

NEWSLETTER no 9



March 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It is now a full two (2!) years since you were able to read our last letter (dated March 2021). Although much has been posted on our website in the meantime, we would like to bring you up to date on the most important things that have happened in these two years.

We invited you with an empty chair to visit us in our new office in Schaarbeek/Brussels. How could we have known that the Corona virus was so tenacious that it would hold us in its grip for almost two years - and beyond?

Also because of Corona and the high fuel prices, I worked 90% of the time in my "home office" in the Netherlands. Nicole stayed at home more often during the Corona wave, but otherwise provided stability in the office and took care of the physical mail.

Our Board member, Fr. Nicolay Dubinin, was ordained a bishop on 13 October 2020. We watched the streaming of the celebration: simple, but very impressive! To fill the gap thus created in the Executive Committee, we found Abbot Bernardus Peeters, President of the KNR, who agreed to participate in an advisory capacity. We were very grateful for that! Only, unfortunately, that didn't last very long, because in February 2022 he was promoted away to Rome: he was elected Abbot General of the Trappists. That was very sad for us. But a great consolation was that Mr. Simon Evers, General Secretary of the KNR, competently replaced him.



Bishop Nicolay



General Abbot Bernardus



Mr. Simon Evers

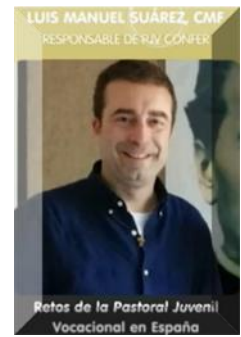
We went through the list of desirable topics that had been compiled at the end of the 2020 General Assembly. And we chose two very important topics to work on. One hot topic is "spiritual abuse". We offered two webinars on this topic in April and May 2021, which were open to all and could be experienced in German, English, Spanish, Italian and French. Virtual working groups were also formed in these languages. About 800 religious participated in the webinars.

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A second theme we are working with is the pastoral care of vocations. We had organised a webinar on this topic as well, as an impetus for a longer process in which, under the leadership of Fr. Luis Manuel Suárez, the various people responsible in the national Conferences are working together.

The task of the Secretariat was to support all this very intensively. We have learned a lot and worked hard and we are very grateful to UISG for supporting us in our webinars and large online sessions.



A few times I did end up in Brussels, e.g. for the visits of Fr. Zsolt and other

Board members, but first on 6 July 2020 for the move of the office from Rue De Pascale to Rue du Progrès, where the rent is less than half. This was our response to the sharp decline in our finances.



Unfortunately, I had fallen backwards shortly before and had severe back pain. So most of the work fell on Nicole. Now we have a shared office, but also a large archive in the basement.

Online we travelled a lot! Almost every week we were in contact with each other via Zoom and Skype (President Zsolt, Nicole and I), but also with Abbot Erik, the Board, the UISG, the moderator of the first part of the General Assembly, Sr. Katharina Kluitmann, Canonist Myriam Wijlens, etc. We met and participated in the conferences of UISG, Ottmaring Days, Renovabis, Renate, COMECE, the Human Rights Forum, among others. Only at the general assemblies of the KNR and the UISG was I present "live".



In Roggenburg we had planned that the next General Assembly (i.e. 2022) would take place in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, it was not possible for us to obtain a visa (and we did not even know at that time how the situation would develop there), so St. Petersburg, despite the many preparatory efforts made by Bishop Nicolay among others, took a back seat as a place to meet. In October 2021, Fr. Zsolt visited Brussels and from there we visited Abbot Bernardus in the Netherlands. On this occasion - originally as a joke! - we asked Abbot Bernardus if we could come to the Netherlands with the General Assembly. To our great joy and relief, he agreed and, after talking to the KNR, let us know that we could start our preparations.

Nicole and I then suitable venue, using a list Since there are hardly any atmosphere in the meeting places are also decided on The Rolduc Abbey Hotel is historic abbey dating back which, in addition to the home to a special hotel



started looking for a provided by the KNR. houses with a religious Netherlands and other too expensive, we finally *Rolduc/Kerkrade*. phenomenal! It is a to the tenth century seminary, has also been since a few years.

A working group was formed: Fr. Zsolt, Sr. Katharina, Simon, Nicole and myself, initially with Abbot Bernardus and occasionally with Sr. Danièle Faltz (then still a member of the Executive Committee). The title became: "We are all in the same boat" and the theme: "Synodality". There were fewer speakers on this theme and thus more space for encounter and exchange.

At that time we had already found prominent personalities who had promised their commitment: Prof. Dr Myriam Wijlens and Prof. Dr Tomáš Halík. The Prefect of the Dicastery for Religious, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, also hoped to be present.

But everything turned out differently!

On 14 January 2022, the Executive Committee decided not to hold the General Assembly in March in Rolduc. Cancellation would cost 15,000 euros, so it was decided to split the meeting into two parts: digitally via Zoom from 22 to 24 March, and "live" in Rolduc from 20 to 24 October, with the election of the new Executive Committee.

A letter was sent to the CICALSAL (now DICALSAL) in February to inform them of this and a series of emails and phone calls followed as they did not agree to wait so long to hold the elections. After all, two members of the Committee were already 2 years "past the date" because the elections could not be held in Roggenburg due to the lack of participation in the Corona epidemic that had begun. Thus, the elections should still take place before the summer. Recently, this would have been possible online.



Therefore, the elections were held on 19 April, which was again a new experience for us. Although there were doubts about the quorum, this concern was unnecessary!

Here you can see our new Executive Committee, of which all members were elected unanimously.

From the left: Sr. Olena Bys, Fr. Janis Melnikovs, Sr. Mary Hanrahan, Fr. Mark-Robin Hoogland

From 15 to 17 June, Zsolt and also Jānis came to visit Brussels. We had a "farewell day" with Zsolt - and Jānis got a "welcome day". With both of them we went to Rolduc to make further preparations for the second part of our General Assembly.

Another troublemaker: the ING Bank! A special situation arose here, due to the fact that suddenly all our accounts were blocked. So we couldn't use any money or receive any contributions. As a result, we were - and are - forced to make all payments via my account. We could not open an account at another bank either, because the new Board had to appear in the Belgian Official Journal beforehand and this - since the necessary documents had to be obtained from everywhere - became a very lengthy process. We are now in the Official Journal, but are still busy opening a new account today.

The General Assembly Part 2 in Rolduc was a great success!

We were especially blessed by the fact that the Dutch Conference (KNR) had agreed to be our host. That was a golden shot! The KNR's commitment was enormous: with the transfers from the various airports and train stations, with the liturgy, with the organization, with the moderation of the first evening and even financially! For this we are very very grateful!

A brief summary of the days can be found on our website (www.ucesm.net), but here I would like to mention that we had two illustrious guests from the DICLSAL (in the photo in the foreground on the right: Dr. Daniela Leggio, and on the left behind Nicole: Sr. Carmen Ros Nortes) in our midst. Their help was invaluable in rounding off a decade-long process of drafting our statutes. We were finally able to adopt them "as a package" unanimously! Now they still had to go to Rome to be approved by the Dicastery.



Still in Rolduc we had the first meeting of our Executive Committee, and via Zoom we met again in January 2023, where we have already fully started planning the next General Assembly (2024). At the invitation of Sr Krista Chladkova, Fr. Janis and Sr. Olena, who were in Prague for the continental meeting of European bishops, with the theme of synodality, together with Nicole met with sisters in the Czech Republic to take stock on the ground. After some back and forth, we decided on the newly renovated Convent in Vranov. You will hear more about this in the near future!



We have not yet taken a final decision on the subject, but it will certainly be about our situation as religious in Europe.

I wrote above about the continental meeting of European bishops organized by CCEE. We as UCESM organized that the whole meeting (5-12 February) was accompanied by continuous adoration by the contemplative sisters and brothers of Europe. People said they noticed it.

Vranov

The financial situation of UCESM is not rosy. Despite the move of our office, which brought temporary relief, we have to look for ways to stabilize this situation as much as possible. To this end, we have put together a small "finance team" to think of possible ways to achieve this.

But without vocations, monastic life in (Western) Europe is in decline. Fr. Janis and Sr. Olena attended the meeting on "ageing communities" organized by the DICLSAL. And Fr. Luis Manuel continues to gather those responsible for vocations to the national Conferences. Soon they will present plans for the future. Let us accompany them with our prayers!

It has become a long letter, but there was also a lot to report. For now, we send you all our warmest greetings and say: until next time!



Sr. Marjolein & Nicole

