

VINCENTIANS IN EUROPE 1999 A TIME OF CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

WHY FOCUS ON EUROPE NOW?

In his letter to European Provincials in advance of their meeting in Lebanon in April 1999, the Superior General, Fr. Bob Maloney, encouraged us to think beyond our own provincial perspectives and to focus on the challenges that face us as Vincentians ‘on mission in Europe’ today.¹ In doing so he acknowledged the diversity of background and variety of mission and ministry in the European Provinces. When one checks our catalogue² one will see that there is at present great diversity from one province to another in regard to size, personnel, number of communities and indeed, great diversity too in the works each province is engaged in. However, with the exception of our provinces in Eastern Europe, it would be true

¹ *Vincentiana*, May-June 1999 - Fr. Maloney’s letter to the members of CEVIM, (European Conference of Visitors of the Mission) April 12th, 1999 - p. 145 - 149.

² Statistics on CEVIM Provinces - Catalogue 1999:

<u>COUNTRY</u>	(1) <u>PERSONNEL</u>	<u>MEDIAN AGE</u>	<u>NO OF COMMUNITIES</u>	<u>STUDENTS</u>	(2) <u>PROVINCE FOUNDED</u>
Austria	21	55.8	5	2	(1853)
Belgium	10	69.6	3	0	(1902)
Paris	124	65.19	20	8	(1642)
Toulouse	85	66.22	15	7	(1661)
Germany	14	56.8	5	2	(1781)
Ireland	92	63.4	16	0	(1848)
Barcelona	54	63	10	5	(1774)
Saragossa	131	60.54	21	4	(1774)
Madrid	159	61.17	19	5	(1774)
Salamanca	109	60.57	22	2	(1774)
Holland	67	72.2	6	0	(1921)
Hungary	15	76	3	5	(1926)
Naples	66	65	13	1	(1815)
Rome	66	65	9	2	(1642)
Turin	97	63.51	14	2	(1703)
Portugal	55	58.54	11	7	(1829)
Poland	266	46.5	31	46	(1651)
Slovakia	34	52	8	30	(1941)
Slovenia	53	55.64	9	6	(1852)
Orient	44	50.38	8	4	(1785)
TOTALS:	1,496	61.35	248	138	

(1) Personnel includes bishops and priests and brothers.

(2) A number of Provinces give 2 or 3 dates of founding or re-founding. I only include the first date here.

to say that now is a time of real crisis in regard to the future of many of our European Provinces. The number of candidates coming forward to join us has radically diminished and many of our provinces are faced with the reality of not having enough confreres to maintain our works into the future. At the same time, the median age of confreres in many provinces is very high - in many cases around the mid-60 mark. Of course we are no different to many other orders and congregations in focusing on what kind of future the Congregation may have in our respective countries. Certainly, the future facing many of our provinces is either one of continuing decline, or one in which, though leaner in numbers, we have a more focused Vincentian presence.

A second reason for considering further a European focus for the Congregation is the fact that at so many other levels so much thinking is going on - politically, socially, culturally - about Europe, not only the European Union, but a much broader view of Europe that stretches west to east - from the Atlantic to the Urals and north to south - from the North Pole to the Mediterranean. We can have various attitudes towards the European Union and be sceptical about the focus on the EURO as such.³ The fact of the matter is that we probably do divide at present into EURO enthusiasts and EURO sceptics and we are faced with all the nationalistic barriers that are part and parcel of our European histories. The challenge of Fr. Maloney's letter and indeed, the challenge of much of what is coming through from the recent European Synod is how to focus on a mission in Europe that meets the spiritual needs of people today.

CRISIS TIME

Some may think that the word 'crisis' is too strong a word to use in regard to the present situation. In the course of this article I will point up some of the factors

³ In November 1998 (*International Herald Tribune*, Nov. 28th/29th) the French Philosopher, Regis Debray, wrote:

"What do we see on our future EURO banknotes whose prints have just been invented? Windows, bridges, portals, glass doors and viaducts - all symbolising openness and communication. There is no image of even a single human being. The pillars and columns have no foundation. No proper names. No landscape either, nor date, nor place. There are only cold, technical desert-like images generated by computers. This is Euroland - a no-man's land, a land of no-where.

Are we Europeans really without memories and without heritage? Even if we disregard political and military glory, which inevitably offends national pride, we are still left with Erasmus, Newton, Shakespeare, Garibaldi, Goethe, Voltaire, Cervantes and many others. Nations are "imaginary communities" in which individuals are linked less by their ideas than through shared images, myths, legends and personal items. Memory is essential to form a common will.

Nothing is really more revealing than these banknotes that have no story to tell and show no figures of which one would be proud; no founding events, no independence. We seem to have forgotten the lessons the philosophers have imparted to us over the course of civilisations - 'nothing great can be achieved without passion.'

Debray could also have included the saints - St Benedict, St Dominic, St Francis, St Teresa of Avila, St Ignatius, St Vincent de Paul - and many others - who, even more than the philosophers, have demonstrated a passionate interest in the well-being of their fellow human beings.

that I think justify us in using this word, but at this stage I would like to indicate that I am using the word in both its positive and negative meanings. There is no doubt that this is an extraordinary time of change and of transition in our societies in Europe. The rate of change at many different levels has increased rapidly over the last 10 or 20 years. All kinds of new challenges and new needs are arising all round about us. It is against this background of accelerating change and new opportunities for mission and evangelisation that I am using the word 'crisis.' I am also using it in the sense that if we do not grasp these opportunities, we may very well maintain some kind of presence into the future but it may be one where we do not meet the real needs of Christians today, or withdraw into a ghetto world where we concentrate exclusively on survival at all costs.

A EUROCENTRIC FOCUS

I can already sense a number of people being anxious about a Eurocentric focus in this article. Since Vatican II we have been encouraged to look outwards beyond Europe and to focus on a world Church and indeed, to focus on what Europe can learn from Asia, Africa, North America, South America and Australia. I take all this for granted and that it is healthy for us to do so. The very fact that most of our provinces have been involved in missions to various parts of the world has in fact given us many points of contact with the other continents. At the same time, I think the time has come for us to focus on what form the mission may take in Europe itself into the future without letting go a world, or global, perspective. Would it be true to say that some provinces in Europe are dying in giving birth to new provinces in Africa, or Asia, or South America? Many resources of personnel and material resources have been directed to new missions, where young Churches have been taking root. There is no doubt that there are many things that are praiseworthy about this approach but, at the same time, it would seem to me that we are also called to take the challenge seriously on our own doorsteps, as Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*⁴ pointed out some nine years ago.

1. THE CHANGING SCENE IN EUROPE - IN SOCIETY AND IN THE CHURCH

Over the summer I participated in a summer school in Louvain University. In the course of a session a young lecturer remarked that he and his own age group (he was in his mid-30's) believed that the Catholic tradition could disappear from Northern Europe in the next 20 years. Many of us attending the lecture were shocked. On being challenged on why he thought so, he went on to remark that, first of all, there are very few of his own age group in the 30's and younger, participating in Church life today. Secondly, many seminaries are virtually empty and it is hard to

⁴ *Redemptoris Missio*, 33, 34, 37.

see where the full-time personnel will come from to maintain Church life into the future as things are presently structured. He had other remarks to make about clericalism, patriarchy, alienation of women, which we hear on all sides today. The focus of this young lecturer's comments was on Northern Europe - Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany and France. The statistics for Mediterranean Europe - Spain and Italy - are less startling but no less serious. When one looks at facts and figures that sociologists are beginning to surface today, one is certainly faced with a continuing decline in religious practice in these countries too. The exception of course is Eastern Europe, where one gets the impression that a vibrant Church life is developing in Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. Nevertheless, at recent meetings of European Provincials, I have often been struck by the remarks of a number of confreres from these Provinces that the challenge facing Western Europe is one that will be facing Middle and Eastern Europe in a short time. What seems to be certain in most European countries today is that there has been an accelerated loss of young people from the Church, which has led to talk of a 'dying Church' in many parts of the western world.

Over the summer a series of articles appeared in the English religious journal, *The Tablet*,⁵ on the haemorrhaging of Catholic practice in England and Wales over the past 40 years. This was taken up by other writers in subsequent weeks, including Jan Kerkhofs,⁶ writing from a continental European perspective. A good deal of

⁵ *The Tablet* - 19th June, 1999: Gordon Heald – "Where Have All The Catholics Gone?" p. 860 - 863. The latest statistics for the Catholic Church in England and Wales show a sharp decline in most areas of church life since the sixties.

⁶ *The Tablet* - 24th July, 1999: Jan Kerkhofs "Where Have All The Catholics Gone - Europe Needs Therapy." p. 1015 - 1016. Drawing from the European Values Study, Kerkhofs points out that the trends Heald (above) draws attention to for Catholics in England and Wales are characteristic, with few exceptions, across Europe and in all main European churches. Here are some of the statistics Kerkhofs includes in this article:

NETHERLANDS: Percentage of population who say they do not belong to a Christian Church: 1900 (1% of population); 1958 (4%); 1970 (39%); 1991 (58%). In 21-30 age group: 72%. Catholic Baptisms: 1992 (36%); 1996 (24%). Only 25% of Dutch will be Christian by the year 2020

GERMANY: Regular Sunday Mass-going amongst Catholics in Germany: 1950 (51%); 1965 (43%, West Germany); 1989 (22%); 1996 (18%, all of Germany). Christians leaving their Churches: 1986-1990 (1 million); 1991-1995 (2 million); 1995: 186,000 Catholics and 297,000 Protestants

BELGIUM: Regular Sunday Mass-going amongst Catholics: 1950 - 50%; 1967 - 43% (Flanders, 15%); 1980 - 26% (Wallonia, 11%); 1995 - 13% (Brussels, 7%). Baptisms (1967, 90%; 1996, 68%); Marriages (1967, 86%; 1996, 50%); Church Funerals (1967, 84%; 1996, 78%). It is estimated that today one out of every two people under the age of 25 in Belgium no longer belongs to a Church.

ITALY: 88% say they belong to the Catholic Church; 9% say they have no religion. Regular Sunday Mass Practice: 1981 (36%); 1990 (40%); 1995 (31%).

SPAIN: Profession of Unbelief: 1970 (2%); 1990 (25%). Regular Religious Practice: 1970 (87%); 1990 (53%). (Only 15% among younger generation).

discussion took place around how to interpret these figures - is it a question of seeing the glass half full, leading to an optimistic interpretation, or a glass half empty, leading to a pessimistic interpretation? What interested me most in these articles was the question of getting into focus a social and cultural analysis across Europe today that would enable us to understand better the world we are called to evangelise. The following is a brief outline of 10 key factors which bear on our contemporary European situation and which are frequently invoked in accounting for the decline of religious practice in many of our countries:

- **Economic & social changes:** In most of our European countries we have experienced extraordinary social and economic changes over the past 50 years. Many confreres of my age group will have memories of frugal living in post-war Europe - in all probability in a rural setting. Today, many people have moved from a rural to an urban setting. Economic development and increasing affluence have opened up all kinds of new opportunities for people. The rate of change has, of course, varied from one country to another. The supermarket has replaced the Church as the centre of community life. The expansion of opportunities for leisure, especially at the weekends, offer all kinds of alternatives to participation in Church life on Sundays and weekends.
- **Dramatic developments in the mass-media:** Many sociologists draw attention to the fact that we have many more democratic sources of information in our media today - media that relentlessly attacks all deference to authority. Some would say that the media have replaced the Church as the one absolute authority. In many European countries the Catholic Church is continually and relentlessly being exposed to negative criticism which, in time, becomes part of the air we breathe. We internalise negative images of the Church, which can stifle the faith of many people and lead them to search for positive values elsewhere. On the other hand the media, like “secularisation” is often envisaged as one of the heads of the dragon of the Apocalypse. How to see the media, not as something demonic but as having great potential for evangelisation, often requires a shift in perspective.
- **Wider access to 2nd and 3rd level education:** One of the extraordinary developments across European countries, including Eastern Europe, is the availability of 2nd level education to all citizens and many now have the

FRANCE: Percentage of those who say they do not belong to any religion has increased in all age groups (especially for those between 15 and 25): 1987 (33%); 1996 (40%). Sunday practice has stabilised at 8% - increasing slowly for those over 60. Baptisms (60%), Marriages (50%), Church Funerals (80%)

CENTRAL EUROPE: Professing to be Catholic: Poland (89%); Croatia (83%); Lithuania (67%); Slovenia (62%); Slovakia (58%). Those who profess to have no religion: Czech Republic (73%); East Germany (72%); Ukraine (68%); Hungary (40%); Estonia (87%); Latvia (63%); Russia (63%). Comparisons between 1990 and 1998 show that in most of these countries the younger generation is increasingly alienated from the Churches.

opportunity to avail of 3rd level and university education. The consequence is of course that we are now challenged to evangelise an 'educated people' who will be far more critical of what we present as the Christian message and far more demanding in the pastoral care we provide. We also find that the standards of religious education for many adults have remained at a rudimentary level. In the recent synod there was a good deal of soul-searching around the question of our failure in the Catholic Church to communicate the teaching of Vatican II to our people.

- **The marginalisation of the Church:** With the decline of Church personnel we have observed in many countries the state taking over more and more responsibility for education, health care and the social services. Even in our so-called Catholic countries there is a diminished presence of Catholic personnel in these spheres. All this raises a number of questions of how well we have prepared lay men and women - teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and others - to exercise a Christian influence in these important areas of life.
- **The privatisation of religion:** The practice of religion is being seen increasingly as a voluntary matter and subject to individual choice.⁷ Many people continue to experience a religious hunger but they find 'spiritual alternatives' to Sunday Mass, which may take the form of cultural outlets - literature and music on the one hand and, at their worst, in esoteric forms of religious belief - New Age⁸, etc.
- **Charismatic Groups - New Movements:** Worldwide, people will draw attention to the success of charismatic groups, inside and outside the Catholic tradition and this is true in Europe too. A number of these groups seem to take very seriously the scriptural and theological formation of their members, but others tend towards fundamentalism, which is difficult to reconcile with 'reasonable' religious belief in today's world. The ambivalence of many Catholics to 'New Movements' in the Church today, in the European context, can spring from the above.⁹

⁷ At the recent European Synod it was interesting to learn how frequently various participants spoke about "freedom": A new freedom to worship in Eastern Europe; the abuses of freedom in Western Europe; the conflict between the Church and modernity in Europe – a drama that in due course will be repeated elsewhere; the restrictions of women's freedom - Synod discussions were impoverished in that women did not participate in any significant way in them. How can the gospel be proclaimed as Good News – an invitation - rather than a litany of moral demands.

⁸ In many European cities over the past five years, I am continually astonished at the amount of space given to this kind of literature in good book-shops.

⁹ The significance of the New Movements for the Church today would appear to have been a major talking point at the European Synod. Do they constitute a last hope for a European Church in crisis, or should they be absorbed into the parish life, giving new energy and new dynamics to parishes in decline. cf. *Tablet* – Reports on the Synod - 23rd October 1999 pp. 1444 & *Tablet* 30th October 1999, pp. 1459.

- **Believing but not belonging:** A recent study of two English Sociologists, who interviewed a significant number of people who had ceased to practice, discovered that over 80% of those questioned indicated that they had left because of disappointment with some aspect of the “Church’s liturgy, the quality of pastoral care, or negative views about Church leadership today.”¹⁰ There is no doubt that there can be quite contradictory expectations among people about liturgy and church leadership and there certainly has been a good deal of polarisation in many European countries on these issues. How to hold the middle ground can be a difficult task.
- **Loss of faith – a post-modern culture:** In any analysis of the present situation in Europe we cannot escape the fact that we are now living in what is called a “post-modern age.” When one gets through the complexities of trying to unravel what the word ‘post-modern’ means, we have to accept that believers are faced with a whole range of negative critiques of religion, coming from philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology etc. One might argue that critiques coming from these disciplines can ‘purify’ religious belief, but a good deal of work is required to reach this position and the faith of many may have withered away at the first icy blasts from atheists and agnostics in our contemporary culture.
- **Rites of passages:** The evidence coming through from Kerkhofs’ statistics indicates that many Catholics keep in touch with the Church for the important ‘Rites of Passage’ - births, marriages and deaths. Much of the work that goes into preparing young people for First Communion and Confirmation is followed by a quick departure from the Church, so much so that, increasingly, people will see First Communion and Confirmation as “Goodbye Sacraments.” For many young people today, religion is something you “grow out of.” In such a context, priests and ministers are viewed more and more as ‘functionaries’ to engage in rites that have lost all meaning for many participants.
- **From social to cultural secularisation:** Arguing from an Irish context, where there has been a dramatic fall in religious practice over the past ten years and where the general credibility of the Church has been damaged by various scandals, Michael Paul Gallagher SJ argues that our “secular” culture has its greatest impact in the zones of imagination, disposition and sensibility. “*Ours seems to be a crisis, not of creed but of culture, not of faith in itself but of the capacity to believe beyond ourselves.*”¹¹ He suggests that we have moved beyond an old style anti-clericalism to a deeper battleground in which a dominant secular environment can eclipse any sense of need or desire for anything more than immediacy. “*God is missing, but not missed.*” Gallagher

¹⁰ Philip Richter & Leslie Francis : *Gone But Not Forgotten* : Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1998.

¹¹ Michael Paul Gallagher SJ, “From Social To Cultural Secularisation” in *Louvain Studies* (24) 1999, p. 104.

points out that in this context: “*Christian faith becomes not so much incredible as unimagined and even unimaginable.*”¹²

Frequently I find that many of the above factors are lumped together under the term ‘secularisation.’¹³ When one looks closely at each of the above one finds that frequently there are many positive factors operating - elimination of poverty; cultural development; overcoming of superstition; a better focus on the Church’s essential role in society; more space to proclaim authentic gospel values; moving beyond tribal Catholicism, etc. There are of course many negative factors operating too - materialism, selfishness, individualism, narcissism, lack of concern for the marginalised and vulnerable. Sharing both a positive and negative critique of the socio-political and cultural situation in our respective countries is an important exercise to be engaged in before getting a Vincentian European mission into focus.

2. A VINCENTIAN READING OF THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Over the past 30 years, various General Assemblies have provided a Vincentian reading of the signs of the times and a focus on how things look from the “underside” - that is, from the world of the poor, the excluded, the outsiders. Many of the points I outline above could be looked at from this perspective. In what follows, I would like to concentrate on what we have called the two “foundational works” of the Congregation, which I believe are “in crisis” in both the positive and negative senses I mentioned earlier.

a) Parish Missions - A work in transition

It strikes me that one area worth exploring as an area of common interest across our European Provinces is the work of parish missions - and now all the more so as many European countries are recognising the need for new forms of evangelisation. The Vincentian Month on Popular Missions, held in Paris from July 7th to August 2nd 1997 certainly gave a good outline of developments in many of our Provinces worldwide, as well as in our European Provinces. One cannot but be impressed by the efforts of confreres in many of our Provinces to re-focus this work and to consider what shape it should take as we cross the threshold of the new century.

In his April 1999 letter to European Visitors, Fr. Maloney had a number of interesting comments to make about these popular missions in a European context:

¹² Ibid. p. 105.

¹³ To avoid a blanket condemnation of ‘secularisation’ some theologians will distinguish between secularisation and secularism. cf. Also Pope Paul VI - *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 55.

*“The work of the popular missions has undergone a significant critique. In some places, the traditional form of parish missions remains effective. In others, Provinces seek for new methods for the integral evangelisation and up-building of parish communities.”*¹⁴

I would venture to suggest that the following are some of the reasons why a “significant critique” is taking place at present about what we regard as one of the “Foundational Works” of the Congregation:

- One question arising in many Provinces is the precise **point of our insertion** into the whole process of parish or diocesan renewal. In many of our Provinces one realises that diocesan priests have now taken the whole renewal process in hand and there are good reasons for doing this. Any diocese that is moving forward today will want to be in charge of the renewal process and because of this it is sometimes quite difficult to see what role parish missionaries can play in this process of renewal.

How does one **evangelise an “educated people?”** Obviously in many situations today these parish missions are engaging with people who have very often had second level education and an increasing number who have third level education. Would it be true to say that the whole parish mission movement in the past was geared to people who had very basic levels of education and who respected priests as one of the few educated groups in a parish?

- Many would take the view that the whole **parish mission movement has been “domesticated;”** *i.e.*, that now it takes the form of a parish retreat or a time of renewal for the converted. In the Irish context, Emmet Larkin, an authority on 19th century Irish Church history has remarked that the fire went out of the parish mission movement as early as 1870, after many parishes had been evangelised. I suspect that this is also true of other European countries.
- We have tended to **separate parish missions from the whole theology of mission** and this I think to the detriment of the parish mission movement in our European Provinces. We have been ready to say that those who are going overseas to what we used to call mission countries are engaged in mission and even though we use the terminology of ‘popular missions,’ I doubt if the word ‘mission’ has retained its original meaning in the parish context of our European Provinces.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Vincentiana* : No. 3 May / June 1999: Fr. Maloney’s letter to European Visitors, p. 147.

¹⁵ David J. Bosch : *Transforming Mission - Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Orbis Books, N.Y. 1993, p. 349 ff. Bosch makes the point in a variety of ways that one does not have to cross a deep blue sea to go on mission.

- What kind of Church community are we asking people to return to? In critiques of the popular mission today as a form of evangelisation one is inevitably going to have to face up to the **Theology of Church and Ministry** that under-girds the parish mission process - the theology of Church and ministry one is encountering in parishes and the theology of Church and ministry that one is hoping to introduce. ¹⁶
- A crucial question for all engaged in parish missions is how to communicate the **'urgency' of salvation** today. Many people of an older generation will have bitter memories of 'scare tactics' in the past. How to communicate God's compassionate love and mercy - what we call the 'Good News of Salvation' - to people today is one of the great challenges of this kind of evangelisation.
- Finally, one is led to ask if the parish mission process, especially when it is short-term - one, two, three weeks - is an inadequate instrument to deal with the different kinds and the different degrees of alienation one encounters among Christians. A much longer process may be required to deal with the alienated, not to speak of the need of initial evangelisation if we are to go forward. ¹⁷

The confreres who met in Paris in July 1997 put together a number of proposals in regard to the future of parish missions in the Congregation. Two of them have particular relevance in the European context:

"Set up an international secretariat for popular missions, which would provide information, formation and development. The same should be done on an inter-provincial level where possible." (Proposal 2).

"Promote periodic meetings of popular mission teams both at regional and international level." (Proposal 8). ¹⁸

Perhaps the time has come to take these two proposals forward at a European level. Certainly if we think that the context of a declining Church is true of many of our countries, we should have plenty to discuss and share with one another, especially in regard to new forms of evangelisation in the parish context.

b) From seminary formation to formation for ministry

¹⁶ We are still in the process of working out some of the key theological developments of Vatican II, such as: the understanding of the Church as 'communion' and not just 'institution'; recognition of the view that outside the Church there is salvation; finding ways for lay men and women to participate actively in the ministry of the Church; finding ways to model collaborative ministry, rather than an exclusively clerical ministry; recognising that the primary sense of 'vocation' is the vocation of all the baptised.

¹⁷ Kevin Rafferty : "Morality & Conversion" : *Vincentiana* No 4/5, July/Oct 1997 - p. 288.

¹⁸ *Vincentiana* : No. 4-5, July / Oct 1997 : "The Popular Mission," p. 443, 444.

New Horizons in the Making:

As we explore other possible areas of collaboration between our Provinces, another area worth considering is that of seminary formation. In this context, Fr. Maloney has made the following remarks in his letter of April 12th, 1999:

“Our work in the formation of the diocesan clergy has shrunk, and even disappeared, in a number of countries. The Post-Vatican II era has challenged the Congregation to take a more active role in helping form lay men and women to participate more fully in the evangelisation of the poor.” (C1, 3^o)¹⁹

Fr. Maloney sums up very succinctly what has happened, historically, in many of our European provinces. At the beginning of the century we were actively involved in staffing and administering seminaries in many dioceses and today we have withdrawn from most of these, although we continue to maintain a presence in a number of seminaries where confreres work on an individual basis. We have always regarded seminary formation as the second foundational work of the Congregation and we know how St. Vincent, as he began the parish mission movement across France, was drawn into the formation of priests in a number of dioceses, either through the Tuesday Conferences, or being actively involved in implementing the Decrees of the Council of Trent.

Jan Kerkhofs, in his recent book - *Europe Without Priests?*²⁰ points up the extent of the crisis in regard to seminaries in the European context. Despite certain areas of development here and there - and very often the Archdiocese of Paris is given as an example of renewal and development - the fact of the matter is that many of our seminaries for diocesan priests right across Europe are in a state of

¹⁹ *Vincentiana* : No. 3 May/June 1999: Fr. Maloney’s letter to European Visitors, p. 147

²⁰ Jan Kerkhofs (Ed.) - *Europe Without Priests?* - (SCM, London, 1995). I quote below some of the statistics Kerkhofs gives in his recent *Tablet* article: *The Tablet* (24th July, 1999 p.1015)

FRANCE: 1965: 40,981 Priests; 1985: 28,629; 1995: 19,700. Average Age : 66

GERMANY: 13,334 Parishes; 8,313 have a resident Priest; 5,021 have not got a resident Priest; Lay Ministers : 5,166 (1990)

BELGIUM: City of Antwerp : 313 Parishes; 1986, 4 Parishes without Priests; 1992, 60 Parishes without Priests; 1994, 106 Parishes without Priests.

POLAND:	Semin.	Ords.	Priests
1982	7,225	775	21,059
1987	7,038	1,009	23,432
1993	7,379	1,132	27,059

OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ON EUROPE:

- In many dioceses in Europe by the year 2000 between 30% - 50% of parishes will have no resident priest.
- In many dioceses the average age of priests has climbed to 65 - 70 years.
- Europe has still the largest number of priests in comparison with Asia, Africa and South America. (These statistics put our European situation into context). 60% Diocesan Priests; 47 Religious Priests.

crisis in regard to both the number of candidates entering and the quality of candidates. A second area of grave concern is the increasing workload on a diminishing and ageing group of priests. Seeing no replacements in the pipeline adds immeasurably to the burdens priests have to carry today.

The following are a number of brief comments that strike me about the present European situation:

- There is a good deal of evidence now that the **tridentine seminary as we have known it is in a severe crisis**. The Church is passing through one of the great turning points in its history in regard to formation for priesthood, comparable to what took place at the time of Trent in the 16th century and before that in the Middle Ages, when the Mendicant Orders influenced our understanding of priestly ministry. It would seem to me that we are in the process of searching for:
 - a) New ways to call people to ministry and
 - b) New ways to prepare people for ministry.

As we work through this period of change there is likely to be a good deal of tension between different models of formation for many years to come.

- Kerkhofs has pointed out that the problem of a **great shortage of priests in many European countries** has not penetrated the collective awareness of the Catholic Church and is not being owned by many people exercising authority in the Church. Reports of discussions at the recent European Synod give evidence to this.
- Over the past 50 years, Vincentians have disappeared from many seminaries across Europe and elsewhere. At a time of great change in seminary formation, it is not surprising that diocesan authorities will want **full control of seminaries** in this time of great transition.
- *Pastores Dabo Vobis* ²¹ certainly opened the door to **exploring new models** of formation. However, perhaps the traditional model of seminary formation still remains central to our thinking. Our old and more recent models are still “teacher-centred, classroom based, curriculum driven, product orientated and subject dominated.” The issue then is not just a matter of modifying the seminary model but one of exploring new models - seeking different centres, bases, motivations, orientations of people who take the Christian life seriously today and who want to engage in theological, pastoral and spiritual formation in order to participate actively in their Christian communities. ²²

²¹ Pope John Paul II's - *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 64.

²² I have drawn here from discussions with an Irish confrere, Eugene Curran, who is studying various forms of Adult Religious Education at present.

- Discussions about seminary formation are taking place against the background of a good deal of questioning about **support systems for priests**. I have met quite a few people in various countries who say that the support systems are no longer in place to support diocesan priests and this all the more so as they are beginning to live in greater and greater degrees of isolation from one another.

Already we can see some signs of new developments in our own European Vincentian Provinces. Apart from confreres who continue to work in seminaries, other confreres are actively engaged in the formation of lay men and women. This may take the form of setting up courses in various institutions, or more often, engaging in formation of lay people in parishes in the context of our parish missions.

We Vincentians are particularly vulnerable in this time of crisis. Traditionally, we have been closely aligned with diocesan priesthood and there is overwhelming evidence now from one country to another in Europe that there is an acute crisis in regard to the future of diocesan priesthood as we have known it. This places us in a particular dilemma. Do we continue to support the system we have grown up with and I think this is our natural way of acting because we have always tried to maintain our contacts with diocesan priests and to support them in many different ways, or do we have to face up to the fact that there is a whole new era in the making and that our efforts should be directed to promoting the initial and continuing formation of priests, yes, but also to promoting the formation of lay men and lay women for mission and ministry? In this context, sharing whatever good practices are developing from one province to another in the formation of priests and the formation of men and women, in an institutional or a non-institutional context, could provide a fruitful area for discussion in our European Provinces.

CONCLUSION

In his recent article in *The Tablet*, Jan Kerkhofs remarked, “*it looks as though some sort of mutation, probably much deeper than after the Renaissance, is accelerating in the depths of Europe’s collective consciousness.*”²³

Against the background of the discussions taking place on the social, political, cultural and religious changes taking place in Europe today, both east and west, it is not surprising that Cardinal Martini, at the recent Synod for Europe, called for a new reading of the ‘signs of the times.’ In an earlier part of this article, I outlined 10 factors which strike me about the European scene, looking at it from the periphery of Europe, on the Atlantic sea-board. No doubt there are profound

²³ *The Tablet* - 24th July 1999, p. 1016.

variations from one country and from one province to another. However, it seems to me that it should be possible for us in European Provinces to reach some consensus about the **European “signs of the times”** as we read them **from a Vincentian perspective**.

I have found Fr. Bob Maloney’s April 12th letter a challenging one and the confreres in the Irish Province continue to reflect on the six specific challenges he puts in front of us. One of them is of particular relevance to us at the moment. With the arrival of many refugees and asylum seekers on our shores over the last five years, a Vincentian, a Daughter of Charity and a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul have set up a centre for refugees in our Dublin parish. We look forward very much to learning more about what is taking place in this area in other European Provinces, where confreres have been involved for many years. Connected to this is Fr. Maloney’s question about making the ‘European voice’ of the Congregation of the Mission expressed more clearly at the European Union headquarters in Brussels. I have concentrated in this article on what we call the **two “foundational” works of the Congregation - parish missions and formation of priests and lay people**. It is evident from what I have said that I am taking on board that these two works of the Congregation are in transition and that we are searching for new ways to give expression to them in the European context. The thesis of this article is that it is these two areas we should concentrate on in our exchange of information and in any collaborative projects that may develop between our provinces into the future.

As one will see from the outline of statistics about personnel in the European Provinces, there is also tremendous variation about the dates at which each province was founded. Knowing more about the **founding events** and our **respective histories** would, I think, be very helpful. This means not only getting in touch with the founding events of our own provinces, but a willingness to listen to the founding events of our neighbouring provinces in Europe too. Paul Ricoeur remarked, in the context of political union in Europe.

*“It is a matter, not only of subjecting the founding events of our culture to a cross-reading, but of helping one another to set free that part of life and of renewal which is found captive in rigid, embalmed and dead traditions.”*²⁴

As we learn more about one another, I believe that this will help us to recapture something of the impetus of the founding fathers of our various provinces. It could also open windows on how to move forward in exchanges and collaboration.

²⁴ Cf. Paul Ricoeur : “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe” in *Festschrift for Paul Ricoeur*, 1995, p. 5 ff.

There is something exciting and challenging going on at the heart of Europe today. With our presence in so many European countries, both east and west, north and south, we are in a position to be at the heart of the great questions that are being asked about the meaning of life, about reconciliation between peoples, about the preservation of Christian values and especially about the call for 'equality and justice for all.'