

Main findings / messages received from the Passau community, 27-29 May 2018

Two Members of the Provincial solidarity Commission spent three days with the Passau Marist community, a layman, J.-Claude Boidin and J.-Bernard Jolly sm. They were welcomed with great warmth and the community was fond to present its activities, without sparing its time among the innumerable responsibilities they are in charge of.

The present community in Passau is composed of five Marist fathers, four of whom have been here since the community was established in 2009/2010, and one joined the community in 2014. Settled in the heart of the city, in an old Franciscan cloister, the community is responsible for a Votive church where offices are held and confessions offered on weekdays. This ministry of confession is important for the diocese. The Marist presence in Passau has a long history, through the house of Fürstenzell, not far from Passau, that was for long a scolasticate and is now an important high-school, the Maristengymnasium.

Live here and now, according to the ignatian motto "hic et nunc": the Passau community seeks to engage through direct contacts with its local environment, rather than responding to distant challenges or seeking external collaborations.

It is quite difficult, and often artificial to try and distinguish the solidarity engagements of the community from its pastoral functions. Most engagements involve both aspects. When visiting prisons or attending the telephone counselling service, we also convey our faith. We meet with persons of diverse religious attitudes, we have to be a presence in their difficulties and a call for a spiritual progress. The group of young Eritrean Christians who comes to the "Votiv Kirche" is first and foremost attracted by the possibility to celebrate their church service, with their own priest. The practice of confessions open to all could also be acknowledged as a social function.

At the Passau community, social or solidarity engagements correspond to individual choices, and will often differ from one member to another. These activities are shared through regular exchanges between community members. The degree of social engagement can be different between the Marists, quite high for some, less significant for others : "I consider myself as a priest, and not as a social worker".

The Passau community does not necessarily engage in the most immediate or visible social challenges (Food distributions like Passau Tafel, hosting refugees..), as soon as these are adequately tackled by public authorities and established NGOs like Caritas, even when the community is closely in touch with it through the parishes. The main engagements of the Passau community relate to the Telephone Seelsorge Helpline, prisons, chaplaincy in the children hospital and with university students, and presence in schools, including the Maristengymnasium in Fürstenzell. Religious teaching is part of the schools curriculum.

The community is aware that the impact of its social work is considerably increased when it can mobilize volunteers, as is the case with the telephone helpline (close to 100 volunteers, besides a professional team) or the Catholic Students group (around 25). Hence the importance of raising awareness, particularly in schools, to encourage solidarity in the wider public.

Christianity is still influential In Bavaria, and Catholicism is firmly rooted in society. This partly determines the community action and its engagements. There is a good collaboration with the Passau diocese, which offers a substantial support to the Marist community and funds part of its activities. The community is thus less in need of support from the Marist province or broader Marist family.

Contacts with University students, who form a dynamic group in Passau, enhance the “missionary” role of the Marist community. This city of 50 000 inhabitants welcomes 20 000 students. They are of various religions, coming from all over Germany and from some foreign countries. The Catholic Students Association plays a very important part, and can be seen both as a channel to reach out to the University and a mirror for the Marist community itself. In our encounter with this group, in its monthly session, one of them talked about the “full awareness”, a Buddhist concept which fits well with the way their Christian faith has to develop in an uncertain world, and is in coherence with the Marist spirit.

The Passau community is not keen at projecting itself towards the future. “The future will take care of itself, let us deal with today’s challenges”. However, several members express a degree of concern in relation to structural change (rapid ageing of the Marist congregation, arrival of Indian priests in German parishes without priests, with no link to a missionary project...). The secularisation is slowly progressing even in the Catholic Bavaria.

The Passau community appreciates the stability of its membership over time (4 of the 5 members have already spent 8 years here). Should a newcomer join, it is felt he would need time to adapt to the local environment and to engage with local communities.

While some would like the social engagement of Marist communities to be better known and better recognized by the Province, they do not consider it important to ensure its visibility for the wider public; this would not correspond with the Marist attitude (charisma) based on proximity and discretion. No service activity without reference to interior life and a call to spiritual work from inside. Seeking for visibility is an illusion, mission is no proselytism.

Finally, it is felt that the “Marist spirit” is the main cement that links all the Marist communities together, rather than organised communications or structured relations. The commitments of the Passau Marist community may all but comfort the other Marist communities in their own commitments.