

## THE ROLE OF THE ECCLESIAL FAMILY IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE TODAY AS SEEN IN TWO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN HUNGARY

**Abstract:** The article deals with a new institutional form, the *spiritual* or *ecclesial family*, recently given official recognition by the Catholic Church, focusing on the forms of association arising from the particular organisational structure. Through the example of young religious communities founded in France and Spain and also established in Hungary, we can gain an insight into what it means today to live as a member of a spiritual community on both the practical and spiritual levels. The study shows the personal desires, experiences and commitments to faith that guide the lives of community members, and how their personal and community identity is shaped by the various forms of connection.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, religious communities, new forms of consecrated life, new evangelisation

It is a widely held perception that the Church is the big family of God's children. In vernacular usage the expression is applied to all persons who have been christened, those who consciously practice their faith and those who live it less intensively, through secular believers grouped in lay movements right up to persons belonging to the clerical order of the church, in short a very diverse and large community.

However, in the terminology of the Catholic Church we also find a relatively new and less well known expression, the *spiritual* or *ecclesial family*, a new institutional form that has been given official church recognition: it assumes membership of a particular community and requires serious faith and personal commitment on the part of its members.

Under the influence of the liturgical reforms and wave of renewal introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) many new spiritual movements and religious communities arose within the Catholic Church and over the decades have won recognition from the competent church authorities as associations of Christian believers or a new form of consecrated life. On a number of occasions

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Pope Saint John Paul II called them the first fruit of the council, the wealth of the Church, a gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Pope Benedict:

“There are always new forms of manifestation of the Holy Spirit, transforming the structure of the Church to make it alive and new.”<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis is on recognition and acceptance of novelty, the new charism.

The category of “new communities” thus comprises all the establishments that arose or received church recognition after the Second Vatican Council. It also includes communities that were formed before the council but for which the documents of the council played an important role in their recognition under canon law or the definition of their structure and government.

What characterises these new communities?

They simultaneously offer a personal and community experience in our secularising world. They constantly seek new means, authentic, living manifestation and active forms of religious practice that can lead people today to a deeper experience of God. Many people find their radicalism attractive, in cases they follow the early Christian pattern. The conscious commitment to the evangelical counsels and the effort to live a consecrated life go together with a practice of witness. For the most part these are grass roots initiatives, in which they are moved by the Spirit to embrace their vocation and serve the Church as a sign of unity in love. Their diversity enables individuals to find an expression of faith that suits their own spiritual nature and charism. They are characterised by complementarity, that is, a union and communion of different life states that is in line with today’s reality.

The expression “new community”<sup>3</sup> comprises a number of realities: private and official groupings of Christian believers, new monastic institutions, apostolic groupings, establishments that are still seeking their place and church recognition, and monastic, spiritual families. The latter is a new institutional form and at present numbers more than 50 new foundations in various places around the world.

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1 At Whitsun 1998 Pope John Paul II first invited the new communities and movements to Rome, and used the expression “new community” in connection with them.

2 The words of Joseph Ratzinger – at the time still cardinal – to those gathered at the 1998 meeting.

3 The “new communities” are a rather broad and complex concept; because it includes a great many and very different kinds of church reality, it cannot be easy or straightforward to categorise either, their canon law status is the result of a lengthy process of assessing and distinguishing. This can be explained in part by the young age of the communities, the resulting appearance of what in many cases are novel forms, the lack of centuries of experience, and the gradual transformation of the respect for traditions. They are often marked by difficulties of self-interpretation and enculturation, by a search for directions. At the same time we can speak of a religious reality with a striking presence in ever growing numbers all over the world, giving life and impetus to the Catholic Church and speaking authentically to people today. The majority were formed in the 1970s, mainly in France, Italy, Spain and Germany, the countries of Southern Europe with the desire to re-evangelise and to support the Church as it struggles with crisis.

The new form of consecrated life – that is, the communities that define themselves as *spiritual/ecclesial/monastic family* – represent a new canon law category within the Roman Catholic Church that is overseen by the Dicastery for Consecrated Life.

The given communities are generally made up of two or three branches: sisters' branch of consecrated life and a brothers' branch of consecrated life; the members of the male branch are brothers living a consecrated life and priests. In addition married or single persons also belong to them as an association or other form of connection; they represent the lay branch.

The members living a consecrated life take the familiar triple vow (obedience, chastity, poverty). The members of the lay branch commit themselves to the given charism with a promise and on the basis of spirituality. Whatever branch having its own independent government they are composed of, these communities have a common leadership. The aspiration to achieve communion is of fundamental importance. The Christian believers in different life states would like to fulfil their apostolic mission within a spiritual family, because they share in the same charism and spirituality. They support each other in living their Christianity, and in this way contribute to the sanctity of life of the individual and the community.<sup>4</sup> Their common training, common activity and missionary service help to form fraternal relations and a family spirituality among the members. In this way the Second Vatican Council opened new perspectives and the way for new initiatives in cooperation between the laity and the religious, creating more effective and at the same time more personal points of connection.

In November 2016 an international conference was held in Rome for the third time on the main topic of: new forms of the consecrated life<sup>5</sup> and new communities established after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>6</sup>

It can rightly be asked whether there is a need for the creation of new foundations or monastic institutions.<sup>7</sup> What are the particular forms best adapted to the new challenges of evangelisation, the spiritual needs and demands of our time?

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4 The Second Vatican Council stressed that in the Church everyone has a call to sanctity and sanctity has many faces.

5 CIC (Codex Iuris Canonici) canon 605: - "The approval of new forms of consecrated life is reserved only to the Apostolic See. Diocesan bishops, however, are to strive to discern new gifts of consecrated life granted to the Church by the Holy Spirit and are to assist promoters so that these can express their proposals as well as possible and protect them by appropriate statutes..."

6 On each occasion the meeting attracted great international interest: new communities come from all parts of the world. This time a speaker came from Hungary too in the person of Sister Márta Balog, who as a member of the Community of the Beatitudes and a canon lawyer, is well acquainted with the area. Her canon law licenciate titled "Développement de la signification théologico-canonique du canon 605 à l'aide des principes des canons 17 et 19 du CIC 1983" (Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2013) gives an insight into the complex question of new forms of consecrated life. I take this opportunity to thank her for her help on the subject.

7 It was stated at the conference that the new forms of consecrated life complement the mission and vocation of the existing institutions. At present several hundred newly established foundations are waiting for official church recognition.

In Hungary to the best of my knowledge only three religious communities<sup>8</sup> operate within such frames, two of which I have been able to contact in the course of my research to date. In this brief introduction to the families I have not aimed to present the canon law, theological or historical aspect, instead I have focused more on the internal motivations and spiritual dynamics, that is, on how members experience belonging to the given family or community. This naturally requires an outline of the often seemingly complex organisational structure of the different spiritual families. Through the Hungarian examples I have sought an answer to the question of how the wealth of the Church can be seen through the closer cooperation between lay persons and religious, and communion of the different life states. How does the diversity of different forms of connection and commitment to them serve unity? What additional benefit or value does belonging to the given community give to those living in a spiritual family? How can it serve the growth of their personal and collective identity and their religious life?

### Community of the Beatitudes<sup>9</sup>

The community was founded in the early 1970s by two young married couples in the south of France, who received a call to devote their lives to the service of God. The community now has around 1200–1300 members worldwide and is present in more than 30 countries.

The founding charism of the community: life in the Holy Spirit, communion of states of life, and the apostolic radiance arising from it, that bears witness to the diversity of the vocations that make up the Church and their complementary nature. Their spirituality has its sources in the teachings of Carmel and Eastern Christianity regarding the contemplative life, the practice of silent prayer and Eucharistic adoration. The special beauty and dignified celebration of their liturgies occupies a central place in their life. Although it began with charismatic inspiration, according to its self-interpretation it does not belong among the spiritual movements and today lives its vocation more as a consecrated community.

The community was recently reorganised as an official association of Christian believers under diocesan authority with the aim of becoming a new ecclesial family of consecrated life.<sup>10</sup> On 29 June 2011 the Dicastery of Consecrated Life (Rome) approved the new rules of the Community that comprises a sisters'

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8 *Das Werk* – The Cause of Christ (1938 Belgium), *Verbum Dei Missionary Communion and Missionary Family* (1963 Spain), *Community of the Beatitudes* (1973 France)

9 For the eight beatitudes, see: Mt 5, 3-12. – The community was first called the Community of the Lion of Judah and the Slain Lamb, then it later decided that in regions with different cultures the name Beatitudes would be more readily understood and symbolise openness to the poor.

10 On the essential elements and history of the Community's spirituality, see the article by Sister Beáta Mária Versegi: *Vigilia* 1999/9. 659–665, the community's website: [www.nyolcboldogsag.hu](http://www.nyolcboldogsag.hu), and a short outline: <http://www.jelujsag.hu/a-boldogsagok-kozossege>. Accessed on 17. 07. 2017.

consecrated branch, a brothers' consecrated branch (that also has priests among its members), and a lay branch. All three branches have a common government headed by a president elected by the consecrated members<sup>11</sup> while at the same time each branch has its own superior.



Ecclesial Family of the Beatitudes (2016)

The community has been present in Hungary since 1988, its members at present live and serve in two houses<sup>12</sup>. Only a few of the founding members in Hungary still live as members of the community. They came into contact with the community in their youth, after completing their studies, under the influence of experiences in France. They have represented continuity over the past 30 years, their average age is around 50 and today they are members of the consecrated branch, one of them is also the community's only priest. Most of those wishing to join came from the vicinity of Budapest or from the south of the Great Plain (the Szeged agglomeration). Even today the community exerts an attraction mainly in towns on the Great Plain and in Western Hungary. Most enquirers were college or university humanities students. In the first years under the influence of the initial enthusiasm many people – single persons, later also married couples and others preparing for a priestly vocation – joined for longer or shorter periods in the life of the community that was taking shape together with all its difficulties, then their lives later took a different course. The years around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by a search for directions and identity in the life of both the community and the individuals there. Many of them still belong to the circle of friends and supporters of the Community. Some of those who entered

11 When the consecrated members make their perpetual vow they receive four symbols from the superior: the brown scapular; the cross of olive wood, on which the symbol of the risen Christ can be seen; the ring which is a symbol of union with Jesus, and the choral robe that they will wear at litanies.

12 The establishment at Homokkomárom was made in 1990, in Budapest in 2006. Their first home was at Pélifyszentkereszt in the vicinity of Esztergom, in the Salesian house that was empty at the time but was returned to the order when it was relaunched in 1994. In recent years they have also been present in Kecskemét with a small community.

committed themselves in France or still live there while a number of others after several years of foreign mission recently returned to Hungary.

The members of the consecrated branch receive continuous theological and pastoral training; the experience gained in foreign houses is of value not only for the language skills but also contributes to the practice of community life. As a consequence all committed members have a high level of qualifications: they include persons with diplomas of teaching or theology, who take part in education, from religious instruction in schools up to university education. Their numbers include a canon lawyer, Christian anthropologist, supervisor, coach, clinical spiritual carer, and mental hygienist.

There are only 12 sisters, it has been years since any man entered the Community.



Eternal vow in the Community of the Beatitudes (December 2016, Homokkomárom)

Parallel with the internal, structural transformation of the community, new enquirers are also appearing. In recent years there have been mainly family vocations and they now form the lay branch of the community. Typically the families of former "shepherds"<sup>13</sup>, are returning as adult children to the community.

The members of the lay branch – who may be single, married, widowed or permanent deacons – live and work in the world and follow a kind of community way of life that is compatible with their vocation, in which community and individual prayer and efforts to achieve universal sanctity occupy a central place. They share in the mission and apostolic activity of the whole ecclesial family

<sup>13</sup> A leader elected by the community for a specified period, who may be a married man, single or a religious.

of the Community of the Beatitudes. In addition to the five Hungarian married couples<sup>14</sup> there is also a Hungarian eye specialist whose unusual life career has included twenty years of service in Africa,<sup>15</sup> who has made a commitment as a lay member with a private vow. He joined the community in the early 1990s and since then, as the only eye specialist in the Congo, he has restored the eyesight of tens of thousands.

However there are more forms of connection and association in the *Ecclesial Family* outside the branches mentioned above for families, single persons and young people living in the world. Individuals in all the forms of commitment belong to a house or particular foundation.

The oldest form of association is *Friends of the Lamb* created for laypersons. They would like to live a prayer life inspired by the community's liturgy and participate actively in the mission of the community. In their prayers they convey the permanent prayer intentions of the Community.<sup>16</sup> They may also receive an individual mission, contained in their mission letter. According to their commitment they regularly partake of the Eucharist and live an evangelical Christian life, they devote their lives to Mary. They undertake a responsible commitment to a mission or apostolic activity of the Community or their own parish. They regularly visit the Community, several times a year.

"I am present among them not as a guest but as a family member. They are like the pillars of a church for me," said a woman, a widow living in a town in Western Hungary, speaking about her connection to the community.<sup>17</sup>

When they make their commitment, all members of Friends of the Lamb are given a small metal cross with the motif of the Lamb. Their commitment is made for a year and can be renewed annually. The text of the commitment contains the essential elements of the community's spirituality:

"My Lord, my God, with the desire of belonging even more to you, and of living my Christian consecration, I beseech you, make me a true friend of Jesus, a friend of the immaculate Lamb, who loved and gave his life for me, may I become like him in his offer of love.

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14 Besides Budapest, they live in Nagykanizsa, Kecskemét and Hódmezővásárhely – from couples with young children to grandparents with numerous grandchildren.

15 Richárd Hardi speaks about his life, among others about his commitment lived in the Community, in a recently published book, see: SIMON 2017.

16 To pray for the glorious coming of Christ, for the preaching of the Gospel, for the unity of the Church, for vocations and for the fulfilment of God's plans for the people of Israel.

17 Because of the confessional nature of the personal declarations and sentiments, anonymity of informants appeared to be the ethical solution as they revealed the most intimate areas of their lives in the course of the conversations. I have tried to characterise them by their family status and location.

I wish to await your coming Kingdom with vigilance and joy, and I wish to anticipate the life of the Lord's Kingdom with constant prayer, praise and active love of my fellow men.

I commit myself to strive for constant conversion, and so allow the fire of the Holy Spirit to reshape me, and to contribute to the renewal of the Church.

I wish to follow with trust the will of the Lord, the example of the Virgin Mary and her maternal guidance.

I commit myself to live in fraternal unity with the Community of the Beatitudes and the other Friends of the Lamb in soul, in prayer, in mutual help, in the service of the Church.

I wish to follow the Lamb wherever it leads, in trust and happy hope."<sup>18</sup>

Temporary commitment, a form of association known as *Disciples of the Lamb* is intended mainly for the younger age group, persons up to the age of 35; it is for three years, with at least four weekends spent annually in a community. Following intensive spiritual and theological training and the experiences gained in community life, and the experience of finding a personal vocation and mission, they gladly help the apostolic and missionary activity of the community, and take an active part in organising the summer camps for young people and retreats. The final act of the Mount Tabor Days, now being organised for the twentieth year is the commitment of new members, made in the midst of the celebrating community. According to the organisers, the greatest benefit and fruit of the camp is that each year participants depart with a living, increasingly personal experience of God.<sup>19</sup>

In Hungary the diocesan priests – at present five in number – belonging to the *Priestly Fraternity of the Beatitudes* established in the autumn of 2015 live in country towns and in Budapest. In addition to their diocesan service, as far as possible they share in the mission and services of the community.

"The beauty of the liturgies, their fitting celebration also serve to deepen the unity among us. Those who come to us can share in this beauty. It is the divine and the beauty from the divine that touched me most deeply,"

said a priest serving in a town on the Great Plain<sup>20</sup> as a member of the Priestly Fraternity.

These forms of association, that merge with the community as a whole and in the final analysis embody the spiritual family, regularly come together. The aim

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18 Extract from a vow received from a Friend of the Lamb, its source is unknown.

19 See the report on the most recent Mount Tabor Days: Kiss 2017. 3.

20 Under his influence the presence of the community has also grown stronger in the Holy Family Parish from the autumn of 2015.

of the meetings is for the members of the community in different life states but committed in the same spirituality to pray together and to strengthen each other with their personal and spiritual experiences. Through the liturgies and fraternal togetherness in the community the participants can experience their belonging to one body.

In June 2016 the first Hungarian meeting of the Spiritual Family of the Beatitudes was held in Homokkomárom in Zala County in the community's house that has been operating there since 1990.



Prayer said for members of the Lay Branch of the Community (June 2016, Homokkomárom)

The outstanding events of the weekend were the commitments: several members of the priestly fraternity renewed their vows, and one priest made his first commitment for one year. In the lay branch established in 2011 four married couples made commitments for three years. Extract from the text of the offering made before the commitment by lay candidates:

*“My Lord, my God, I long to belong even more to you, and to live my Christian consecration more fully. Therefore I beseech you to make me a student of Jesus, and may I be ever more like Him in his sacrifice of love through my temporary commitment in the Community of the Beatitudes.*

*I wish to live according to the spirit of the apostolic counsels and the Eight Beatitudes, to be a prophetic sign in this world of the coming kingdom of God.*

*Lord, I believe that the Community of the Beatitudes is a member of your Body, the Church, that you have chosen for a special mission. I wish to give myself to the Lord, freely and of my own free will, and to do everything so that in the coming period, with the help of*

the Holy Spirit I can live my own lay vocation ever more fully in the Community of the Beatitudes.”<sup>21</sup>



Commitment of married couples in the Lay Branch (June 2016, Homokkomárom)

While the prayer for the newly committed couples was being said, a white cappa<sup>22</sup> was held above them, which as a symbol of the Holy Spirit is also a sign of their sharing in the prophecy and charism of the community.

The temporary vow gives concrete form to a promise, an undertaking set out by the couple in a personal charter, preceded by a letter of motivation: what they feel called for, what they are able/would like to undertake in the church services, individual prayer life, collective activities and contacts with the community; above all, joint participation in the liturgies, in instructions for betrothed couples, spiritual days or concrete assistance in other activities offered by the local church community. The prayer evenings held by the community – the Pure Love Prayer Evening, or paraliturgies held in memory of Blessed Sára Salkaházi and Saint Therese of Lisieux attract growing numbers and considerable help is needed for their organisation.

In the course of conversations with the families it became clear that the main motivation for entering the community was the communion of life states. “We are not members of a third order, we can be members of the community as laypersons,” they said. “It gives us enormous richness that we are able to belong to such a community where there are persons living consecrated lives,” said a young Budapest couple. We are able to form much closer and more personal contacts than in the form of the well known Third Order connection.

“The reality of the complementarity also means that it is not the person living a consecrated life or the priest who experiences the

21 Text of a ceremony received from a young Budapest couple during a personal interview, the source is unknown.

22 Cape with a hood, worn by committed members during the ceremony.

spirituality that is shared by the laypersons; they live the same spirituality as laypersons, as priest, as consecrated,"<sup>23</sup>

says a consecrated sister.

It is of fundamental importance to respect the characteristics of the different life states. The family has much greater dignity in the community, there is place for the children. The (close) coexistence and the often mutual interdependence of the different realities is a concrete help in everyday activities and services<sup>24</sup> and it also represents a personal connection with community members with different life states. In the words of a father of several children:

"I learn a lot from my children, and this also represents learning for the lay and consecrated members of the community. Learning to see things the way children do, a special way of seeing and immersion in it."

"Living as a member of a spiritual family goes beyond personal friendships and close human relations, that would not be enough in itself because the mutual relations rest not only on human pillars..."

he added.

"A conscious yes for every day, for every difficulty I face, that I do not bear alone. If I think about my days, there is much more gratitude and thanks in them, I am beginning to learn that I can count not only on myself and that is good. The community sustains and holds us together, we can experience the power and blessing of shared prayer on our lives and our connections,"

was the opinion of an older head of family living in a large country town.

According to the confession of the community, the life of the community is modelled on the Holy Family of Nazareth.

"We enter the school of Nazareth to learn to live not for ourselves but for others; to rediscover the true meaning of human relations. We strive to transform our houses into real families."<sup>25</sup>

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23 See VERSEGI 1999. 660.

24 A regular "division of labour" arose between a consecrated sister and a family with small children living nearby, in which the mother could go for the Eucharist while the sister cared for her daughter. Everyone benefited.

25 <http://docplayer.hu/993322-Nyolc-Boldogsag-Katolikus-Kozossege.html>. Accessed on: 24 September 2017.

The Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity and Missionary Family also conveys communion and the mystery of the mission. Its establishment can be a good example of the appearance of new forms of consecrated life parallel with or even before the Vatican Council. In their case everything that was later expressed by the Council members was already becoming reality.

## Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity and Missionary Family



Verbum Dei Missionary Family (2015, Budapest)

The community was founded in Spain on the island of Mallorca in 1963 by a young novice seminarian.<sup>26</sup> A few years later the community composed of members in different life states was defined as an institute of contemplative-active consecrated life and fully apostolic mission. On 15 April 2000 the Congregation for Consecrated Life recognised the community as an institute of pontifical

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26 Ft. Jaime Bonet (1926–2017) who died recently not only accompanied and assisted the life of the community right from the start: he was its life force, a tireless evangeliser, a good shepherd of the tree that he planted and that came to flower. In 1994 he participated in Rome in the Episcopal Council on “The consecrated life and mission in the church and the world”, as founder and representative of the New Forms of Consecrated Life. He led many retreats, it was very important for him that the community should have well trained missionaries.

right, as a “new form of consecrated life”. The community’s particular charism is expressed in its name: at the heart of the Verbum Dei Family lies the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity, comprising three branches: the male and female consecrated missionaries, and the missionary married couples. At present its members number around 400 consecrated women and 200 consecrated men (of whom 60 are priests) worldwide. They are present in more than 30 countries, in around 100 local communities. Most are in Spanish-speaking territories, in countries of South America, but they also have a substantial presence in Africa and Australia. The three branches have a common Constitution and rules, legally they constitute a community in which the charism and missionary activity is shared by all members.

The Verbum Dei Missionary Family belongs to the Community; here men and women in various life states from all parts of the world serve in different forms of connection. Families and single persons commit themselves as associate members, as members of the spiritual family.

In the Verbum Dei Family commitment can be made at various levels:

All those who are attracted to the spirituality, live the charism in everyday life and are faithful to it can be members of the Missionary Family in the wider sense. This enables them to participate actively in programmes organised by the community, in community masses and in various services. One form of formal commitment according to a concrete rule is to live as a consecrated missionary in the world: as their name shows, they retain their secular existence but live in celibacy and committed by a personal vow, and also undertake participation in training and missionary work. They form the lay branch of the community.

The male and female missionaries in the consecrated branch of the fraternity opt for even closer unity and take a perpetual vow “placing” themselves in the hand of the general superior and the president of the community. While committing themselves to a concrete branch, they become members of the entire Fraternity, officially represented by the President. This is why both leaders are present when the vows are made. In the branch of missionary couples, married couples commit themselves with a private vow where the unanimous intention of both members of the couple is required. The different branches meet several times a year in their zones or regions, sometimes meeting only with members of their own branch, at other times with all branches. At these meetings they participate in common religious exercises, further training, community building and recreational programmes, collectively planning their apostolic life. The Missionary Family groups meet regularly every week or month for common training, prayer, conversation and agapé that helps to foster a sincere, family atmosphere and community sharing.

What do they accept, what calling do they answer?<sup>27</sup>

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27 For the commitment of the different branches, see the annex.

In the spirit of the first Christian community they devote their lives entirely to prayer, to serving and spreading the Word, so that they can form apostles for Christ from people of all life states, gender, race or social situation, to spread the kingdom of God. Accordingly they carry out highly varied and many-layered apostolic activity: from university ministries through parish services to a wide range of pastoral areas.



Eternal vow in Saint Stephen's Basilica, in the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity (2012, Budapest)

The community settled in Hungary in January 2002 in the Esztergom-Budapest Archdiocese with the permission of Cardinal Dr. László Paskai, to help the re-evangelisation of the Hungarian church with their charism. At present three missionaries who have taken perpetual vows – a German, a Hungarian and a Peruvian sister – form the Hungarian consecrated branch, with residence in Budapest.<sup>28</sup> All three entered the community at an early age, they have served among others in Germany, Spain and the American

continent, they have diplomas of theology and have also undergone training within the frames of the Ignatius Spirituality Centre in accompanying retreats and as spiritual guides.

Their service covers mainly Budapest and the agglomeration. They hold retreats, prayer and apostolic schools, lead schools of the Word regularly every week in Spanish and Hungarian to which they welcome anyone who shows interest with an open heart. With their sound theological training and experience, they take part in pastoral activity among young people. Every week they send daily meditations to those who feel the need for spiritual impulses. They offer personally accompanied retreats and spiritual programmes for all age groups. The convent of the Cistercian Sisters in Kismaros is their favoured place that often receives them for retreats. Most of the participants are members of the intelligentsia. On individual request they undertake personal pastoral care and spiritual guidance, providing a supportive presence in crises and difficult life stages. One of the pillars of their spirituality is apostolic activity and apostolic training for adults. To teach and bear witness so that they too teach others and become witnesses. Their presence in the life of local parishes is of key importance: from leading acts of adoration to community leading, through supporting family groups to preparation for confirmation. They strive to be a leaven until they have formed a

<sup>28</sup> Zsuzsanna Czupy (1973-), Iria Staat (1965-), Barbara Luz Vera Villar (1970-). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Zsuzsanna Czupy, consecrated sister, local superior for her help in connection with this study.

community.<sup>29</sup> It is very important for them to strengthen the local communities and groups and help the faithful to form a personal, living relationship with God and so live a responsible, mature, committed Christian life in the Church.

Everywhere they live as small families of a few members together with the committed community members, on the basis of conscious decisions. In their view the important thing is not addressing the masses,

“... because we deal with individuals, but this does not exclude the possibility that in some countries several hundred people take part in the Word schools. It is not the creation of an isolated community for its own sake that is the essence, but building a family around ourselves. The Fraternity is the driving force of the Missionary Family that it supports and strives to incorporate into a far wider family in which all kinds of life states are present and so everyone can find their place and vocation,”

says the Hungarian superior of the community. The family-style meetings, group sharing and quality spiritual content and teachings give them their distinctive image. They are characterised by the duality of their contemplative and apostolic spirituality. As the Hungarian superior noted:

“The spiritual family is none other than a spiritual home where one can draw nourishment, grow stronger and strengthen each other, where each family member contributes to the growth of the family with their own personality and charism. As a member of the spiritual family it is not only my own humanity and the growth of my faith that matters: I am also responsible for the others and for the growth of the Church in faith,”

said the sister of German origin.

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29 The community's current superior in Hungary writes about their vocation as follows: “When we came to Hungary we contacted the local parish and the university chaplaincy. We offered retreats, spiritual weekends, we held seminars to spread the faith, we helped in the group preparing for confirmation, the everyday spiritual practice, and we watched to see who are the people called by God to be his apostles. After two years we had to move to another apartment that was in the area of another parish. We noticed in the parish that the faithful quickly dispersed after mass, and although they had been going there for 40 years they did not know each other, there was no community life. When in 2007 the City Mission was coming up, the parish priest asked us to be coordinators of the mission in the parish. We held retreats, prayer groups, sharing after communion and mass for the faithful, where they gradually got to know each other. All the faithful in the parish shaped the programme for the City Mission. It included musical devotions, a choral evening, a play in the church on the life of its patron saint, adoration of the Eucharist, and a family day. The feedback from the faithful was that they had come to feel that they were coming home to the parish, a community had been created. This community is still alive despite the fact that we had to leave, because the Lord called us elsewhere. We gave them the tools that they still use.”

## Few lessons

I see as a common feature in the life of the spiritual families that the founders responded to the call of the Spirit and acted freely, while performing a wide variety of apostolic services to develop and live their own charism as fully as possible, for the renewal of the Church. The individual conversations showed the path taken by all committed members that led to making their personal decisions and offering to the community charism.

The path that they follow together as members of the spiritual family is both a service, a source of joy and a sustaining force. It not only strengthens their personal and community identity, their connection to God, it is also a sign in our time, a kind of radical answer to how the personal vocation can become a life-long profession.

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