

"THE VOCATIONS APOSTOLATE"

Zoom with Luis Manuel Suárez CMF,

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Talking about the "vocations apostolate" is a question that integrates many aspects. We can compare it to a **polyhedron**, an image dear to our Pope Francis: reality is not a perfect sphere with all points equidistant from the centre, but rather a set of different realities, which at the same time are called to integrate into a beautiful and harmonious unity.

The vocation apostolate is a polyhedron with many different sides: the individual young people, with their quests; we religious, with our reality; our church, with its lights and shadows; and the society in which we live, with its achievements and its shortcomings.

In this presentation we are going to begin by outlining a brief **context** of this question, and then go on to focus on 3 points related to the "*Vocations Apostolate Network*" of UCESM: **who are we?, what have we done so far?, and where do we go from here?** It is a fraternal sharing on a recent and open process, which wants to count on your contributions in order to continue taking the steps that the Spirit of God may inspire us to take.

A) THE CONTEXT OF THE VOCATIONS APOSTOLATE IN 2022

The context of the vocations apostolate in 2022 is the context of our societies, of our Church and of our religious congregations in each of the countries where we are present. A context which, as in every age, presents possibilities and challenges in each of these areas.

At the ecclesial level, two recent events give a perspective to the "vocations apostolate": the synodal process on "*young people, faith and vocational discernment*" and the synodal process on "*synodality*" which is currently underway.

A1) The synod on young people and the exhortation "Christus Vivit".

They say that when a Synod is over, the Pope asks the synod fathers what could be the next topic to work on. After the two centuries on the family, there were several topics on the table. One of them was vocations of special consecration. Another was young people. It is said that the Pope brought the two themes together in a broader and more inclusive perspective. And so, in 2017, a synodal process entitled "*Young people, faith and vocational discernment*" was announced. After a highly participatory preparatory phase, which included a meeting of 300 young people from all over the world in Rome, the Synodal Assembly took place in October 2018. An "*Instrumentum laboris*" was submitted to the Assembly, which brought together all the previous consultations. The Assembly produced a "*Final Document*" with many reflections endorsed by a very large majority of the participants in the Assembly. And a few months later, Pope Francis wrote the Apostolic Exhortation "*Christus vivit*", a beautiful piece of writing with many issues directly dedicated to young people and other issues in a more reflective vein. I know that the Major Superiors, and especially those of you present here, have a lot of work to do. At the same time, I invite those of you who have not yet read these documents to do so. If you have little time, you can focus on "*Christus vivit*". If you have more time, you can also read the "*Final Document*". And for those of you who have the possibility, I also invite you to read the "*Instrumentum laboris*".

What, in summary, would be the great contribution of this whole process to the question before us? The very title of the synodal process tells us that the starting point is the life of young people with their capacities and limitations, their quests and crossroads. We are called to share with them as the Lord Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, sharing even a stretch of the road to the distance, welcoming them and listening to them unconditionally as the basis of everything. From there, the time will come to propose faith to those who do not have it or have lost it, or to help those who already believe in it to grow in it. And in this journey of growth in faith, a fundamental ingredient is vocational discernment. Asking the Lord, "Who am I for?" and discovering a personal response within the framework of the different forms of Christian life. The passage of Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus is one of the fundamental texts of the synodal process and is also the paradigm of our pastoral journey with young people, open to their vocational search.

Thus, the Synod on Youth places us in a broad perspective of the vocations apostolate, based on the connection with young people and their faith journey. This perspective goes beyond a vocations apostolate focused exclusively on the promotion of consecrated vocations. At the same time, in taking on this broader perspective, it should not be forgotten that within this vocational proposal we must come to present our consecrated life as a possible path for young people.

A2) The call for "synodality".

"Synodality" is one of the "trending topics" in our church. It wants to be more than a fad. In fact, it is another name for Communion. In this case the emphasis is on walking together as a church, all the members of the People of God, each one from our baptismal vocation, counting also on our specific formation and vocation. Two key words to understand synodality are "*co-responsibility*" and "*participation*". And the three words with which this whole process is presented to us are "*communion*", "*participation*" and "*mission*". In these days it has been announced that the next XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will deal with this question, will be held in two sessions, one year apart: the first from 4 to 29 October 2023, and the second in October 2024.

It is said that the Synod on Youth was one of the driving forces behind the call for synodality. In the same exhortation "*Christus Vivit*" there are several numbers referring to a synodal pastoral care (ChV 203-208). In these issues there are two emphases. The first one is to involve young people in their own pastoral process and not merely passive spectators; in this sense we are called to a "pastoral care with young people" and not only to a "pastoral care for young people". A second emphasis is that of counting on all members of the people of God and on all proposals that help our objective. Francis explains it very clearly:

"At the same time, we should take into greater consideration those practices that have shown their value – the methods, language and aims that have proved truly effective in bringing young people to Christ and the Church. It does not matter where they are coming from or what labels they have received, whether "conservative" or "liberal", "traditional" or "progressive". What is important is that we make use of everything that has borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel" (ChV 205).

Synodality with young people, synodality among pastoral workers. With young people as a reference point, in their journey of faith and from a proposal of vocational discernment. This is our context.

We have lived through a few years of pandemic, which have broken many inertias and oblige us to rethink many things. Let us hope that, enriched by the synodal process on young people and on synodality, we can give a new impulse to our "vocations apostolate" in this context in which we live.

B) WHO WE ARE - National Referents in the Conferences of Europe and other people

The working group on vocations ministry, which we have called "Vocations Apostolate Network", was born from a request of UCESM to consider this topic as something important in our days.

This project of vocations ministry in Europe among religious was born from the General Assembly of UCESM in 2020, where it appeared as a priority of the national Conferences. After a first online meeting in May 2021, we have been taking steps to clarify who we are and what we can do together. We will look at these steps one by one in the next section. Before that, I thought it would be interesting to take a moment to look at who is currently involved in this project.

The first point to bear in mind is that the situation in each Conference of Major Superiors is different. In some places the action is only between religious congregations. In other places there is some kind of collaboration with the Bishops' Conferences. And in still other places, there is total co-ordination with those Conferences, in what is called a "National Vocations Centre".

Although we originally called for "National Vocations Directors", with the passage of time we looked for a common name that would integrate the different profiles, which has finally become "National Referents" of the Vocations Apostolate. At present we are in contact with 21 Conferences of Major Superiors in Europe, although one of them does not yet have a contact person (Slovakia). As a testimony to this variety of profiles, let us look at the role played by each of these persons, which situates us in the different ways of organising this apostolate in each place:

- ALBANIA – Director of the National Vocations Office of the Albanian Bishops' Conference. Member of the National Confederation of Religious as President of the Apostolic Administration of Southern Albania.
- AUSTRIA - Leader of a team running an institution of the Austrian Conference of Religious (supporting vocations in general and religious vocations, connecting with the vocations officers of the congregations).
- BELGIUM – French-speaking manager of the National Vocations Centre of the Bishops' Conference of Belgium.
- CZECH REP - Secretary of the Council for the Pastoral Care of Vocations of the Czech Bishops' Conference. She also collaborates with the Conference of Religious.
- ENGLAND & WALES - Promoter of Religious Life of the "National Vocations Office" of the Conference of Religious and Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.
- FRANCE - Responsible for vocations at the "National Service for the evangelisation of young people and vocations" of the French Episcopal Conference.
- GERMANY (2 people) - Member of the "Working group on the vocational pastoral care of religious orders" (AGBO) and of "BEIRAT" (of the Bishops' Conference) + Director of the "Commission for Vocation Directors of Congregations" in Germany
- HUNGARY (females and males) - Responsible of the 'National Vocation Apostolate Team', recently born in Hungary, under the two Conferences of Religious (male and female)
- IRELAND - Director of "Vocations Ireland", linked to the Conference of Religious. "Vocations Ireland" is also on the Maynooth Vocations Council of the Bishops' Conference.
- ITALY (2 persons) - National contact for the Conference of Women Religious for the pastoral care of youth and vocations + USMI delegate for the CEI for the OFFICE for Vocations and Youth Pastoral Care.
- LATVIA - On the board of Consecrated Life in Latvia
- LITHUANIA - Responsible for the vocational apostolate of the Lithuanian Conference of Religious. Co-ordinator of the Vocations Pastoral Care of the Kaunas Archdiocese.
- NETHERLANDS - Representative of the Conference of Dutch Religious (KNR) for the UCESM Vocations Apostolate Network and for the inter-diocesan committee for vocations in the Netherlands (IRO).

3. **Towards a "Core Group"** - November 2021

In response to the request made by the General Secretariat of UCESM, the "Core Group" will be formed with seven people (six religious and one lay) belonging to 5 Conferences: Germany, Spain, France, Poland and Switzerland.

4. **Meetings of the "Core Group"** - from December 2021

Between the months of December 2021 and May 2022, the "Core Group" met four times by video conference, in addition to more frequent exchanges via email and a WhatsApp group.

5. **Branding** - January 2022

At the beginning of this year a graphic brand of the "UCESM vocations apostolate network" was created. This graphic design shows a map of Europe with many people connected. The initials of the name of our group in English ("Vocations Apostolate Network") give rise to the word van ("VAN"), which is another graphic symbol of the brand. On the van is the word "Christus vivit" and a dove representing the Holy Spirit. Next to it the slogan 'helping one another'.

6. **Thinking about what to do** - meetings for the first half of 2022

At the second meeting of the "Core Group", a couple of online meetings for the first half of 2022 were agreed upon:

- a) An "Assembly of NATIONAL REFERENTS of the Vocations Apostolate", with preliminary work, for 29 March 2022.
- b) A "Meeting of NATIONAL TEAMS of the Vocations Apostolate" to think together about "Youth Culture in Europe today", on 31 May 2022.

Both actions, with their dates, were communicated at the end of January from the General Secretariat of UCESM to all the Presidents of the Conferences and to all the "National Referents" with whom there was contact at that time.

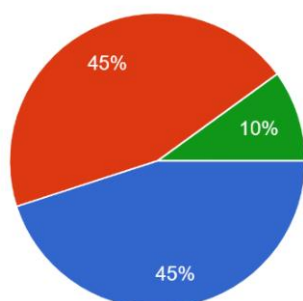
7. **Personal contact with each "national referent"** - February-March 2022

During the months of February and March 2022, the coordinator of the "Core Group" wrote personally to each of the persons who had participated in the meeting of May 2021, to verify whether they had the profile of "national referent" of the vocations apostolate from their Conference of Major Superiors, whether another person was the person who should be there or whether there had been any change in this function. In this dialogue, some information was gathered about the specific profile of each of these people. This completed a list of contact persons from the 21 Conferences with which we currently have contact in this project.

8. **Responding to a questionnaire** - March 2022

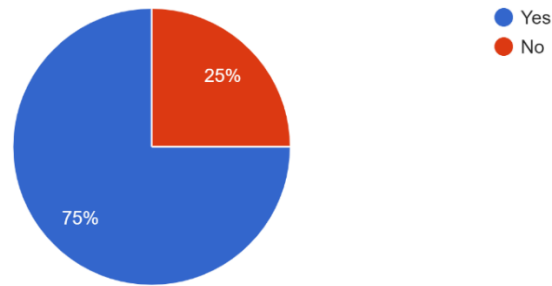
As a prelude to the "Assembly of National Referents" a questionnaire with three questions was sent out and answered by the contacts of 20 Conferences. These were the questions, and their graphic results, which were completed by open answers:

- I. Looking at the work you do at national level from your Conference of Major Superiors and/or from your Bishops' Conference, which of these statements best reflects what you do?

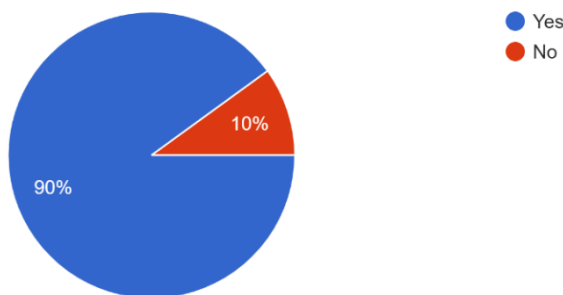


- a. Our work integrates youth ministry and vocation ministry.
- b. Our work focuses on vocations ministry in a broad sense, promoting all forms of life in the Church.
- c. Our work focuses on vocations ministry in a specific sense, promoting mainly religious life.
- d. None of the above.

II. In relation to the World Day of Prayer for Vocations (IV Sunday of Easter), do you organise any significant event at national level?



III. Apart from this World Day, are you planning any other special events related to the vocations apostolate this year?



9. **Thinking a "Core Document" - March 2022**

Together with the results of this questionnaire, the National Referents received the draft of a "Core Document" that was worked on by the "Core Group", which contained the following points: name of the project; identifying image; target groups; objectives; organization and meetings; economy; and communication.

10. **UCESM_VAN - Assembly of National Referents - 2022-03-29**

On 29th March 2022, the first "Assembly of National Referents" of the "Vocations Apostolate Network" of UCESM took place. Eighteen people representing 15 Conferences took part in it. After a greeting from the President and an opening prayer, there was time to look back over the road travelled, to review the answers to the questionnaire, to communicate in language groups and to look together at the draft of the "Core Document". In the dialogue around this document, the question of simplifying the structures came up, trying not to duplicate the common work done with the Bishops' Conferences in some of our Conferences. Finally, the formation meeting planned for May was presented.

11. **UCESM_VAN - Formation Meeting - 2022-05-31**

A formation meeting took place on 31 May 2022. More than 40 people participated, linked to about 18 Conferences.

Two presentations were given by Ms. Isabelle Jonveaux, a French sociologist working at the Institute of Religious Studies of the University of Graz (Austria); and Fr. Roman Groszewski SJ, a Polish Jesuit currently working with young people in Copenhagen (Denmark). After the presentations, there was a time for dialogue in language groups, followed by a dialogue with the speakers.

The meeting could be followed in several languages, with simultaneous translation into English, Italian and French, as well as Czech, and the overall assessment was very positive.

12. Contact with CCEE-EVS - May-June 2022

In response to the request of the first Assembly of national referents not to duplicate the work, from May 2022 a formal contact was initiated with the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, in the person of its Secretary General, Mr. Martin Michalicek. After some initial communications by email, we had a meeting by videoconference between Mr Martin, Fr Jānis SJ - current president of UCESM, Mr Michele Gianola - director of the National Centre for Vocations Ministry in Italy and current Secretary of the "European Vocations Service" and Fr Luis Manuel CMF, coordinator of the "Core Group" of the "Vocations Apostolate Network" of UCESM. In that meeting we shared the journey we had made, as well as the interest in improving coordination, since several of the national referents linked to the Conferences of Major Superiors are also linked to the Bishops' Conferences of their countries. We have agreed to maintain communication, without yet arriving at anything concrete.

D) WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

I list below some initiatives both at European level and at the level of each Conference, which continue what has been started and which open up new horizons as far as possible. We can share about them in the subsequent dialogue.

I. At the European level

- Exchange of initiatives and reflections
- Differentiated online meetings (assemblies / training... other?)
- Go forward in the dialogue with CCEE-EVS
- Common studies in each Conference, similar to those carried out in the USA on consecrated vocations cfr. <https://cara.georgetown.edu/EntranceClass2022.pdf>
- Any face-to-face meeting of National Referents or Teams to promote this project?
- ...

II. At the level of each Conference

- To consider how to develop in the best way the "vocations apostolate" in one's own context.
- To increase collaboration with the Bishops' Conferences, offering the different models that currently exist in the various countries of Europe.
- ...

Thank you very much for your interest and attention. Let us entrust this project to the Lord, open to the good fruits that it can bring.