

# EUROPA

## ZONE



<b>ECP</b>	Austria, Switzerland, France & Croatia
<b>ESP</b>	Spain
<b>GER</b>	Germany
<b>HUN</b>	Hungary & Serbia
<b>IBP</b>	Ireland & England
<b>ITA</b>	Italy, Romania, Moldova & Albania
<b>NEB</b>	Netherlands & Belgium
<b>POL</b>	Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Norway & Kaliningrad
<b>POR</b>	Portugal
<b>ROM</b>	The Roman Colleges & Nemi
<b>SLO</b>	Slovakia & Czech Republic
<b>URL</b>	Russia & Belarus



## TOWARDS OPTIMISM: EUROPA

### 1. Missionary Context

During the last fifty years, Europe has witnessed a drastic change in its social, religious and cultural environment. Europe nowadays can be described as secularized, multi-cultural, pluralistic, post-modern, post-Christian and ageing. The average total fertility rate in the European Union is calculated at 1.58 children per woman. The shrinking population of Europe poses a great challenge to its social security system. The social gap that is growing wider and wider becomes a threat. Unemployment among the young generation is growing and the tendency towards nationalism and radicalism is on the increase. The younger generation from the east and south of Europe tends to move to the affluent consumer societies of Western Europe.

The high number of migrants and refugees from other continents, who are fleeing from poverty, war, and persecution, and want to enter Europe to look for a safe place to live, is another phenomenon affecting present day Europe. The recent great wave of immigration, with its record number of over 1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2015, is reshaping life and politics in Europe, but at the same time also shaking up Europe at its core. Some countries are open to receiving migrants and refugees; others hesitate

or call for closing borders and building fences. To develop a sustainable European migration policy remains a constant challenge.

The religious scene is also changing. Europe has become multicultural and pluri-religious. Islam became the fastest growing religion in Europe. Some in the Church are overcome with a sense of pessimism due to various factors: increasing secularism and pluralism, dwindling number of churchgoers, few local priestly and religious vocations, closing and selling of Churches, handing over Church-run educational and health care institutions. Due to the lack of priests and faithful, parishes are merged into mega-parishes. Many young people, even being raised Catholic, no longer identify with the religion. The gap between Church teachings and “real life” experience is growing. The “culture of the temporary” has led many people to give up on marriage as a public commitment. The image and credibility of the Church as a moral institution was damaged by child sexual abuse scandals. On the other hand, there is a phenomenon called “hunger for spiritual values”. The spiritual dimension is still strong and active in many people, and questions around the meaning of life and the broader question of the future of our planet, are being asked in different ways by so many varied groups. This however does not mean religious affiliation: it is a kind of “believing without belong-

ing”. The general openness towards migration is also a very positive sign, reflecting the presence of Christian values like solidarity, respect, tolerance and inclusiveness. There are many young people who participate actively in various social and charitable projects organized by either the Church or NGOs.

The presence of the grant-making agencies in Europe, the generosity of the benefactors, volunteering and an active lay participation in the life of parishes are significant marks of the Church in Europe. In this context, the SVD is undertaking its missionary activities, in solidarity and partnership with the people under the motto: “mission *inter gentes* – putting the last first”. The SVD did not surrender to the pessimism of some; neither did we fall under the influence of the skeptical attitudes and tendencies to die. The attitude of our Founder Arnold Janssen, who – in the words of Archbishop Melchers of Cologne – “in the time when everything was tottering and threatening to collapse” was resolved to build up something entirely new is the basic attitude of the SVD. Already in 1990 with the so-called “Roscommon Consensus” the SVD said its “Yes” to the changing reality of Europe and to the Church’s mission in Europe.

The SVD is currently working in 25 European countries, with the newest missions in Latvia, Albania and Norway. There are 12 administrative units in the Europe Zone: 10 provinces, 1 Region and 1 unit of 3 communities in Rome and Nemi. On the level of the local Church, the SVD internationality certainly is a good living witness of

the universality of the Church. Our international presence makes a valuable contribution to reducing people's fear of foreigners. The work of our confreres involved in specialized ministries related to the JPIC issues, migration, family and youth, with old and marginalized people, in the biblical and communication apostolate, and in parishes is highly appreciated by the local Church. People value the attitude of our confreres, their simple lifestyle and their adaptation to the life of the local people. It is true that without the SVD the Church in Europe would be poorer.

One of the urgent challenges regarding the primary and new evangelization is to find new pastoral approaches and a proper language in order to rekindle the Christian faith on the continent. The accompanying questions are: How to introduce people into a real relationship with Jesus and his life and teaching? How not to get absorbed by the “culture of death” but to evangelize culture and live in a countercultural way? How to promote the culture of life, of care for others and of protecting the environment? The current migration crisis presents many challenges: of better and intensive collaboration with other Church, religious and secular institutions; of combating fears and prejudices against migrants and refugees; of constant reflecting on the causes of migration. The growing pluri-religiosity of European society calls for new initiatives in terms of interreligious dialogue, ecumenism and living out solidarity.

The increasing number of parishes that we staff is an ideal platform to reach out to non-believers and non-practicing Catholics and thus to be present

*inter gentes*. On the other hand, these parishes should be transformed into “missionary” parishes, with the distinctive charism and characteristics of our Society. The time when we try to do mission in its many facets “on our own” is slowly coming to an end. A new awareness is needed, open to the possible platforms of collaboration with lay partners and other institutions with a similar charism. Constant renewal of our confreres to “keep the fire burning” as well as helping our “troubled confreres” and taking proper care of our elderly confreres remain a constant challenge.

**To build "a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter"**

## 2. Missionary Service

In response to the above-mentioned challenges, the majority of provinces chose the following three *ad extra* Congregational Directions as their priorities: Primary and the New Evangelization (11 provinces/region); Family and youth (9); and Migration (9). Other priorities were: Social Justice and Poverty eradication (3), Ecumenical and Interreligious dialogue (1), Reconciliation and Peace building (1), Integrity of Creation (1). In some provinces teams were established, including lay partners, which designed action plans for implementing these *ad extra* priorities. The introduction of a regular evaluation of the implementation of these priorities and its systematic monitoring needs to be done. It would also be good to foster the awareness that not only members on the team are responsible for the implementation, but every confrere in the province.

In many provinces the spirit of being one Arnoldus Family is very much alive. Familial exchange and collaboration between SVD and SSpS have developed very well and are carried out in areas like JPIC issues, youth ministry, nursing, pastoral care and project support in the mission offices. There are also many occasions on which confreres and sisters get together, like the feast of our Founder Arnold Janssen, special jubilees of the provinces, family feasts, etc. Establishing more joint projects and closer collaboration remains a goal of this exchange.

Collaboration with other religious institutions and the local Church is going on predominantly in the social ministries like working with migrants, prisoners, and people living on the margins of society. In recent years a growing interest and appreciation for collaboration with lay partners is being noticed in our provinces. Encouraged by the resolution of the 17th General Chapter, we try to promote lay collaboration by empowering the lay partners in our missionary ventures. They are not merely collaborators but truly “co-responsible” in building up the Kingdom of God; they are a real gift to our mission. To the existing lay groups with a long tradition and rich apostolates, such as those in Portugal, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, and Hungary, were added new initiatives just recently: a group of lay associates in Steyl and various groups called “Mission Family of Lay Partners” in Slovakia. Hopefully, there will be more interactions between SVD and lay partners in terms of common activities such as Bible sharing, retreats, days of recollection, etc. Confreres

also need to be prepared for accompanying and guiding the formation of lay missionaries.

### 3. Intercultural Life and Formation

With the Roscommon Consensus, the context of SVD life and work has changed. The Europe Zone was transformed from a “sending” one to a “receiving” one. Most of the SVD communities in Europe are now international and multicultural, and their members come from all continents, diverse languages, nations and cultural backgrounds. Currently there are over 250 young confreres from other continents working in Europe, especially from Asia and Africa. This new context has posed new challenges both in community life and in our apostolates. In many provinces there are teams established to accompany the incoming confreres during their first years in the province in matters of language learning, inculturation, and giving insight in the situation of society and Church. There is also a “sacred duty” of every local confrere to welcome missionaries from outside Europe as equal members of the province, and share with them all responsibilities and leadership positions with joy and gratitude. On the other hand, those coming to Europe need to have a proper, clear, and pure motivation. Those who already know that Europe is unbelieving and ungodly and who come with ready-made images of God and concepts in order to evangelize the people of Europe are not suited to this mission. Prophetic dialogue calls us to foster attitudes like being open for an appreciative and benevolent encounter,

understanding, and a willingness to learn, to change and to contribute.

Currently there are 8 communities of initial formation in Europe. The number of local vocations is dropping drastically. Even provinces from Eastern Europe which had many vocations in the 1980’s and 1990’s either do not have novices today or have only few occasionally. In the year 2018 the whole Zone is blessed with 5 novices, coming from 4 provinces. The majority of our formandi are coming therefore from countries outside of Europe. The future of initial formation in Europe is a matter for serious reflection. However, it is clear that it is better when those who come to work as missionaries to Europe do their theological or advanced studies or at least their OTP program in Europe. In this way, they became better acquainted with the local realities. The European context with its rich educational infrastructure offers a wide range of programs for ongoing formation. Confreres working in the parishes can take advantage of educational and training programs run by their respective dioceses. What needs to be improved is the participation of the confreres in the SVD-organized renewal courses.

The European Zone receives an average of 14-15 new missionary assignments every year. In addition, there are seminarians and OTP students coming regularly to Europe from the other zones. With this young generation some “new blood” comes to fashion a future for the European Zone. Biennial meetings of the seminarians of the Eastern Subzone could be seen as

a part of their formation in internationality and interculturality. Besides getting to know each other better, they also discuss various themes connected to our mission and spirituality. In 2017, the seminarians from St. Augustin joined this gathering for the first time. Thus, this gathering could be seen not only as a gathering of seminarians, but also as the formation of a future “think tank” of the Zone. In one province not only one confrere but a “guidance commission” is responsible for the accompaniment and introduction of new confreres into the local realities of the Church and society.

Confreres in another province organize a “themeday” as a part of their ongoing formation. They choose, prepare, present and discuss together various themes, connected to their life experiences, like dealing with burn-out, skills in interpersonal communication, conflict management and fraternal correction. There is also a retreat organized without a retreat master. Confreres attending the retreat divide among themselves various tasks like giving some spiritual input, preparing prayers and the Eucharist for each day. The daily sharing of faith experiences is also on the program. This seems to be a very effective tool for growing together as a community. The spirituality of aging and of accompaniment is being promoted in provinces with a high number of elderly confreres. Formation in terms of a spirituality of commitment and perseverance helps confreres to continue their mission in a country with long and unpleasant Siberian winters, as well as harsh laws concerning missionary activities and a strict visa regime.

#### 4. Special Concerns in the Zone

The **future of initial formation** is an open issue due to the low number of local vocations. Our apostolate with youth and families should remain therefore among our priorities. In order to guarantee a good and proper formation, the establishment of a common formation center for Europe could be an option to be investigated.

A **new vision for our big, outdated structures/houses** (formation houses, printing presses, retreat centers, educational institutions) is slowly emerging. Further development of this vision should be guided by questions like: What facilities and institutions must we: (1) preserve as instruments of our mission in Europe and of our responsibility with the world-wide mission, and (2) develop further according to the changing situations? How can we detach ourselves from the obsession with the once “well-known and glorious past” and become companions of people who live in diverse traditions?

Some **new missions** opened after 1990 are experiencing either stagnation or are developing rather slowly. It is not easy to find personnel for these missions. A comprehensive evaluation will be necessary to see how we shall proceed.

The lack of local vocations and the need for an effective use of available resources led to a merger of various provinces in the past 15 years. This process of **restructuring the Zone** may continue in the future.

The **engagement in the issues of social justice** is growing, bringing fruits in the establishing of local branches of VIVAT International in two provinces. How could this be extended to other provinces? In terms of advocacy in the United Nations Offices in Geneva, Switzerland, VIVAT Office is present and in Vienna, Austria, we had the office, but now it is closed.

The **dwindling number of local benefactors** poses a great challenge not only for the financial self-reliance of European provinces but also for their financial solidarity with the SVD worldwide. The question remains: What are the new ways in guaranteeing the financial self-sufficiency of our provinces and promoting solidarity with others?

We are on the right track by **growing in collaboration with lay partners**, and the collaboration with lay people is getting more and more interest from the side of our formerly rather skeptical confreres. We should continue to deliberate on issues like: How to develop this collaboration further? What are the concrete future forms/areas of sharing of our life and mission with our lay partners?

Some mission houses are becoming retirement houses due to the **aging of European confreres**. The concern is to guarantee proper care for confreres in the autumn of their lives, and at the same time to avoid falling into a trap of thinking “it is over”.

The preparation and formation of **future leaders** remains a constant concern. How to motivate confreres to make themselves available for service to the Society and not to withdraw their names from the list of candidates? How to help new missionaries to Europe to take up this challenge with courage and make their contribution in this area of our life and mission?

## Conclusion

Our deepest conviction is that the harvest in Europe is great, and therefore there is a mission in Europe. Impelled by God’s boundless love, we want to become transforming missionary disciples proclaiming God’s Reign of peace and reconciliation in each place, among every people and for all cultures. We are ready, through the proclamation of the Gospel, our witness and engagement, to build “a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter” and to create the means “for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 239). We are also aware that we cannot give witness in Europe without living simply and generously, not only as individuals but as members of international communities who show a deep love for the poor and for those who do not have a home in the new fragmented culture. A caring Church and caring Divine Word communities will surely have a future in a secularized and post-Christian Europe.

Peter Dusicka, SVD  
EUROPE Zonal Coordinator