



Not only folklore

Participants of the Fifth Pan-European Forum of Brotherhoods and Confraternities prayed in the Chapel of the Miraculous Image.

POSTED ON 04/28/2024 FIG. REV. TOMASZ WOJTAL

The Second National Forum of Brotherhoods and Confraternities was held in Częstochowa. It was also the Fifth meeting of Brotherhoods and Confraternities operating throughout Europe. The participants of the forum shared the experience of their presence in the Church and reflected on the future of the communities.



The meeting, organized by the Pallottine Fathers from the Valley of Mercy, in cooperation with the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Katowice, was attended by about 100 members of brotherhoods from all over Europe. The event was held under the honorary patronage of the Council for the Lay Apostolate of the Polish Episcopal Conference.

The first part of the meeting took place on Saturday, April 27, in the Valley of Mercy and was also a summary of the research project conducted by the ISKK, "Confraternities – an element of the Polish regional and national tradition: documentation, animation and integration". A conference devoted to this subject was given by Prof. Marcin Jewdokimow.

In the next part of the meeting, the members of the fraternities shared their experience and participated in workshops, during which they looked for common ways and directions of action. They reflected on the challenges they faced. They pointed to the need for formation and the need for cooperation between confraternities operating in different regions of Europe.

Proper rootedness

– The first axis of our activity is prayer, and the community helps us to organize it. It is much easier to pray in two or three, according to the words of Jesus," said Michel Ramousse, vice-president of the federation of confraternities of penitents operating in France and the principality of Monaco. He also pointed to other areas of involvement. – It is important to participate in the public activity of the Church, in liturgical celebrations and celebrations in the cathedral, as well as in processions. Other goals of our activity are charitable service, i.e. helping the poorest in cooperation with many local associations, as well as spiritual formation. Together with our priest, we try to participate in the formation proposed by the Church – he added. He also emphasized the historical dimension of the brotherhood and its impact on the local community. The confraternity in the town of Puy-en-Velay, to which it belongs, was founded in 1584 and operates at one of the oldest sanctuaries in Europe. As early as 1926, individual brotherhoods created an organization associating communities from all

over France. Thanks to this, it became possible to exchange experiences and mutual cooperation between individual units.

The situation is slightly different in Switzerland. It was told by David Adamoli, representing two brotherhoods operating in Lugano. In his statement for the Sunday Guest, he drew attention to the spiritual atmosphere of the meeting in Częstochowa and the experience of fraternal community. He stated that fraternities in Poland and Switzerland face a similar challenge – the need to integrate many groups operating in regions with different cultural specificities. "The work we have undertaken will certainly bear fruit. In our country, only in the Italian-speaking part there is an organization associating various brotherhoods. In the others, each organization operates separately. We plan to create a structure that would coordinate the life and activities of all fraternities," he said.

He also stressed the need to deepen the spiritual life of the members of the brotherhoods. "For many, participation only means external belonging. Its motif is tradition, and the greatest risk is to stop at the level of folklore. We are looking for a way of functioning that will make us more rooted in Christ, in our common faith and in love.

He stressed the necessity of building the Church based on a concrete experience of faith and love. – I hope that you experience community in the Church. That you do not associate the Church only with a soulless, cold institution without a heart, with rules, rules and regulations enforced coldly and mercilessly. Of course they are important, but they cannot be the essence of the Church. I hope that you have experienced what St Thérèse of Lisieux experienced, that the Church has a heart and that love is at its centre. I hope that in the Church you have met not only gospel theorists who can speak beautifully of love, but that you have met someone who has welcomed you, no matter what.

He also drew attention to the historical development of brotherhoods that occurred in the Roman Empire after the legalization of Christianity as the state religion. "In the following centuries, their structures and goals diversified. Among them, an important place was occupied by brotherhoods that took care of the formation of their members. Today, the confraternities are engaged in the development of worship, Christian

culture, liturgy and catechesis. I am glad that after the meetings in France and Portugal, and before the meeting in Rome, Poland was chosen as the venue for the international forum, which was joined by members of the brotherhoods from our homeland.

He also noted that today's fraternities face two dangers. The first is to focus on the outward signs of belonging to the community. – In the very word 'brotherhood' there is a thought about community. I'm in a fraternity, that is, the other one is like my brother, like my sister. It is important that the element of your community is not only what is external. Sometimes among the members of the fraternity one can see such a tendency to take care of the outfit first of all, to be visible through the outfit. Let us always remember that the greatest garment we have in the Church is the robe of Holy Baptism. It means that we have put on Christ (cf. Gal 3:27). All other garments are important, but not the most important. They indicate our desire to become more like Christ in a particular way. This is the meaning of the monastic habits or the costumes of your confraternities. If, however, we forgot that humble baptismal garment while putting them on, we would be pathetic, ridiculous, and parade. You can also wear a colorful outfit on the mannequin, but the mannequin will not turn into a living person. Saint Paul asks us not to boast of our appearances, but of the interior of our hearts (cf. 2 Cor 5:12).

Another danger, which the Metropolitan of Katowice pointed out, consists in emphasizing one's own distinctiveness within the Church. – The second danger that the members of fraternities face is emphasizing the part before the whole. It is more important for me to belong to a fraternity than to the Church. Such an attitude would also be scandalous. I am a member of the church fraternity only as a member of the Church. The laws of the confraternities must not be in conflict with what the Church teaches, nor can they take precedence over it. Confraternities must be part of the Church, a concrete way of involving the lay faithful in the mission of the Church. Otherwise, they would have become a Catholic sect.

Understanding the current needs

of the Society and the Confraternities have always responded to current needs and challenges. They developed in a particular way in the Middle Ages, although certain forms of association and organized organizationactivities related to charitable service, m.in, were already present in antiquity. The purpose of the confraternities was to lead a communal life of prayer and a broadly understood service of mercy. The idea of association, common prayer and helping those in need gained importance during the plague epidemic of the 14th century. The "Black Death" took the life of some, while in others it aroused the need for commitment.

Members of the fraternities served the sick with dedication, organizing clinics that later turned into hospitals. Other confraternities were engaged in burying the dead and accompanying the bereaved, caring for travelers who found themselves in a new environment without any means of subsistence. Anonymity was very important in the activities of some groups. It was provided by a habit, a hood pulled over the head and a face covering. When giving alms or visiting the sick, members of the fraternities often did not wear shoes. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize the benefactor. They were recruited from different social classes, but the idea of equality was important to them. Modesty, humility, and anonymous service, in which no one seeks his own glory, were the ideals of many brotherhoods.

Over the centuries, brotherhoods have adapted their activities to the needs of the times. In many cities in southern France, they often set up a kind of provident fund that could be used in times of crisis. Each member of the fraternity who cultivated the field pledged to give a small portion of the grain to the common granary. When one of the members of the fraternity did not benefit from the expected harvest, he benefited from the generosity of others.

Over time, their social role lost its importance. The development of hospitals, state-run social institutions and private funeral parlors has limited their involvement. Many brotherhoods disappeared from the map of southern France during the French Revolution. Nowadays, in some regions of Europe, a revival is observed.

Since 2020, annual meetings of fraternities and confraternities in Europe have been organized. The first one took place in Lugano, Switzerland, and the next ones: in Malaga (Spain), in Nice (France) and in Mafra (Portugal). Present at this year's forum was Marco Lucente from the Dicastery for Evangelization. He invited the participants of the meeting to participate in the upcoming Jubilee Year. From May 16 to 18, 2025, a meeting of brotherhoods and confraternities will take place in Rome.

According to the data of the National Forum of Brotherhoods and Confraternities, there are 872 registered communities in Poland.

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