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## **Sharing on the Experience and Challenges of our Mission in Europe**

### **CICM MISSION IN BELGIUM**



The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), also known as Scheut Missionaries, was founded in 1862 by a Belgian priest, Fr. Théophile Verbist. Our Founder went to China in 1865 with three CICM confreres and one lay helper. After he died in 1868, many Belgians and Dutch CICM were sent there until the Communist takeover in 1949. Later in 1888 and 1907, CICM sent its first missionaries to DR Congo and the Philippines, respectively. The rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a history of flourishing missionary undertaking when CICM missionaries were sent to many more countries.

After almost a century, all provinces became sending and receiving entities. Today, we no longer have vocations from Belgium or the Netherlands, the two countries where we are present in Europe. Instead, both the European confreres and those from other countries working in Belgium are confronted, just like anyone else, with the reality of secularization.

We have several retirement communities in Belgium for our elderly European members. In addition, several confreres attend to the needs of the homeless, the poor, asylum seekers, immigrants, and others. Their commitment is a response to a specific

missionary challenge, each based on their personal capacity and aptitudes. We also have a presence in parish work as we participate in the revitalization of the local Church with the collaboration and the empowerment of the laity. The dominant attitude toward the church seems to be indifference. In some places, the liturgy is poorly attended, and the average age of the participants is high. As we deal with people in our pastoral activities, we see, on the one hand, many people are concerned about issues such as climate change, holistic health care, the influx of immigrants and refugees, the emergence of a multicultural society, and their children's future. On the other hand, many undertake solidarity actions to fight for change in favor of human rights and the protection of the environment.

Recently, two promising developments have taken place regarding our missionary presence in Belgium: our current presence in Deurne (Antwerp) and a new missionary venture in Mechelen-Brussel.

### ***Our presence in Deurne (Antwerp)***

The request to start our missionary presence in Deurne came from Mgr. Johan Bonny, the Bishop of Antwerp. He asked for a missionary presence of a multicultural religious community in an urban environment. In our exploratory meetings with him and his collaborators, we were pleased to see the similarity between his missionary vision and ours. The most important aspect of this vision is witnessing as a community, that is, the possibility of living together as brothers from diverse origins in a multicultural environment. This CICM community is composed of Ghislain Toussé (Cameroonian), Thomas Hendrikus (Indonesian), and Fabio Texeira (Brazilian).

The mission of this community is to commit themselves, each according to his charism and competence, to the following tasks: (1) pastoral services such as catechesis, sacraments, and liturgy; (2) reaching out to people of goodwill and promoting new forms of community in a multicultural environment; and (3) an active presence in the diocesan social and charitable assistance structures, which promote meeting people in the peripheries of society: the poor, migrants, refugees, prisoners, ex-detainees, the young, the elderly, the sick, and people of other faiths. From the beginning, Mgr. Bonny and CICM agreed that the mission of this international community is to be a living and visible witness of religious missionary life in a global community in the city of Antwerp.

To realize this missionary endeavor, the three CICM missionaries organize themselves in this way: each of the three members is involved in the parish pastoral ministry and beyond the parish boundaries. Thomas is engaged in interreligious dialogue with Muslims. Ghislain participated in the preparation and animation of the youth of the diocese for the World Youth Day meeting in Panama. Later, the bishop entrusted Ghislain with the chaplaincy of the boatmen of the Port of Antwerp. Fabio is more involved in the animation of Christian communities in the agglomerated parishes.

The challenges of our presence in Antwerp include reaching out to people inside and outside the church. It goes beyond the boundaries of a traditional parish. This form of evangelization aims to be present among believers, non-believers, and people from different cultures. It also seeks to promote the emergence of small communities where openness to others, understanding, solidarity, and mutual aid are encouraged and made visible. This project challenges us to consider a new missionary vision and play a new role as religious missionaries. Therefore, it requires constant accompaniment and regular evaluation.

Their successful integration in the diocesan milieu and the secularized environment of Belgium at large can be attributed to several factors: the rigorous selection by the General Government of the three confreres, who previously had positive missionary experiences in other mission countries; the openness of the Provincial Government of the Belgium-Netherlands Province who welcomed them with joy and proposed to them a clear vision of mission today and their missionary project, which was supported by the leadership of the diocese; and the professional accompaniment and adequate formation provided by competent persons commissioned by the Bishop.

### ***New Missionary Presence of CICM and ICM in Flemish Brabant***

After a positive experience in the missionary project of Deurne, CICM Europe started with the same fervor to prepare for the coming of three young confreres. This time we had to look for a place ourselves, preferably a multicultural setting close to one of our communities. We considered two multicultural cities, Vilvoorde and Mechelen, where the respective mayors had explicitly asked for the help of the church in integrating immigrants. The leaders of the vicariate of Vlaams-Brabant chose the latter. To make this project viable, we teamed up with the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM), who also appointed three sisters.

If everything goes well according to the plan, three confreres and three ICM sisters will be involved in this project together. We are convinced that a team of six members will make the project more sustainable, allowing us to work in a somewhat more extensive area and live out the diversity, benefiting from each other's charism and aptitudes.

It is interesting to see how all those responsible for this plan, both in the vicariate and in the two congregations concerned, take the preparation seriously and work together with enthusiasm to make this project

successful. To move forward with the project, the following measures will be considered:

- Prayer and communal discernment, keeping in mind that this is first of all God's mission.
- Deepening our identity as religious missionaries as Pope Francis constantly reminds us to be open to the world, to look beyond borders, and to be sent to the underprivileged.
- Being clear about what we want: to promote communion in an intercultural environment, committed to our neighbors beyond the usual boundaries.
- Consulting with key players: Bishops and other congregations, ensuring we are all looking in the same direction. Being inclusive and respecting diversity.
- Being clear about what we do not want as we dialogue with key players: no to maintenance mode. Avoid filling gaps or becoming bouche-trous. And avoid the mentality of the 'one-woman(man) show' approach.
- Ensuring the support of the confreres of the province by keeping them informed, communicating with them, and animating them through visits, the newsletter of the province, and information meetings.
- Anticipating the possible implications such as financial constraints and other difficulties; frustrations related to visa applications, language study, or Covid-19 restrictions; etc.

Our missionary commitments are in view of the Reign of God. Faced with a complex world in constant change, the challenges are numerous. That is why the six team members need time to establish an identity, get used to a new place and mentality, and be accompanied and guided by others in their integration. To achieve this, a community such as a Christian parish community is both an ideal and necessary place to serve as a *pied-à-terre* and a springboard to discover a new world and shine... For their part, they will have the task of animating the Christians to

look beyond the parish boundaries and, hopefully, develop paths that have not been explored until now.

Be that as it may, there is always the danger that they may become overwhelmed by the immediate needs of the faithful - religious services, masses, etc. - and be absorbed by a traditional pastoral ministry (liturgy, sacraments, catechesis, diakonia) which could take up a lot of their time and limit their outreach to the peripheries. Despite those challenges, the mission continues. This is the way it is and has always been. Cultural forms change, indifference or opposition to the church ebbs and flows. Sometimes, the Gospel flows with the current, and sometimes it goes against it. But through it all, we are to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. After all, we rely on God and our networking and journeying together. It is God's mission, and God remains our guide.

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## ICM MISSION IN BELGIUM

I have been listening to the different sharings today, bearing in mind the new initiative of my own congregation, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, ICM, namely, the start of an international community in mission in Belgium, in collaboration with the CICM congregation.

I recognize myself very well in what Fr. Christian shared about Europe and mission. As a missionary congregation that was founded in India at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a Belgian sister, Sr. Marie Louise De Meester, our history started with many Belgian sisters who left their country and were sent to different mission countries. For many years that reality remained: Belgium was a sending province. Though in the renewal chapter of 1968-69, with the new understanding of mission, all provinces became sending and receiving provinces, that was not fully enforced for the province of

Belgium. Sisters of other nationalities missioned to Belgium remained exceptions. A few sisters of other nationalities were involved in mission animation work in Belgium, one became part of the leadership team, one stayed on after her assignment in Congo, and another one came for a short term to minister in a community of elderly sisters. Two others were assigned in an inserted community in an area with many Turkish and Moroccan immigrants together with some Belgian sisters.

At the same time there have always been several Belgian sisters who, after returning from their mission, got involved in different projects in Belgium: in parishes, joining other organizations in reaching out to the poor, working with people of foreign backgrounds and the inserted community I was talking about a while ago. From their experience of having lived with people of different nationalities in their mission, they tried to be a bridge between the local population and the immigrants, the marginalized. This is very much part of our charism as missionaries: our Mother Foundress tells us *to have a generous and welcoming heart*, like that of Jesus, where the whole world may find room to dwell in.



Already at the turn of this century there were proposals for starting an international community in Belgium, but at that time it was not welcomed by the church authorities. The bishops had their own reasons not to fill the gaps left by a diminishing number of priests and religious in Flanders with missionaries of other cultures. But maybe it had also something to do with what was mentioned today: the reluctance in learning from others. The movement had always been in the other direction... "Flanders sent out its sons and daughters." But Flanders receiving

missionaries? I have heard from some of our sisters who were missioned in Belgium: several people frowned upon foreign missionaries coming to Belgium, as if to say: "What are you going to do here?"

At our last general chapter in 2016, the proposal for an international community in Belgium came up again and was accepted to be studied by the general leadership team. Looking at the context of our world and the reality of Belgium with the presence of people of different cultures and religions, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, we thought that, as a missionary congregation, we can indeed make a contribution of presence, accompaniment and assistance in the process of welcome and integration of these people. It was therefore decided to explore the possibility of establishing an international ICM community in Belgium. The process accelerated when it turned out that the CICM congregation also wanted to start a second international community in Belgium, in collaboration with another congregation. So, we have now two sisters studying the language in Belgium and one sister who is here with us in this session, impatiently awaiting her visa for Belgium. For that is not also simple.

Of course, aside from a very multicultural society, another reality is that the Belgian society is highly secularized. The church is going through a turning point and the change is very profound. We are saying goodbye to the era of the popular church, where Catholics made up a very high percentage of the population and the whole cultural landscape was Christian. The Church now has to find its place in this changed society. It is not clear what new form or character the church will take on in the emerging future.

It is in this reality that we have been invited by the diocese of Mechelen-Brussel to have a missionary community. The diocese made it very clear that it doesn't expect the missionaries to restore former church



situations, to recover what was lost. There is no way back. The missionaries are not expected to fill the gaps that have appeared in the pastoral practice. They are given the space to determine for themselves what their field of action will be. The existing faith communities will offer them a starting base and logistical support.

Surely, the missionaries will experience in their contacts with the church in transition that with some Christians there is still nostalgia for the 'success' of the past and the pain for what the church is losing. They will find Christians who are still in a process of mourning. They will find people who have formally left the church, deeply hurt by the cleric sex abuse scandals that have been revealed in the previous decades. It will be important for the missionaries to understand and interpret this grieving process and this experience of hurt. But the diocese doesn't see them accompanying what they call a 'palliative' process. They must not get stuck in the past, but are expected to give shape to a new form of Christian presence in society.

The diocese will give the missionaries space and time to search creatively for new forms of missionary presence. It is their hope that the missionaries will boldly fill that space and dare to add different emphases than what people are used to. They expect the missionaries to challenge them to renewal. For this, it is of course very important that the missionaries have a profound understanding of life in a secular society and the process of secularization. That is what Sr. Marie Helene made very clear in her introduction this morning. Otherwise, they may risk misinterpreting what they see happening.

It will be a mission of patience, of sowing small seeds: by their presence that connects people in the neighborhood, by having a listening ear to people's stories, by their attitude of service, a willingness to meet in depth, an honest witness of their life, creating a space of prayer, by bridging the gaps between peoples of different faiths and

cultures, rediscovering and sharing the richness of their own culture and faith, an openness to their fellow citizens, taking opportunities for deeper conversations and dialogues. Never in a pushing or aggressive way, but always as an offer, an invitation, with respect.

The diocese expects the missionaries to reach out to the periphery. In Mechelen, that can mean that they come home to the world of the young people, make friends with them, enter into listening to their life questions, or reach out to the poor and the people who can no longer fully participate in our society, start conversations and make friends with them.

Another hope of the diocese is that the missionaries will connect the small church in Belgium with the world church, helping the Christians not to fold back on themselves, but to open themselves to what Christians of different cultures can mean to each other in living the same faith. They can point to the needs of the different churches, but they can especially call attention to the wealth of faith and witness that the other churches can offer us in a mutual exchange.

Together with the whole church the essential question will be: How do we engage in a dialogue with our secular environment and what do we have to offer? How can we be unpretentious witnesses of our Christian faith in the different circumstances of life?

In our presence here in this session today, in the sharing of our speakers, I see the desire to walk together, from an awareness that none of us has the answers, none of us knows how and what will emerge from this present situation. In that sense, I experience here the call to the synodal movement which the whole Church is invited to reflect on and live.

Rather than being pessimistic or fearful about a secular Europe and the place of the Church in it, I feel that today we have looked at possibilities and that it is even an exciting space to be in, and as Fr. Timothy reminds us: we don't need to fear this crisis, let us walk ways of hope and reconciliation!