

## COLLABORATION IN MISSION

*An apostolic community of jesuits and lay men and women with their families living together, sharing the same grounds of the spiritual centre they serve*

I will give a brief outline of the evolution the retreat centre went through during the last years, a summary of the most important activities, and finally an attempt to answer the question about the needs of the local church.

I live in the Oude Abdij with my family for almost sixteen years now. My four children (between 6 and 15) were born here. Very soon after I started working here, I discussed with the provincial the possibility of other families and (younger) jesuits moving in. Because for several years there was no longer any community that formed the 'living heart' of the retreat centre, it risked to develop in some (badly equipped) anonymous congress centre.

The provincial welcomed the proposal and we agreed to wait for the "right time." At the provincial congregation in December 1998, we — that is: some Jesuits and lay people — presented a "postulate" asking the Province to invest morally and financially in what we called a "living-and working community": two or three families and two or three Jesuits.

We insisted on the fact that we did not want a mixed community of lay people and religious (Jesuits). Each of them has its own charisma and the first community of (married) lay people is the family; so is his community for the jesuit. What unites us is the "project" of the retreat center and, above all, common prayer and liturgy.

The provincial congregation was at first surprised (for the first time lay people participated in a postulate), but then fully supported it.

In 2000 a wing of the building was renovated into three apartments for families. A few months later Stijn Vanden Bossche, his wife Genade

Temmerman, their three children and Pascal Veeckman and his wife Ria Savoye, came to live in the Oude Abdij. The Society of Jesus 'offered' us one Jesuit: Jos Alaerts. We all share a desire for prayer (and a need for common prayer) and a commitment to participate in the development of the retreat centre.

Therefore, each resident is a staff member and attends to the staff meetings (once in a fortnight). This is especially important for those residents who do not have a job in the centre.

This first few years, I think, our mainly concern was to organise prayer and liturgy - for the residents in the first place, but open to everyone - in such a way that it is compatible with family life and jobs. So, for the moment there is the following:

There is a common daily prayer (15') at noon and on Fridays a mass (open to everyone, but mostly we are on our own).

During the Advent and Lent we organise a common, silent evening prayer, every day (9 to 10 pm).

For about one year now there is a mass on each first Sunday of the month, preceded by a conference on a spiritual or theological theme (1 hour) and followed by the 'aperitif' and lunch. This 'activity' is attended by more or less 70 people, most of them parents with children.

Finally, we invited for the second time people to live and celebrate with us the Eastern triduum, from Wednesday-evening until Eastern-Sunday-morning. Through the program for parents and children (in different age-groups), we focus on the liturgy. We had about 120 guests, again most of them parents with children.

Of course there is also the regular program of the retreat house, which focuses mainly on Spiritual Exercises, Spirituality and Faith and Culture.

An important step was the formation of a group of spiritual directors — lay people and Jesuits — about six years ago to give the Spiritual Exercises. They give mostly the Exercises in Daily Life (together about 25-30 a year) and meet on a regular basis for

supervision and formation.

I would like to mention also the Samuel-project, based on an initiative Cardinal Martini developed in Milano for young adults (20-30 yrs.), to help them discern that way of life that corresponds with their desire to give Christ the first place in their lives. They commit themselves to one monthly meeting in the Oude Abdij (introduction in lectio divina), a conversation twice a month with a spiritual director and a daily prayer of half an hour. The whole project takes about 8 months.

For the fourth time, 20 young people (quite a miracle in our over-secularised country) have taken up the challenge.

In our programs on spirituality we want to open up the great texts of our Christian spiritual and mystical tradition. There are conferences, reading groups and each year a summer course, attended by over 130 people.

I must not forget the Day of Ignatian Spirituality which we organised in September 2003 for the first time. Over 650 people followed one of the 17 workshops.

Finally there are activities about faith and art (film, concerts..) that are often linked with other activities.

### **To what needs of the local church are we responding?**

Allow me some preliminary remarks. First of all I want to say that the needs of the local Church are our own needs. We all share the (mis)interpretations of christian faith, doubts, questions, beliefs and unbeliefs etc. that people in our local culture have, whether we like it or not. In other words: when we try to respond to the needs of the local church, we also (and perhaps first of all) try to respond to our personal needs. So we have little to offer (we cannot pretend we have the answers!), but we can invite people to share in our search for answers.

Secondly, the people who are intrigued by the Christian faith, are mostly intelligent, independent people who are looking for authentic, 'real' answers. They want to be taken seriously; if not, they simply don't come. In fact, you can no longer fool them (as we could have done in

a time that almost everybody was Christian by birth and churches and retreat did not have any difficulty at all to attract people). On the other hand, they are willing to accept the sometimes demanding consequences of their commitments (see Samuel).

More concretely now.

I think families are attracted to some of our activities (esp. liturgy), because of the fact we are 'normal' lay families, people of the world, who seem to believe in Christianity (which in our culture is foolish). Apparently, families attract other families. Our liturgy is nothing special, in fact it is rather classic, but I think many people are in need of living communities, which they (unfortunately) do not find in their parishes.

Many people have abandoned the Christian faith of their youth and — often as a consequence of a crisis — are looking for a renewed, authentic Christian spirituality, that is not affected by moralism. I think they realise that faith is not something besides life, that it is in the heart of life.

We live in a culture of spiritual alphabetism. There is a need for a personal spirituality, a culture of the inner life, which most people, we have to admit it, find in alternative and often more self-centred spiritualities. But Christian spirituality is a 'relational' spirituality, build on a personal relationship with the living Christ. I think that is the major problem in our culture today: how can I and why must I believe that Jesus lives? The question cannot be solved by theoretical, rational answers. You cannot convince people that Jesus is actually living, you just can live and celebrate it and invite people to live and celebrate it with you. (And of course, the theological questions will follow automatically).

There is also a need (and at the same time a problem) of 'belief': that God really 'exists', that he effectively works, that we can know him. In correspondence with this, it is difficult in our culture to accept the condition of man and the world as imperfect, in need to be healed, to be saved. In fact there is a great need for salvation and liberation (the experience of the

Fundamentum).

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