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On going Formation Conference 2010: Report Documents

Written by Antonio Pedretti sss

Introduction

As scheduled, from 20 – 22 January the Permanent Formation Session, organised by the European Commission on Permanent Formation, took place at Malmantle (Florence). This Commission, is nominated by the European Provincial Superiors, and consists of Fathers : Antonio Pedretti (Chairperson, who co-ordinated the preparation and conduct of the Session), Giovanni Moretti, Pedro Nunez, Augustin Odriozola, Gerard Daix, Patrick Lecouve, Patrick Costello (Provincial of the St. Peter and Paul Province). The recently deceased Fr. Maurice Rouleau was also a member.

The theme of the Session was: "To be Disciples and Apostles in the footsteps of Fr. Eymard, inspired by the example of Frs. Albert Tesniere and Charles Michel-Jean, in response to the world of to-day which challenges us". This theme is similar to that of the next General Chapter.

The first of the three days was devoted to reflection on what it means to be disciples and apostles. The second was devoted to the deepening of our knowledge of the modern world, especially in Europe, and with ideas from eastern culture. The third day was for seeking answers for to-day's world and making proposals from groups formed along Provincial lines.

We have, in fact, five Provinces: 1. Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament (Italy and Austria), 2. St. Peter Julian Eymard (France-Switzerland), 3. St. Joseph (Germany, Belgium, Holland), 4. St. Peter Apostle (Spain), 5. St. Peter and Paul (Gt. Britain and Ireland).

Wednesday 20 January

First input, Fr. Erasto Fernandez spoke on the theme: "To be Apostles and Disciples" in the New Testament

He developed the Theme from the spiritual point of view more than as exegesis. He began by speaking of Jesus Who is the first disciple and Apostle of the Father and in turn calls other persons of His choice and sends them out. To be disciples means to be with Jesus and to become like Him, and demands a total renouncement of and detachment from self. The disciple allows God to be and to act in him. Not only does he work, but puts into practice, becoming himself the message. According to the words of Fr. Erasto, "The central point with which we must become imbued as disciples of to-day is that the Kingdom is already here, that Jesus has renewed all things. We are called to live the life of the Kingdom here and now (1Jn.3:1-3) even if we don't experience it in its fullness – this requires a completely new set of relationships with others, of new attitudes and orientations in our daily lives ... An Apostle is one who is sent to share the Good News with others. Having seized the Good News ... but first he must ensure that he has experienced this Good News ... he should see there a healthy tension between disciple – apostle and a good balance between the two (the Martha-Mary story – Luke 10 : 38-42)

Second Input : "Fr. Eymard, disciple and apostle of the Eucharist in response to the world of his day".

This input, written by Fr. Andre Guitton who could not come due to a car accident (happily not serious), was read by Fr. Giovanni Moretti. Fr. Guitton speaks first of all of France in Fr. Eymard's day, with the aftermath of the French Revolution, the succession of regimes, the workers' revolution of 1848, the position of the French Church which was leaning more towards the monarchy. But at the same time a certain number of Catholics were aware of the new social realities.

Fr. Eymard founds his two Religious Institutes to respond to the needs of his time, seeing in the Eucharist, the place where Jesus is present, the most effective means. The worst of the evils is "The universal indifference which takes hold of so many Catholics in a terrible manner" and the remedy is the Eucharist, love for Jesus Eucharistic. Fr. Guitton concludes by saying that to-day, we must reinterpret the intuitions and creations of Fr. Eymard. An interesting point is that Fr. Eymard did not see liturgy, prayer, adoration as the ultimate outcome of a more effective ministry. They are rather, the first form of apostolic life.

Third Input : "Fr. Albert Tesniere, in the footsteps of Fr. Eymard, in his time"

Fr. A. Tesniere (1847-1909) was the favourite child and faithful disciple of Fr. Eymard, as it says in a memorial published in a review which he founded "The Most Blessed Sacrament". He accomplished great work for the Congregation and for spreading the thought and spirituality of the founder. He published books and magazines, especially the "series" of his writings. His edition of his writings however, is not very reliable. Fr. Tesniere often adapted Fr. Eymard's expressions to make them convey the thought better (in his view). He was however, driven by the desire to make Fr. Eymard better known. To-day, in the electronic edition published on the internet (www.eynard.org) and published in 17 volumes we have a text which corresponds with the original. Fr. Tesniere was Superior General after Fr. de Cuers and before Fr. Tenailon. Despite some hesitations over the Marechal affair, in the end he decided to maintain the structure of the Congregation as inherited from the Founder.

Fourth Input : "Fr. Charles Michel-Jean, in the footsteps of Fr. Eymard, in his time"

Fr. Charles Michel-Jean (1914 – 1992) was an unusual personality. He was born in England of an aristocratic Anglican family, a convert to Catholicism he changed his name and entered the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament in France. Very austere and hostile to mediocrity he moved from a traditionalist to a reforming attitude. Fr. Verhoeven adds that at night he didn't sleep in a bed but on the floor so as not to sleep too much. He had an important role in the renewal of the Rule of Life. As a liturgist he was director of "The Eucharistic Review for Clergy" the name of which he changed to "Parole et Pain" (Word and Bread).

In his own way, Fr. Michel-Jean shone out for his fidelity to the Word of God and the Liturgy which he considered to be so important for the renewal of the Church. He was very attentive to the marginalised and the poor. He was an advisor for the review "Conclium" and participated in the preparation of the international Eucharistic Congress at Lourdes in 1981. A word which could summarise his attitude in everything he did is "passion".

Thursday 21 January

Input of Fr. Harrie Verhoeven on the world which challenges us

The world did not happen by accident, but is a work of God, a reflection of His glory; always the fact of original sin makes us experience paradise lost, but at the same time we yearn for paradise promised.

Throughout Christian history we have varied between a pessimistic vision, "fuga mundi", and an optimistic vision in the ideology of progress. The characteristics of the world of to-day are globalisation, media culture, individualism/relativism and the dominance of the market-place.

For Europe, Fr. Harrie stipulates three elements: secularisation, living as if God did not exist, trying to create an earthly paradise. But the ideologies which promise it are only producing hell. A new religiosity is therefore born, often mixed with all sorts of beliefs and superstitions. Immigration brings Europe into contact with other religions and cultures among which none is predominant. Information coming through the media is often in conflict. For young people they speak of instantaneous religion, religious sentiments which come and go in an instant. For example the gatherings of JMJ.

Just as Fr. Eymard interpreted the signs of the times, we should interpret the signs of our times. The evil was religious indifference, to-day we could add religious ignorance. The groups in their sharing will deepen the signs of our times and interpret them to respond to them.

Group discussion on Fr. Harrie's questions

All the groups are satisfied with Fr. Harrie's presentation. One group found it a bit negative.

Underlying elements to highlight.The presence of new religious movements. Reference to the number of Muslims in Europe, globalisation as a seizure of power and manipulation. Communication media having too much influence. Society characterised by consumerism.

Local issues

Difficulty of dialogue with certain situations, like the Chinese at Prato. The Church in Spain which listens too little to the grass-roots. Problems with family ethic.

Obstacles to mission

Not listening to situations. Religious indifference and ignorance. The age of Religious and formation received in the past, which prevents understanding of youth especially in sexual matters. The religion of the youth lies on an emotional plain, ours is doctrinal. Separation between Hierarchy and the People of God. The language of the Church is not understandable for a lot of people to-day. People have an impoverished concept of the Eucharist.

Opportunities and challenges

To better understand people and their values in the culture of to-day, to see the positive even in negative situations, e.g. when unmarried partners demand Baptism for their children. To see in immigration an opportunity to integrate at a level more human than religious. The Church must seek to respond to the demand for a more authentic religious meaning. Reformulate our tradition. Make our celebrations more significant.

What would Fr. Eymard do to-day?

With much passion to respond to the needs and by presenting the Eucharist in accordance with to-day's understanding of it.

Conference of Fr. Erasto Fernandez on "Ideas coming from Indian culture"

Fr. Erasto presented the values of the Asian culture which could help us to provide responses for Europe. Despite the reality of superstitious aspects or of unacceptable traditions like caste distinctions, Fr. Erasto underlines certain values of the Asian culture, especially that of India, which could certainly be recommended in the West, like deep religiosity, daily prayers at home or in the temple, hospitality, respect for others, especially for the aged and for those consecrated to God, family unity and cohesion, ecological awareness, respect for nature and all living things, peace and respect for all religions, despite the fundamentalism which to-day appears in many religions.

On the other hand, the easterners are often tempted to imitate the west and their traditional values are in danger of disappearing. The meeting of these two cultures should lead to sharing especially the positive values within them and letting go of the superficial elements.

Group discussion on the questions of Fr. Erasto

The general impression is positive. All consider this to be very rich and useful for dialogue with the East.

For some, confusion emerged due to difficulty in understanding because of the different way of approaching religion. More intellectual in the West, more experiential in the East. Fr. Erasto says that we should look more at the lived reality than at the philosophy, which should be handled with care. On the other hand certain aspects of the Indian culture are there in theory, but not in the mentality of the people. In his presentation he speaks of how the people live and feel, more than about Hindu doctrine.

Differences and similarities between East and West

Globalisation is seen by Fr. Erasto in its negative aspects, consumer society, danger to authentic values. Globalisation affects the bigger cities in the East, not so much the rural areas.

Values to integrate into our culture

The unity of the person, interiority. God at the centre of life. To live in the Presence of God Who lives in creation and in the heart of man. An attitude of silence, varying styles of prayers. Harmony with nature, hospitality, respect for the aged, the role of a spiritual director.

Friday 22 January

Group discussion on final conclusions

Elements to retain in the various presentations

To be disciples and apostles with enthusiasm and passion. To interpret the signs of the times, to allow ourselves to be challenged by history. To know Jesus in the Gospel, to know our times and our Congregation. To re-capture the fundamentals of the Acts: fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles, Koinonia, celebration, prayer, care of the poor.

Just as Fr. Eymard dedicated himself to evangelisation in his work of First Communions to go where the people are to introduce them to the faith; to educate not only the children, but also the parents. To leave behind the old religion to share the values which exist and bring about some progress. To value lay people, in order also to keep the charism alive.

To borrow from Eastern culture the harmony between the interior and the practical exterior, between God and man, remembering that it is easier to be a good monk than a good Christian.

To rediscover the spiritual dimension of the present time.

To programme a daily time of adoration in the parishes.

To have places for prayer in towns, especially in the poor areas.

To use the means of communication: press, internet, to spread our message and to pay attention to the quality of their content. To present the faith in a creative, attractive way.

Not to presume we know everything, but to always research, especially in relation to our knowledge of the Eucharist.

Attention to the resources of nature, water, electricity, petrol.

To help with understanding the position of the Church. Attention to local situations to foster dialogue and collaboration.

Suggestions for Provincial and General Chapters

To present all this material and ask that we be offered adequate equipment. To invite lay people to the Chapter who can give a wider vision of the reality. Not to dwell on painful memories of the past but to look with hope to the future. That the Provincial Chapters think global, with vision outward from the frontiers to give local responses for inside the frontiers. To discern priorities.

Report by Fr. Hans van Schijndel on the work of the General Council in preparation for the General Chapter.

At the last Amplified General Council meeting which took place in Madrid in September 2008, it was proposed that the theme of the General Chapter would be "To reignite our passion for the Eucharistic Mission in order to become, in the foot-steps of Fr. Eymard, disciples and apostles of the Eucharist for a world that challenges us". (Cf. Ensemble No.81)

For the venue, there were various suggestions, in order of priority: Mumbai (India), The Philippines, or Rome. Following evaluation of these locations, the last option was chosen: the Chapter will take place in Rome in May 2011. Because this year corresponds with the bi-centenary of the birth of our Founder, the General Council thought we could prepare for the Chapter by a year of union with St. Peter Julian Eymard. To this end a series of twelve themes was developed for twelve months from January 2010 to January 2011 and the celebration of the anniversary on the 4th and 5th February 2011.

On the theme of the Chapter, articles of exploration/deepening were published in Ensemble Nos. 81 and 82.

Another task completed by the General Council is the translation of the first volume of the Complete Works of the writing of the Founder, which contains important information on the Works.

A letter from Fr. General invites all communities to reflect on the theme of the General Chapter and to formulate proposals and reflections which will be gathered by the Provincial Councils and forwarded to the General Council.

Evaluation of the Session

In general there was a positive assessment on the entire conduct of the session, the organisation, the hospitality on the part of the house, the meals, the conferences, the fraternal atmosphere.

Naturally one can always improve: for the first two inputs a time to reflect and explore.

There should be an opportunity to get to know the participants better, whether by adding photos to the list or by using little badges which can be worn on clothing. They could be provided for the next session.

Fr. Antonio will provide the text of all the inputs, and also minutes will be available for download on the European Website at this address:<http://pfn.ssseu.net> by entering the user-name and password. Anyone who has difficulties may contact the site administrator.

For my own part, I thank all those who showed their appreciation of the session, especially those who worked at it and contributed to its success, hoping that it will bear fruit for our mission in the Church, a mission that we regard as important and ever more relevant for the coming of the Kingdom.

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