

Some thoughts about the recent pilgrimage in the steps of the founder

I have been asked to give some thoughts about the recent pilgrimage in the steps of the founder, still so vividly present in the minds of those who took part. My first impression is of the wonderfully well organised programme. Each day had its different itinerary and purpose, but all came together and made a coherent whole. This can be seen on the Josephite website, as well as on the websites of the different congregations, where each day's programme has its place in the daily reports.

I was also struck by the ever-growing friendship of the members of the various congregations founded by Constant van Crombrugghe. It is striking how our coming together is now a renewal of links from other occasions when we have done things together. There is a genuine sense of happiness in each others company, and plenty to talk about. Especially to be able to catch up with the news of how things are going in this place or that, and with those people who couldn't be with us, was a very important part of what was going on all the time in various conversations.

For myself, too, I gained some new insights into the reasons for various decisions taken by the Founder in the early days of the congregations. Particularly, I had not realised how much diocesan policy at that time came into play in the different dioceses where our roots lie, and how much the influence of the different bishops was felt. Visiting the actual places brings home the interplay of such historical pressures. We had the time, too, to see the actual parishes where the young priest van Crombrugghe spent his early ministry, and to see as well the homes of those of his parishioners who became his lay collaborators. This lay collaboration seems to have been a mark of his way of working, and now perhaps is coming to be the way of the future.

Again from a personal point of view, the chapel in the school at Alost where the young head teacher so often prayed, made a deep impression on me. There is a picture over the altar showing the Holy Family on the way to exile in Egypt; St. Joseph leads the way forward, but looks back over his shoulder to an angel of God who is directing and encouraging him forwards. I thought of how often Fr. Constant would have prayed before the tabernacle and the image on the picture over it. Moments of realisation such as these can never be felt as deeply from books or study as they can be from a moment of empathy such as that.

Finally, the new collaboration, and genuine warmth, shown by the various lay collaborators was a source for me of genuine pride. In all of the schools and apostolates there are now lay men and women who appreciate the spiritual legacy left by the four congregations. I noticed this particularly in the Josephite schools, perhaps naturally, and thought with gratitude of the generations of Josephites who had created this family atmosphere, and of those who still live in the school community. The teacher at Louvain who showed my group round gave a wonderful, and totally natural, explanation of the Josephite family spirit before saying he wasn't quite sure what it was. He obviously did, though, and put it into practice. So those are my impressions of a wonderful week which I shall treasure the memory of for a long time.

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