must assume in the implementation and realisation of the Chapter decisions are listed.

But now, seeing that we have time to do so, we consider it our duty also to consider other aspects regarding how the Chapter content was received since we referred to this on different occasions.

The Chapter began by reminding us who we are: Comboni missionary disciples called to live the joy of the Gospel in the world of today.

- The foundation is discipleship. If we wish to speak of mission and Comboni mission, we do so starting from a first call to discipleship which is this daily following of Jesus, the daily acceptance of the life project that he has proposed and that involves each one of us, often making us face up to the dominating project which is, unfortunately, a project of death and destruction for many people.
- Then there is a reminder of our identity. We have a charism which is a particular way to live discipleship. We have Comboni as the inspiration for many concrete choices, indications of the content to give to our spirituality. Everything is concentrated on the icon of Africa with all its human and cultural riches as well as its trauma and tragedies.
- There is, finally, a third aspect which is the world of today defined as “the theological place where we are called to broadcast and cultivate the seeds of reconciliation and love”; a world in rapid and profound change, a world we must come to know, to understand and to love.
  - All our provinces have worked to follow this vision. From this reflection something is emerging that we feel is important to share in this report.

## I. The Comboni Mission in Europe (cf. CA 46)

- The Chapter given us an assignment: the Comboni mission in Europe. This is new in many ways. This is the first time the Comboni mission in Europe has been mentioned and this statement has given rise to some reaction and provoked some debate, bringing us to study the meaning of what the Chapter assigned to us.
- The Chapter said that “It is no longer sufficient to think of the continent of Europe simply as the place where we do missionary animation and vocations promotion. Also in Europe we are called to ‘have the courage to reach out to all the margins that are in need of the light of the Gospel’ (EG 20)”.
- The Guide later adds: “Changes at global level and in the political, economic, social and cultural ambit have important consequences for us because they invite us to a deep revision of our methodology, Furthermore, , the paradigm of mission has changed: we are aware that mission starts from the heart of God and therefore our mission is a participation in the *missio Dei*; it is global because it goes beyond geographical confines and has as its horizon the building up of the Kingdom of God; it is attentive to differences of context and is, to the same extent, a composite reality made up of many dimensions: the proclamation, liberation, justice, peace, integrity of creation and dialogue with cultures and religions”.
- In every important meeting, whether provincial or continental, we taken up the points and we asked ourselves: what does it mean to be mission in Europe today? Rather than clear answers which will, in time, be found, some points have emerged. The first is awareness that the world has changed or is

changing or at least seems to have profoundly changed. There are many interpretations, all of which may be true but perhaps also incomplete, that try to explain this historic change. It is not an epoch of change but a change of epoch, as Pope Francis described it.

- Let us look on this time from an observer's viewpoint, that of Europe itself. We have entered a season where, on the one hand, the frontiers that for centuries separated countries and continents are disappearing; creating the illusion of an ever more open world that is free and multi-cultural. Then we realise that, at the same time, there are differences surfacing that are cultural, territorial, regional, ideological and religious. There is pressure to belong, on the one hand, to a world that is a global village while, on the other, there is pressure to belong to something that is truly small and close to us like a category of people, a colour that identifies or a community etc.

- Europe is clearly under construction and in formation. It has a parliament and a currency but no constitution or a common base on which to build new society projects. It is a Europe of the markets, not of peoples.

- Nevertheless, a revolution is taking place before our very eyes and it finds its greatest expression in the fields of technology and information. In Europe we have the impression that we can do anything and reach everywhere. The concepts of time and space have changed. There is no longer near and far. There is no longer today and tomorrow. Everything is mixed up and confused; everything exists now and immediately, apparently within arm's reach. This is not something to be commented on but a new context in which we are called to live, move and work.

- The Chapter tried to tell us these things when it spoke of a changing world. And we often feel lost like people overcome by processes that take place too quickly. This is the case of families, politics and the churches.

- The changes of which we speak concern the mission. It is not what it was in the past. Pope Francis has made us understand that it is no longer geographic even if, perhaps, a new understanding will indeed derive from geography.

- The *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, a research centre in Washington, from an enquiry launched a few years ago (2013), found that a century 70% of Catholics lived in Europe and North America. Today they make up 32%, less than a third of the total. Today, more than two thirds of Catholics live in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia and in Oceania. In America Latina, in a hundred years they increased from 70 million to 425 million. In Asia and Oceania from 14 million to 131 million.

- In Sub-Saharan Africa the increase has been even more surprising. Catholics numbered only one million in 1910. A century later they were 171 million. From being less than 1% of the population, they increased to 16% in a hundred years.

- In sub-Saharan Africa the order of countries with most Catholics has been turned on its head. In 1910 the first in order were France and Italy, with 40 and 35 million Catholics respectively. Then came Brazil with 21 million. In Germany there were more Catholics than in Mexico: 16 million as compared to 14. In 2010 Brazil was in the lead with 126 million Catholics, then Mexico with 96 million and the Philippines with 75 million. For the first time, an African country is found in the top ten countries: the Democratic republic of Congo, with 31 million Catholics.

- Among the countries of Europe and North America, only the United States has had a net increase in the percentage of Catholics in the population (thanks to the Hispanics). They were 14% in 1910 and now they are 24%. In pure numbers, with 75 million Catholics, the United States is today level with the Philippines in third place overall.

- In some countries where people have always been Catholic, they no longer make up almost the entire population, as was the case a century ago. Today, the Congo has twice as many Catholics as France. The cardinal of Kinshasa once asked why the Congo was still under Propaganda Fide while Holland (with more than 60% professed agnostics) was not.

- This means that mission has changed and not only for Europe but for everyone. We believe it is this that the Chapter sought to tell u when it spoke of Mission in Europe and of the importance of elaborating new paradigms starting from the continent which, for centuries, has been the cradle of mission.

- Change has not been simply geographic. The mission today is no longer a movement with colonial characteristics (bringing, teaching building), as it was in the XIX century (when our Institute was founded). It is no longer in one direction (from Europe to Africa, LAm and Asia), but has become an encounter of churches, peoples and cultures which, journeying together, grow the project of Jesus for a world that overcomes differences and is rebuilt on solidarity, justice and fraternity. Europe, which in the Comboni tradition provided personnel and means for a mission realised elsewhere, examines itself so as to understand, in this change of epoch and of perspectives clearly expressed by Vatican II and now by EG, what the Spirit, the protagonist of the mission, is asking of it today. The Chapter reminds us of the validity of Jesus' missionary proposal and the importance of reaching the outskirts where the light of the Gospel is needed: this begs the question as to what these are and how to approach them.

We have sought to understand these problems and we believe the mission in Europe for us Combonis seems to have five characteristics.

## **1. Mission as service**

### **Within**

- We are obliged to welcome each other in fraternity as Jesus did with his disciples at the close of the day. That was the time when, gathered round him, one felt the need of reciprocal care. In our own case in Europe, we have returning confreres in need of medical treatment and assistance, after spending their lives elsewhere. In our provinces, this has become an urgent need. We have accepted it as a great missionary commitment. To carry it out properly we have re-examined structures and redirected energy and economic resources to provide the confreres with the best we have to offer. We are willing and proud to take care of our confreres and many of us give an impressive witness in the homes for the elderly and some houses have even become homes where they are welcomed and animated.

- In providing this service we have found new allies in the national health systems, learning from them the norms for assistance in each country and finding many people who appreciate us, help us and wish us well. We believe we have made considerable progress in this mission which calls us to become fraternal service and care.

- In this process, we have tried to make the confreres understand that the mission may also be lived in frailty and limitations. Only a few confreres become closed within themselves while there are shining examples among those who continue to live the mission right up to the end of their days.

- We are often asked if it is possible to extend health care to confreres from other continents. We would like to do so but, unfortunately, we are prevented from doing so by the laws of our countries which are becoming ever more restrictive and exclusive regarding foreigners. We believe that this consideration should be studied at Institute level to avoid creating internal imbalances and differences that would clash with the ideal of fraternity which forms the basis of our lives.

### **Without**

- Mission is also external service to our churches of origin. Traditionally, our Institute was organised in this way: mission was done in Africa and LAm and Missionary Animation was done in Europe. MA meant in many cases speaking of a mission carried out elsewhere which needed personnel and money to succeed. Today, the opportunities for this sort of MA are notably reduced. Churches do not welcome us as in the past (many dioceses have their own missions and their own projects) and we have become an annoyance.

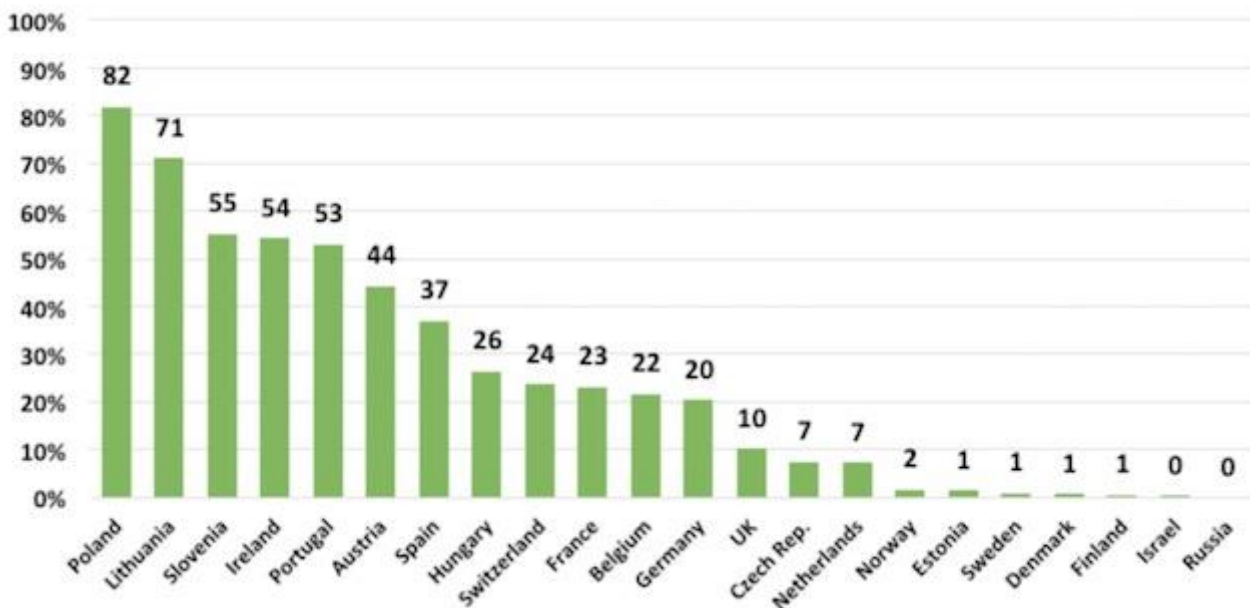
- In the absence of MA, our benefactors have become fewer, the magazines slowly approach a crisis and we have lost our ties with the country (friends, missionary groups, support mechanisms etc.).

Nevertheless, Europe is open to new MA proposals when they concern something specific and qualified. Is this not the request to study the dimensions of ministries of which the Chapter spoke?

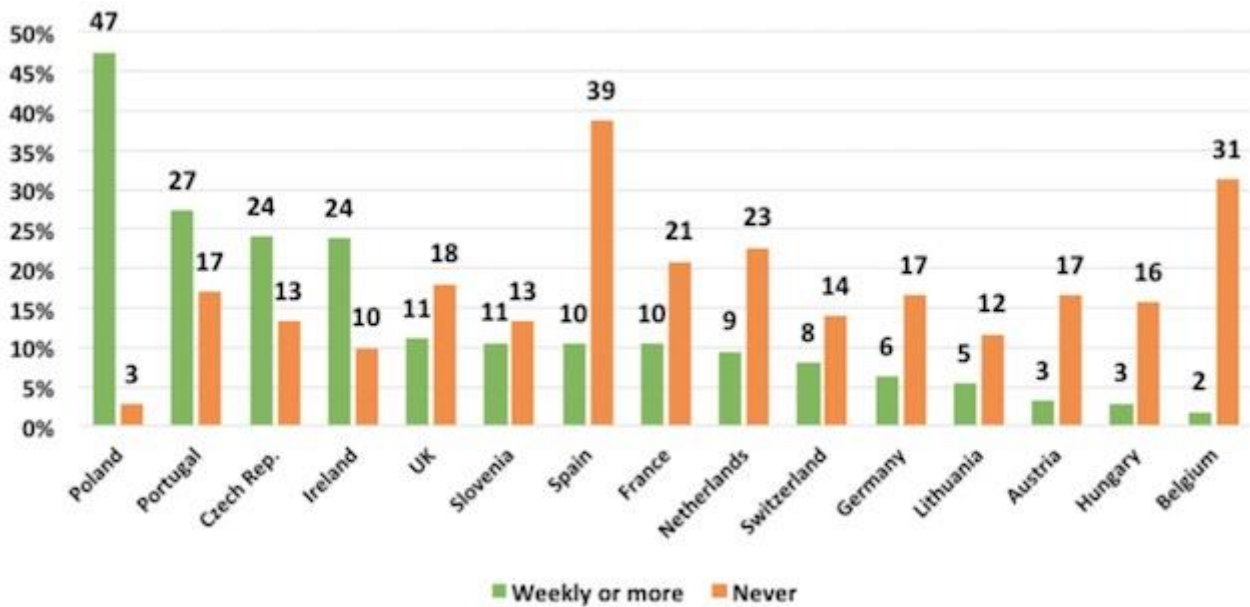
- Many of our members wonder what they should do. The need is felt to go out but we do not feel able to face an increasingly demanding public. This is the reason we resort to parishes. This is a widespread topic of discussion in our provinces: is the parish the way to live the mission in Europe today? And we want to ask whether this question concerns only Europe or whether the time has come also for other continents to tackle ecclesial realities that are no longer those we encountered in the beginning. Why is the parish alright in Africa but not in Europe? We have the impression that this reflection, while being important in Europe is now under consideration everywhere, bearing in mind the new geography of Christianity and the new reality of the churches in which we work.

## 2. Mission as proclamation

- Europa has become the continent where the proclamation must be re-launched.
- We have noted that some traditionally Catholic countries now have a lower level of participation than many “mission countries”. Studies predict that within thirty years, non-believers will be the “majority religion” in France, Holland and New Zealand, countries that have a Christian majority today.
- Many young generations have never heard any serious talk about Jesus or the Gospel. The two graphs published in a London daily in March of this year show the participation of young people (16-29) in the life of the Church (Italy is not included but its figures are similar to its bordering countries):



*(Percentage of young people (16-29) who consider themselves catholic)*



*Percentage of young Catholic adults who attend Mass at least once a week (green) or never (orange)*

- This has obvious repercussions. The very pronounced process of secularisation causes widespread atheism that affects mainly the younger generations and that is not limited only to the catholic world but also – in an increasingly marked way – to the Protestant world and which aims at what is “religious” in the global sense. In response, parishes and local churches, instead of opening up to dialogue and encounter, reinforce their traditional positions and stubbornly present a model of church and Christian life that does not respond to the unease of the modern world. The vocational crisis indicate that the time will come when the churches will no longer be able to meet even the sacramental requirements of what is left of the Christian communities.

- In spite of this, our provinces carry out a great amount of youth pastoral work, even though there is little to show for it.

- On the one hand, we missionaries live and breathe an air of appreciation for our work but, on the other, we also breathe an air of visceral hatred for the world we represent. It is from this that the identification of mission as a proclamation derives. Europe of today is launching a great challenge to the Church and it is important to learn to dialogue with modernity, re-examining the traditional religious models (the Mass, the parish, religious feasts etc.)

### **3. Mission as welcoming**

- To speak of Europe is to speak of a continent that has become a fortress. The Mediterranean, historically a place of encounter, exchange and understanding between peoples and cultures, is now a wall, a battlefield and often a cemetery and a place of daily tragedy.

- The theme of immigration has become central to the discussion of mission in Europe: with the result that many circumscriptions have taken important steps in this direction:



- As a continent, we see this problem as the main frontier of the mission in Europe. In concrete terms, we have opened communities to welcome immigrants and have studied projects that have immigration as their main concern (the impact of the migratory phenomenon is not the same in all provinces. It is felt most in the countries on the borders of Europe)

- We considered a specific project, rejected by the bishop, in the world of migration in Spain. We are trying to find another place for it. The OPCU should also be continued in this sense.

- We have one parish among immigrants in London, one in Portugal and one in Italy, as well as countless local initiatives in all the circumscriptions. The theme of immigration has also become central to MA and in the work of the magazines and constitutes the basis for other reflections regarding the revision of commitments and the use of structures.

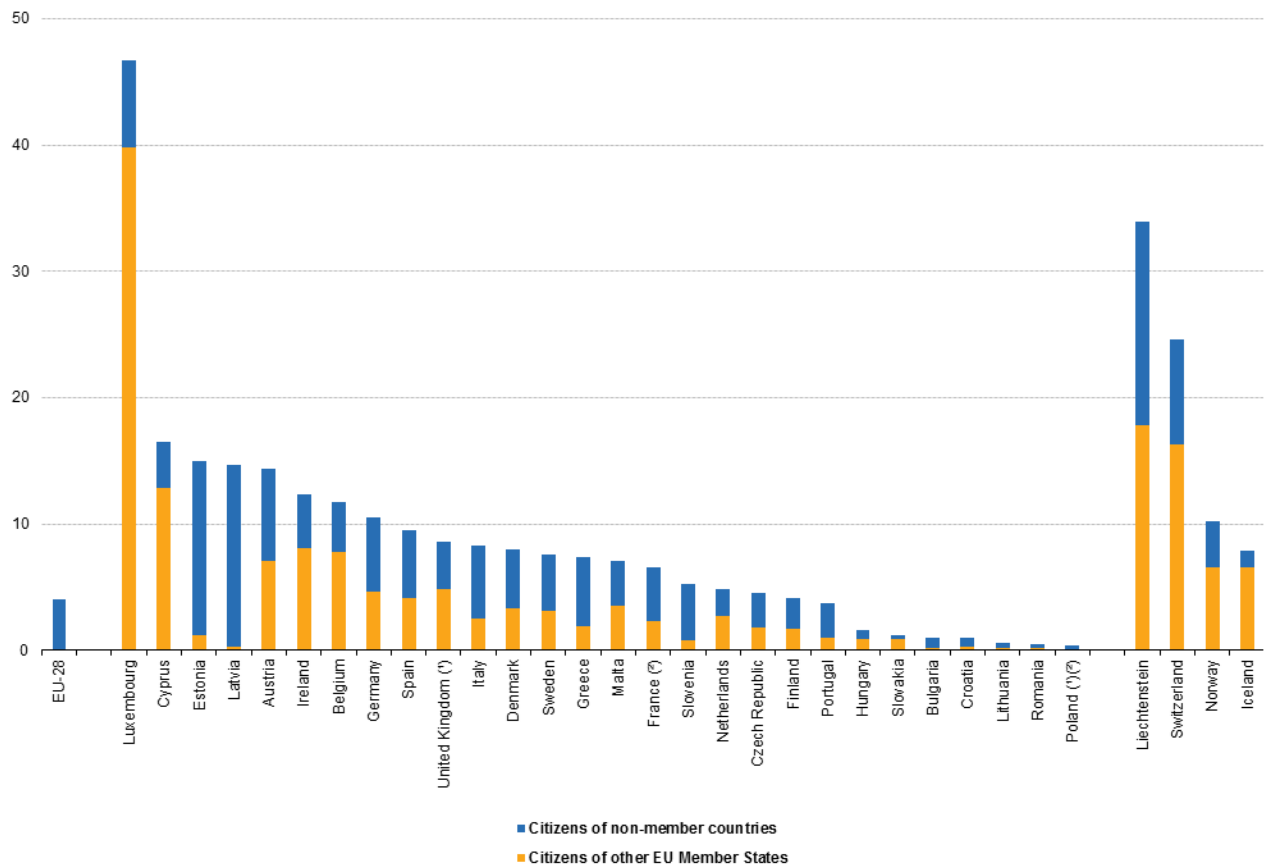
#### 4. Mission as prophecy

- The migratory process quickly changes the physiognomy of societies, making them multi-cultural, generating also negative dynamics unknown until recently in most countries with closure, intransigence, xenophobia, fear of others and of what is different.

- The first prophecy, the Pope says, is fraternal life among ourselves, especially if it is lived in multi-culturality. A reality that welcomes differences becomes a sign in a world closed within itself.

- It becomes prophecy when it transforms into the ability to adopt new life-styles, in line with what pope Francis proposes in Laudato Si'.

- It becomes prophecy when it has the courage to review the structures of the past, to open them to the needs of society and to allow ourselves to come closer to the world of the poor.



(\*) Estimate.  
 (\*) Provisional.  
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: migr\_pop1cdz)

- We are convinced that there must be a new kind of sensitivity in our missionary commitment and also in relations between ourselves. Our communities must move from being international to being multi-cultural.

## 5. Mission as condemnation

- Europa is world economic-financial power. As such, it is a pillar of the perverse and exclusive economic-financial system that increasingly concentrates riches and wealth in the hands of the few and excludes entire continents from even minimal access to subsistence goods. Europa is responsible for many dramas and tragedies that strike humanity and it is responsible for the growing differences it allows to be created within it.

- The continental commission for JPIC has become fundamental in helping to become aware of these mechanisms. It helps us to promote ethical finance, to oppose the production and traffic of arms, to condemn the injustices that underlie many international business accords and to take an interest in environmental themes.

- We would like to see a new sensitivity of this kind to form part of the aims of basic formation and to integrate the content of Comboni spirituality.

- JPIC must no longer be a sector of mission but its soul.

- Reflection on mission in Europe today leads us to consider two aspects. The continent has taken great strides in this awareness of a world that is changing and of the renewal of the mission. There are some obvious obstacles. The first is the average age (73) of Comboni confreres in Europe, many of

whom were born and grew up in a different vision of the Church and the world. Then there is the natural tendency, at a certain age, to refuse to run risks. It is also difficult to understand how the mission in Europe today cannot abstract from the themes of JPIC which, in the past, were been treated as areas reserved to some more sensitive or specialised people but are now very important both in the way of doing mission and in proclamation. These are the questions on which we, as provinces, are working.

## **II. Reflection and the revision of commitments (cf. CA 44)**

- No. 44.1 of the 2015 Chapter says: “The reality of the mission, in a state of constant change in the world of today, requires continual reflection both at theoretical (theologico-charismatic), and practical level (places and ambits of mission)”

- In Europe we have tried to insert the new sensibilities into our Six-year Plans which we have discussed and shared among provincials and in the various sector assemblies. If Europe has changed as a mission, we must change our response in the various fields. We have learned from Pope Francis that the mission is not a place (geographic), but an attitude (“passion for Jesus and passion for the people” - EG 268). It is witness before activity. For this reason we have tried to move our reflection on the revision of commitments from what we are doing to how we do it. Reviewing commitments means, for us, reviewing or life-style, re-thinking structures (that belong to a past which no longer exists and that condition our mission), seeking channels of dialogue and encounter with the local churches, opening ourselves to the lay world and reviewing our language and work methods. All the provinces of Europe are making this sort of reflection.

- To stimulate and enlarge it we have restructured the mission secretariat both in the provinces and at continental level and we have appointed a coordinator whom we have asked to propose, stimulate, bring together, network, circulate idea and share experiences. This coordinator will interface with the General Secretariat of the Mission.

- We have not closed communities by reason of the fact that, in the European provinces, apart from Poland and the LP, for the next ten years numbers will be maintained or will increase, considering the ageing and the return of European confreres scattered throughout the world. Our provinces are therefore committed to working on two fronts that are apparently contradictory but are, in fact, complementary: to take care of the elderly and the sick but also to travel new pathways. Our Six-year Plans have sought to incorporate these two dimensions of our life. Each circumscription is sincerely dedicated to managing the present but with an eye to the future.

## **III. Evangelization and specific pastoral services (cf. CA 45)**

- A reduction of commitments must favour the requalification of our missionary service without being limited to closing communities” (CA 45.1).

- Last year, European discussion on immigration was launched and this year we have something similar in the sector of youth ministry and the accompaniment of the laity. The purpose of these initiatives is to bring things together for greater strength and we are trying to grow in specific ministries that require space for reflection, confrontation and also the possibility of finding new modalities of exchange and coordination. In one province, a reflection on organisation is taking place: is it possible to consider a manner of organisation that is less geographical and more ministerial, including the composition of councils?

- Another aspect that concerns the continent is communication. This is central to the Comboni mission. It is, perhaps, the sector in which, in recent years, changes have been deepest and most radical. Traditional communication is in crisis (paper, books, magazines), digital communication has developed, the Internet has burst on the scene and we have entered the era of the social media.



- The European continent has tried to make a reflection, considering that today the means exist to unify efforts, to improve services and broaden horizons. We are aware that there must be an improvement in the quality of what we produce and we must not be afraid to use marketing techniques to make our messages more consistent.

- The European media have approved the idea of starting a new website ([www.combonieurope.net](http://www.combonieurope.net)) that brings together, including in English, the best of what we succeed in producing at provincial level. There is the proposal to include in it a space dedicated to the youth and their problems. The provincials have decided to back this request.

- We have no plans for specialisations, also due to the small number of young members. However, we do think it is important to prepare personnel in the more involving fields of mission in Europe today: from the sector of journalism and communications to that of administration; from immigration to youth ministry; from commitment to JPIC to the accompaniment of confreres in difficulty.

- In virtue of this new missionary perspective we have supported active participation in the World Social Forum and in the Africa Europe Faith & Justice Network (AEFJN), based in Brussels, Belgium.

- As regards the significant work for brothers requested by the Chapter, discussion and discernment have begun. We have identified three possibilities, one in Spain, one in Portugal and one in Italy. A commission will now make a feasibility study and will present its conclusions at the European assembly for provincials.

#### **IV. Interculturality (cf. CA 47)**

- “Multi-culturality is a grace that forms part of the *charismatic patrimony* of our Institute since its foundation (CA 47.1)”.

- As the continent of Europe, we have lived the mission as unidirectional. We have supported activities all over the world with personnel and means, relying on the fact that, we had living churches that sustained us financially and wished to take part directly in missionary activity. Things are no longer so. The exuberance of the past has helped to give birth to many young churches and we have become aware that there have also been some negative results such as the fact that this awakened a spirit of protagonism and self-sufficiency that all too often closed us to the values of other continents and other peoples. We finally understood that mission is always encounter and exchange; that one never gives without receiving, at least in equal measure. We believe this to be the real charismatic patrimony that must characterise the Institute at all times and which we, as the continent of Europe, must rediscover.

- At a time when the continent is called to discover the other who comes, not as a problem or a threat but as a rich resource, we can be promoters of a multicultural society. This is how we want the mission in Europe to be, a bearer of cultural riches and ecclesial experiences which, as an Institute, we welcome and offer to others.

- All the provinces of Europe want to progress towards a multicultural mission and they also invite other provinces of the other continents, especially those most flourishing in vocations and personnel, never to close themselves in on themselves but to continue presences that are truly characterised by intentionality and inter-culturality. Europa has begun to receive confreres from other provinces and their contribution is extremely positive.

- Regarding the possible exchange of personnel between European provinces, we have tried but have succeeded only in taking a few small steps.

- In Europe, reflection on the new mission and inter-culture has been continued especially by the GERT which, in about fifteen years, dwelt on many themes. In recent years, the Limone Symposium, formerly promoted by the GERT and now coordinated by the Italian Province, dealt precisely with the question of immigration and inter-culture. These are moments of exchange at European and Comboni

Family level. They take place every two years. In the intervening years a workshop is organised to seek to make concrete what is proposed at theoretical level.

- Our symposiums in Limone (continental and Comboni Family) have begun to deal with the theme of inter-culture. Next year, we will not have a symposium but a workshop on the same theme.

## **V. Rule of Life – reading, re-visiting and revising (cf. CA 49 e 50)**

- The Chapter asked for the re-reading and re-visiting of the Rule of Life be continued. Europe has made interesting and fruitful progress following the indications of the GC. A team was formed that organised a workshop in Verona from where the various provincial activities proceeded, coordinated by small committees. The results of the process have been satisfactory. The RL continues to be not only valid but also a source of inspiration for a mission that is able to renew itself and look to the future without losing contact with the riches of the past.

## **VI. Code of Conduct (cf. CA 54)**

- The Chapter asked the communities to help the communities to study and share the Code of Conduct, since it sees it as an important means for promoting faithfulness to the Comboni vocation.

- The continent of Europe is gradually bringing it into the life of the confreres and the communities. Each province has nominated confreres to accompany confreres in difficulty.

- As regards the request to prepare personnel to conduct investigations as, in some cases, the Code of Conduct requires, the continent sees this as difficult since this requires that people be not only willing but competent. Perhaps it will be sufficient to have someone at Institute level who may establish external contacts to be used when necessary.

## **VII. Coordination of the Institute**

### **And the General Administration (cf. CA 64-68)**

- The chapter has proposed the reorganisation of the structures of coordination at Institute level.

- In all the European provinces we have reviewed the secretariats and reduced them to three: mission, formation and finance. It is difficult to unify basic formation with on-going formation and to find the right place for VP (vocations ministry), which is connected both with formation and the mission and MA.

## **VIII. Continentality – Brothers continental reference person (cf. CA 69-71)**

- The Chapter reiterated the validity of continentality. As Europe, we have tried to apply the Vademecum in continentality, applying it to all the sectors of missionary life.

- A continental Brothers reference person has been chosen who takes part in provincial assemblies. We must clarify his term of office and whether it should coincide with provincial elections or not.

- In order to identify personnel to appoint to continental projects, we are trying to do something at the level of the OPCU and of immigration, but the road is still long.

## **IX. Circumscriptions and clustering (cf. CA 72-73)**

▪ The proposals for clustering made by the GA have so far resulted in the creation of more concrete forms of collaboration between provinces on some specific initiatives. The situation of Poland is a cause for concern since, instead of proceeding towards the creation of a delegation, as proposed by the Chapter, the numbers have gone down so much that its survival is threatened. The continent feels a reflection should be made with urgency to resolve the situation.

Rome, 15 September 2018



*P. Giovanni Munari – Continental coordinator*