

PASTORAL CARE OF VOCATIONS IN EUROPE IN SYNODAL PERSPECTIVE

Talk and discussions about the "Vocations Apostolate Network" (VAN)

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Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you very much for the invitation to participate with this topic in this XXI General Assembly of UCESM. I would like to begin by sharing that this land of the Czech Republic is, in a way, at the origin of my vocation. In 1990 I was 18 years old. Towards the end of the year a European Taizé Meeting was to be held in Prague. I had heard about Taizé through friends who had been there and had returned excited about a fresh Christianity, based on *a welcoming community, lively prayer* and *selfless service*. And in my journey of growing in faith, coupled with my adventurous spirit, a trip to Eastern Europe in those years sounded like a real motivator.

But the illusion was short-lived: when I discussed the idea at home, my parents did not agree. Too far away, too unknown... I had just come of age, but I didn't have the means for the trip and I didn't want to provoke a family argument, so the visit to the Czech Republic was put on hold.

At the same time, in those autumn days of 1990, Fr. Emilio made an invitation to some of the young people who collaborated with him. He was a Claretian missionary who animated the youth ministry of the school of the Heart of Mary in Gijón, my city, in the region of Asturias, in the north of Spain. It was something as concrete as giving us a leaflet announcing that a "vocational gathering" was going to be held, with the question: "Lord, what do you want of me?" in order to guide life. It was to take place just before the end of the year. At that time, I was part of a Christian youth group, I was helping as a volunteer in a homeless shelter, I was involved in the pastoral animation of the school's adolescents and I was going to receive the sacrament of confirmation. In this context, the possibility of spending a few days away from home, even if it wasn't in Prague, seemed interesting... And so it was. And it was during this time together that I felt the "vocational spark" which, with a subsequent discernment and formation process, has brought me here today. A vocational response to Christ's call to follow him in that group of religious that was closest to me: the Claretian missionaries. *A community with a welcoming capacity, with a shared prayer* and with a *missionary service of the Word*. A group that I had known since I was a child at school, and that at that moment appeared as an option for my life, within my human and Christian search. Why not?

Who knows... It may be that, if I had come to Prague in 1990, I would never have felt that "vocational spark", because I would not have gone to that "vocational gathering": vocational responses need *concrete moments and proposals*. It is also true that the booklet Fr. Emilio gave me would not have had an echo in me, on the one hand, if I had not been on a path of search and growth, and, on the other hand, if I had not met the Claretian missionaries: vocational proposals need a *vital "humus" of someone who is searching* and a *real offer of Christians who are walking*, with spaces of encounter between both.

Be that as it may, I bring this story to begin this sharing on the question of vocations, thinking that in all our vocational journeys there may be something similar: *someone searching, a group living the following of Christ*, and a concrete moment that, by God's mercy, becomes an *opportunity to respond*, thus beginning a journey.

1. THE HORIZON

1.1. The "vocations apostolate" in our social and ecclesial context

A year and a half ago I was able to share some time of online conversation around the question of vocations with those who were at the previous General Assembly of UCESM in Rolduc (The Netherlands). At that time, I shared that *talking about the "vocation apostolate" is an issue 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 vocations apostolate is a polyhedron with many and very different sides: the individual young people, with their searches; 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.

Without going into each of these dimensions in depth, we can say that we live in a *complex world*, in the midst of an "epochal change". *Young people*, as a reflection of society, reveal the values and contradictions of our context. Our *Church* wants to continue walking towards the Father, welcoming the Kingdom, in the midst of its fragilities. And our *Religious Life* participates in all this: in our social context and from our ecclesial belonging, we want to continue living the following of Christ from the charisms that the Spirit has raised up, with our vows, in community, in our spirituality and in our work.

Grateful for all the good that the Lord continues to give us, we are at the same time aware of the fragility that, in general, we experience in our continent. There are exceptions of institutions that live moments of vocational bonanza and institutional strength, although not all foundations that are born or remain strong can sustain themselves over time with an authentically evangelical spirit without falling into abuses of various kinds.

In this context, vocations ministry continues to be a necessary and urgent activity. To continue to seek the Lord to do his work, removing any obstacles on our part. And with the urgency of the things of God, without scarcity making us appear anxious and distrustful of the "Lord of the harvest", knowing how to respect his times.

1.2. The question of vocations after the "Synod on youth" (2018)

We normally associate "vocation ministry" with the effort to awaken and accompany vocations to the different forms of life in the Church, referring especially to the first steps on the way. Decades ago, "vocations ministry" referred exclusively to vocations of special consecration (religious life and ordained ministry). Today, the question of vocations has become broader, on a path that has been taken up and endorsed by the synodal process around 2018 on "young people, faith and vocational discernment". The fruits of that process have been gathered mainly in two texts: the "Final Document" of the synodal assembly of October 2018 and in the Apostolic Exhortation "Christus vivit" of Pope Francis, a beautiful writing with many issues directly dedicated to young people and other issues in a more reflective key. A good read for everyone.

Recalling something of what was shared in Rolduc: *what would be, in synthesis, the great contribution of this whole process to the question that concerns us? The very title of the synodal process tells us:*

- *The starting point is the life of YOUNG PEOPLE with their capacities and limits, their quests and crossroads. We are called to accompany 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 it will be time to PROPOSE FAITH for those who do not have it or have lost it, or to help those who already believe 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.*

The Synod on young people thus places us in a broad perspective of the vocations apostolate, based on the connection with young people and their faith journey. Without mentioning it many times, the concept of "vocational culture" underlies it. This perspective goes beyond a vocations apostolate centred 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, it is necessary to present our consecrated life as a possible path for young people. An integrating concept, embracing the more general and the more specific.

1.3. Concern about "income" and "perseverance"

From all of the above, the pastoral care of vocations includes an effort to raise up and accompany vocations, from the basis of human encounter and the proposal of faith. In this sense, a good "vocational culture" includes knowledge and appreciation of all forms of life in the Church (laity, marriage, consecrated life, ordained ministry).

Applied to our way of life, I share an illuminating reflection. In 2013, the then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás SJ, had a meeting in Chicago with the heads and presidents of the 28 Jesuit universities in the United States, all of them lay, which was also attended by the superiors of the nine Jesuit provinces in the country and other leaders of the Society of Jesus. At the end of his address, he said these words to them:

"And so I come to the end of what I wanted to say to you this morning: I wanted to ask for your help in recruiting Jesuits. I would very much appreciate the help of all the leadership teams in the room. Please could you at some point have a serious conversation with your provincial about the means your institution or your company uses to recruit a new generation of employees? Could you talk to your rector about what more could be done on campus to recruit future Jesuits? Could you please propose suggestions to the local Jesuit community about *how they could be better known and recognised as a possible life option for young people today?* Jesuits don't always listen to their superiors, but I think they will listen carefully to you if you tell them personally!" (cfr. in Spanish: www.americamagazine.org/espanol/2013/11/08/en-busca-de-lideres-espirituales-el-superior-general-de-los-jesuitas-habla-sobre / in English: www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/10/31/call-spiritual-leaders-jesuit-superior-general-higher-education).

To be "known and recognised", in the good sense of the word: that our life is transparent, and to live in such a way that this way of life appears as an option for the young people of today. Behind this there is a lot of closeness, authenticity, showing the reason for our life, talking about difficulties, a prayerful attitude, a sense of community, selfless service... Many people see us as good people and great workers, but many have not seen us praying together, nor sharing the dining room, nor do they know about our shared economy, nor what a destination elsewhere means, nor the joy of giving oneself freely, nor the strength of faith and prayer at certain times... without hiding the difficulties and limitations we experience.

Commenting on the above intervention in our CONFER Team, the Jesuit Vocation Promoter who was with us said: in our reflection, we are convinced that "recruitment" is important (even if it is not a word we use frequently). At the same time, along with recruitment, those of us responsible for vocations ministry have to be concerned about "perseverance". And it is true: although the "perseverance" of vocations that are born usually falls more in the field of "Initial Formation", we all - those responsible for Vocations Ministry, religious men and women, and Major Superiors - should be concerned about the "recruitment" of new vocations, as well as their "maintenance".

In case it helps to identify something of the present moment we are living in many of our Religious Life institutions, here is a publication on "X" (former Twitter) by a relatively young Spanish Jesuit priest (36 years old):

"We 'young people' in the Church in Europe have to rebuild while rubble is falling on us. Better to live it with humour" @AFBBohorquez

To which someone replied: *"I love those inverted commas around the word young people" @asolanab.* And another said: *"At this point, to rebuild should mean to start building again. Let the dead bury their dead" @apego5*

If today in many contexts we have difficulty in "recruiting" new vocations, it is also difficult for them to "persevere". We are called to take care of both aspects. For this reason, from the Conferences of Religious, it can be as important to encourage vocational youth ministry, offering proposals of faith and discernment to young people, as it is to promote areas of relationship and growth among the religious of the different institutions, especially in the first years of their religious life. And to take care of everyday life together, where the old and the young - many or few, as many as there are - can mutually enrich each other in an intergenerational and intercultural coexistence, a witness for our world.

2. THE CHALLENGE

2.1. Fundamental tasks of a Youth Vocational Ministry in our context

From all of the above, we can list three fundamental tasks for a Vocations Apostolate based on Youth Ministry in our time and place:

- a) *To walk with people*, on a path that starts from a quality human encounter: "neither too far, nor too close", that is, avoiding both the distance that does not create bonds, and the excessive closeness that coerces or violent people. In this journey with young people, it is important to work and help them to grow in *human foundations*, with special attention to maturity in affectivity and sexuality, an important theme today that was highlighted in the 2018 synodal process. A path that must include the *courageous and transparent proposal of faith*, as an encounter with the Living Christ who illuminates life and gives it a new decisive direction. And a proposal that, in order to be complete, must *offer an open "vocational discernment"*, based on the knowledge and appreciation of all forms of Christian life.
- b) *To live and make visible our life* as believers and as consecrated persons. Our personal and communal prayer, our shared life and goods, our concrete apostolate and the reasons that move us to do so... from

the basis of love for the Lord and his Church, in obedience to the Spirit. The English writer and speaker Simon Sinek, drawing on examples such as Apple, Martin Luther King and the Wright Brothers, says that "people don't buy what you do; people buy why you do it" (*How great leaders inspire action* | www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action). Our task, then, is not only to live a life of a certain quality, but also to make it visible in the whys that move us and keep us on this path. A witness that can be inspiring for everyone, in terms of a believing life open to God and dedicated to our brothers and sisters, and which for some can be the concrete path on which to begin to walk vocationally.

- c) *Walking together to encourage and inspire each other.* This is the call to synodality, the new name for communion, a sign of our times. A journey together *as communities*, making the way easy for those with whom we live every day. A journey together *as consecrated men and women*, collaborating as much as possible within each Conference of Major Superiors and at the more local levels. And a journey together *as Church*, recognising each other, valuing each other, complementing each other, forgiving each other. With the three key words of the current synodal process: communion, participation, mission. Learning to listen to each other in order to listen together to the Spirit. In a broken and wounded world, walking together can be the great sign that helps to birth and grow in faith, as well as to start and sustain the new vocations that our Church needs, in all forms of life.

2.2. Starting to walk together: what has been done in UCESM-VAN

Summarising and expanding on what was shared in the Rolduc communication, the path travelled by what we have called the Vocations Apostolate Network (VAN) has been as follows.

Origin and composition

This project of vocation 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.

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 collaboration with the Bishops' Conferences. And in still other places, there is total co-ordination with these conferences, in what is called a "National Vocation Centre".

Although the original call was for "National Vocation Directors", with the passage of time we looked for a common name that would integrate the different profiles, which finally became "National Referents" of the Vocation Apostolate. At present we are in contact with 23 Conferences of Major Superiors in Europe, although two of them do not yet have a contact person (Slovakia and Poland-male).

Stage 1: BIRTH (First online meeting - 25 May 2021 | Change in coordination - October 2021)

Stage 2: INITIAL CONFIGURATION (Towards a "Core Group" - November 2021 | Creation of a graphic brand - January 2022 | Thinking what to do - meetings for the first half of 2022)

Stage 3: BEGINNING OF EXCHANGES (Responding to a questionnaire - March 2022 | UCESM_VAN - Assembly of National Referents - 2022-03-29 | UCESM_VAN - Formative Meeting - 2022-05-31 | Contact with CCEE-EVS - May-June 2022 | Talk and discussions in GA of UCESM – Oct 2022 (online)

Stage 4: MAINTENANCE AND PERSPECTIVES (Update of the contact list - September 2022-February 2023 | Core Group meetings - February-May 2023 | Open Assembly of "National Referents" and "Teams" - 9 June 2023 | Participation in the Meeting of Bishops and National Vocation Directors - CCEE-EVS - Rome 28 September-1 October 2023 | Renewal of the Core Group and future plans - September 2023-March 2024).

Now we are seven members at the Core Group: Fr. Joseph CMF (UK), Ms. Margaret (IRE), Miss Liliane (LAT), Sr. Anna AP (POL-f), Miss Claire (SW-fr), Br. Jorge FSC (SP), and me.

2.3. Walking together further: a perspective of a project for UCESM-VAN

The draft UCESM-VAN, which I present here for discussion and approval, could be outlined as follows:

WHO WE ARE the "National Referents" group (as the base group of the project, open to other participants):

- a) *Consecrated persons or persons related to Consecrated Life*
- b) *Working in the vocations apostolate* (some with a work that integrates youth and vocations ministry, and others more focused on vocations ministry in a broad sense, promoting all forms of life in the Church).
- c) *That have some kind of representativeness* beyond their institution (linked to their Conference of Major Superiors and/or their Episcopal Conference).

WHAT WE CAN DO TOGETHER (objectives):

- 1) *Promote SYNODALITY* in the work of Youth and Vocations Ministry in two areas and at two levels:
 - between Institutions of Consecrated Life and with other realities of the Church, through their respective Conferences;
 - in each country and at European level.
- 2) *To create a space for MOTIVATION-INSPIRATION-TRAINING* in relation to pastoral work with young people and in the promotion of vocations, both broad and specific, in our European context.

HOW WE CAN ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES (means):

- 1) *Continuing communication with CCEE-EVS**, thinking how best to develop collaboration between Conferences of Major Superiors and Bishops' Conferences, both at European level and in each country, from experiences that work.
- 2) *Holding regular meetings* - one or two every year - in different modalities:
 - Some of these meetings may be "*Assemblies of National Referents*", with a more restricted participation, while others may be "*Formative Meetings*" open to more consecrated people or those who work with consecrated people in youth and vocation ministry.
 - The ordinary modality can be *online*. However, in order to create a stronger link and to be able to go deeper into some topics, some of the "*National Referent Assemblies*" can be *held in person*, for several days, every 3 or 4 years.
- 3) *Opening channels for the exchange* of initiatives and reflections between the "*National Referents*" by telematic means.

(*) A possible collaboration between CCEE-EVS and UCESM could be to carry out a study on vocations similar to those carried out in the USA on consecrated vocations (cfr. <https://caracatholic.substack.com/p/from-the-archive-women-and-men-entering>).

HOW TO FINANCE THESE MEETINGS (economics) - criteria:

1. The *costs of the online meetings* (virtual platform, speakers and translators) could be covered in two ways: if possible, entirely from the common budget of UCESM (as at present). If not, one part could be covered from the common UCESM budget, and another part from a fee contributed by the participants in each event.
 - What could come out of the UCESM common budget can either be a percentage of the event's expenses or cover possible deficits that are not covered by the participants' fees.
 - In the case of persons who collaborate with a Conference of Major Superiors, it can be recommended that their fee to participate in an event be paid from each Conference. And in the case of persons participating from a particular Institution of Consecrated Life, their fee would be paid by each Institution.
 - Core Group members may be excluded from paying all or part of these fees, due to their collaboration in time and effort in the development of this project.
2. In the case of a *face-to-face meeting*, transport and accommodation expenses would have to be added, and the above criteria could be specified (knowing that those who participate would be sent by a specific Conference).
3. In order to optimise resources, the "*Assemblies of National Referents*" could use the *two* most widely known *languages*: English and Italian; and if appropriate, *an additional language* - French - could be added to the "*Formative Meetings*" in order to reach more people. Leaving always open the possibility that those who need a translation into another language can seek that translation with the help of someone from their Conference or Institution.
4. Expenses arising from participation in CCEE-EVS events or other similar forums *where someone represents UCESM* could be paid from the UCESM common budget.
5. At the beginning of each course, a *budget* of the proposed activities would be drawn up, detailing the sources of funding (UCESM common budget / participants' fees), and presented to the UCESM Executive Committee for approval, according to the above criteria.
6. These criteria for this project would be tested "*ad experimentum*" and reviewed at each UCESM General Assembly.

3. THE ATTITUDES

Whatever the concrete organisation that we may develop in each Institution, in each Conference or in the shared project of UCESM-VAN, the following are some *attitudes* for the work of youth and vocational ministry.

3.1. VUCA vs. VUCA prime

Analysts say that we live in VUCA environments. These stand for VOLATILITY, UNCERTAINTY, COMPLEXITY and AMBIGUIDITY, qualities that make a situation or condition difficult to analyse, respond to or plan for.

In this sense, CRISIS is the state of mind of our world, and also of consecrated persons. The good thing about crises is that they serve to sift, to distinguish the valuable from the secondary. Where there is danger, there also grows what saves us. It is the experience of Easter.

Gustav Mahler said that "*tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire*". Are there alternatives to trying to survive by surfing in this VUCA cultural sea?

The answer is YES. Another VUCA world is possible: VUCA prime. It is possible to dream with God our future, with VISION, UNDERSTANDING, CLARITY and AGILITY.

- VISION - in volatile times, keep the focus on what is important: steadfast in faith.
- UNDERSTANDING - exercising "wisdom", which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. What would the Lord Jesus do in our reality?
- CLARITY - step by step, trial and error, trust in Providence... The Gospel is simple... and we are in God's hands!
- ADAPTABILITY - being flexible to achieve goals, "flowing" without being scattered... "*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel*" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).

3.2. Choosing generativity and integrity

The American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson states that people have to go through 8 stages for a healthy development. At each stage there is a polarity which, depending on which way the person is oriented, builds the edifice of his or her life.

The average age of Religious Life in Europe is high. Most of us are adults or elderly. The polarities of these later stages of life, according to Erikson, are as follows: in the stage of adulthood, the person is torn between GENERATIVITY and STAGNATION. And in the last stage of life, between INTEGRITY and DESPERATION.

The temptation to stagnation and despair is there. The grace of generativity - from gratuitousness - and of integrity - from all the gifts received - are also possible. What do we choose? What do you choose?

"I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing.

Choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

3.3. The theological virtues as perennial guides

"By FAITH Abraham obeyed the call and went out to the land which he was to receive as his inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going (...). By faith Sarah also, being barren, obtained strength to conceive when she was past age, because she counted him faithful who promised her" (Hebrews 11:8,11).

"This is what the Lord says, for I know what I intend to do for you: to plan for peace and not for trouble, to give you a future and a HOPE" (Jeremiah 29:11).

"We are compelled by the CHARITY of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

An open ending

A heart, in order to function, has two movements: contraction - systole - and expansion - diastole. In a certain way the Church in this part of the world, and Religious Life in it, is living a moment of systole. Is it the end of something, or is it the beginning of something new, the preparation of a new diastole? Could it be a purification for a new birth, as has happened so many times in salvation history?

"In the moment of discouragement, the moment of 'retirement', let us allow Jesus to get into the boat again, with the illusion of the first time, that illusion that must be revived, reconquered, re-edited. He comes to look for us in our loneliness, in our crises, to help us to start again. The spirituality of the beginning

again. Do not be afraid of him. That is life: to fall and to start again, to get bored and to receive joy again. To receive the hand of Jesus. Even today he passes by the shores of existence to rekindle hope and to say to us too, like Simon and the others: 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets' (Lk 5:4)" (Francis, Homily during Vespers with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers in Lisbon during WYD, 2 August 2023).

There is an old saying: "*If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans*". We don't know what the Czech Republic and Europe will be like in 30 years. Nor do we know what the Church and Religious Life will be like then. It is up to us to trust, to hope and to continue sowing, trying to create *welcoming communities, with a lively prayer and selfless service*, which can be a sign for those who seek and bring them closer to the God of Jesus Christ through the Spirit and that, in this encounter, some of them may feel called to continue and recreate these same paths, in a new present.

Thank you very much for your interest and attention. We continue to entrust this project to the Lord and to the Virgin Mary, in Easter confidence, open to the good fruits it can bring.

FOR TIME IN GROUPS (after questions and break):

- A) **Underlining, accents, different opinions** based on the general considerations heard (point 1 and point 3)
- B) **Assessment of the UCESM-VAN proposal** and specific issues to be taken into account (point 2, especially 2.3.)