

A Report on the 2007 Meeting of the European Federation of Married Priests

On the first week-end of July, delegates of all the member groups of the European Federation of Married Priests (from France, Spain, Belgium, Great Britain, Italy, Austria, and Germany) met in Brussels to discuss the status quo of the Federation, two years after its inception and after the World Congress at Wiesbaden. 16 people worked together for two days in a highly productive and brotherly and sisterly way. The meeting went on in French for the most part, but up to four other languages were also used.

On the basis of what delegates shared in the first session about the situation of their respective national groups, common issues were identified. The outcome of that was a list of four issues that will be important for the European Federation over the next few years :

1. All the groups should be visible enough in the public to be approachable for such people who have left the ministry, or are in the process of doing so, or are considering this. It is of utmost importance for us to be able to render services to these people. In view of this, the European Federation will establish its own web-site which will be set up, and usable, in five languages, viz. French, Spanish, English, Italian, and German. With a view to both improving internal communication and attracting new members, a special sub-network will be set up for younger priests (U 50) from all member countries who have left the ministry. The idea is for them to be able to meet and to share their experiences in a somewhat informal way.

2. Across the different member countries, there is vast variety of differing conditions re health assurance, rights to pension funds, conditions in joblessness etc. that transitioned priests must cope with. Seen that the European Union is planning to harmonise the differing national standards in all areas, we are hoping to collect all relevant data from our member countries and put them together so we can pass all this on the European Council as well as to the European Union (through the European Parliament). This shall be done through the good services of the international network "Church on the Move" which has been recognised as an INGO and can, therefore, do lobbying with the EU. It is our hope to be able to eventually obtain improvements in the living conditions of married priests throughout Europe.

3. Our contacts to other reform groups, particularly the existing networks, turned out to be another important issue. The European Federation cooperates with the European network "Church on the Move" and seeks similar relationships with other reform networks as well. It is felt that it is important to strengthen such networks because the collapse of the church structures in place seems unstoppable, and there must be safety nets for all of us to go to. Hence the idea that we should work away from a pyramid church towards a church of networks.

4. We urgently need a deepening of Christian spiritualities and a new wording of what our faith is about. That, too, shall be taken on, but not as a top priority. In this area, basic ideas like that of "we are church, all of us" or the question what it means to today to believe are at stake. All this will likely involve working with Basic Christian Communities - even if, in some of our countries, there are not many of them.

What this list shows very clearly is that the issue of fighting for the abolition of obligatory celibacy was not a topic at this meeting - contrary to the Wiesbaden congress two years ago where that issue had been upheld by certain people. Of course this issue will remain one for married priests, but this fight is generally regarded as pointless so that basically people are not willing to invest a lot of energy into it.

Another thing that became evident is that this federation sees itself as a movement of married priests and their wives and, thus, as one among many reform groups in the church.

Accordingly, membership is open to national groups of married priests and their wives, but not to other reform groups, let alone individuals. This federation, therefore, is itself a network of national groups of married priests and their wives.

