



## God is in the city

The 23rd International Congress Renovabis took place on 11 and 12 September 2019 on the theme "The Urban Church. Challenges in Providing Pastoral Care, both East and West" took place in Munich.

About 200 participants from 30 countries from East and West were present. From UCESM: General Secretary Sr. Marjolein Bruinen

The Renovabis Congress approached the topic in three steps: "First, we observe what big cities are and where they are heading. Then we make pastoral theological reflections on the presence of God in the action of the metropolises", said **Father Hartl** in his greeting. On one evening international pastoral experiences were exchanged and approaches of the so-called city pastoral care were reflected upon. It was about how city dwellers ask for God, what they are looking for today and what mission Christians can have in everyday urban life. The solidarity action Renovabis had the challenges and chances of new formats of the 'Citypastoral' in particular at Eastern European large cities fixed. They have undergone two major changes: first after the Second World War and again after the end of communist tyranny 30 years ago.

**Bishop Tomáš Holub of Plzeň/Pilsen in the Czech Republic** stressed that his country does not know any really big metropolises - with the exception of Prague. There "the anonymity among the people contrasts with a huge offer in all areas, with pompous power and money structures - before the eyes of all". Holub said: "More than the church with its structure we are clearly called to proclaim Christ as a person in our pastoral work". This enables cooperation and active presence wherever people and good are concerned.

The **Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Blase Joseph Cupich**, added aspects of urban pastoral care in North America: "In my archdiocese we care daily for the sick, the homeless, the poor, the unemployed, the elderly, migrants and prisoners. We train young people and advocate public policies that promote and defend human life and dignity, concern for the planet, the fight against violence, the restoration of justice and religious freedom". He focused on three challenges; the changing family image, the division of society and the impact of the sexual abuse crisis. Cupich pleaded for "an open discussion about everything to take people with us".

"The decisive question for us as church in the metropolis is how we can help people to discover God in their urban living, working, living and leisure environment, to perceive him", said **Heiner Koch, Archbishop of Berlin** responsible for Renovabis in the German Bishops' Conference. In cities like Berlin, where God is often no longer sought, it is important to open up encounter and experience spaces. Archbishop Koch said: "We must hold and stabilize those who as Christians are on the way of faith. They must sense how good it is and how good it feels to live in and with the Church". In addition, the open community is needed, which in its attitude and in its language, in its gestures and in its actions is inviting for people who do not believe and who do not speak their language and do not understand their gestures. A nice example: for some years now, a Christmas singing with 30,000 fans has always taken place on 23rd December in the stadium of the "1st FC Union Berlin". "We have been invited as a church to accompany this event". Koch also passes on the motto "Learn from the others and listen to them". Of course, this requires trust. And: "Do not wait until people come to us, but go to them".

Previously, **Angelika Poth-Mögele of the Brussels Council of European Municipalities and Regions** had classified the role of large cities in the European Union as secular. While urbanization is progressing worldwide, development in Europe is heading in a different direction: there will probably only be a few megacities in the future and, in addition, many medium-sized and smaller cities. These would also keep rural areas alive. "55 percent of the world's population currently live in cities (with more than 100,000 inhabitants), in the European Union the figure is 72 percent. Many problems were concentrated in the cities". Mrs. Poth-Mögele said: "Today, (large) cities face a variety of challenges such as affordable housing, mobility, an ageing population, social exclusion, environment and climate change". But cities also contribute to solving many problems. Cities could take the lead in movements and be supported by their citizens who organize themselves in initiatives, associations or alliances, Mrs. Poth-Mögele drew attention to civil society involvement.

According to **Markus-Liborius Hermann of the Catholic Office for Missionary Pastoral Affairs**, the cities should be seen as "laboratories of evangelization" in the sense of Pope Francis. With special offers of the "City Pastoral Care" the church could try to approach people. Also in the future one has to get involved in "pastoral risk fields" and experiments. As an example he referred to the "Christmas praise" practiced in Erfurt: secular contemporaries were invited on Christmas Eve to a kind of "slimmed-down form" of the Christmas mass. This lowers the inhibition threshold for participation.

In the closing remarks of the 23rd International Congress Renovabis, Archbishop **Ludwig Schick, Chairman of the Commission World Church of the German Bishops' Conference**, drew attention to the fact: "In the metropolises all over the world and of course also in Eastern Europe, as with us, the Church has the task to name structural injustice and to place itself on the side of the weakest". The Bishop of the World Church quoted Pope Francis, who recommends a "charitable ecumenical pastoral care". Archbishop Schick: "For Jesus wants to spread life in abundance in the cities. People in big cities expect the Church to proclaim Christ's message. From the beginning, it was precisely in the cities that curiosity for the faith was aroused, in the knowledge that God - then and now - dwells in the city among the people".

On the second day we divided into working groups. I myself was in the English-speaking group with the theme: "How to support the most vulnerable". A former victim of sexual abuse by a priest made a very impressive statement. In the end, we collected ideas on prevention and dealing with victims and perpetrators.

All in all it was a beautiful, rich congress that even breathed a little of the atmosphere of a family reunion: acquaintances were made and existing ones renewed.

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Sr. Marjolein Bruinen op