

Fraternity of Priests Goes to Slovenia

By Fr. Bob Franco, Cleveland Fraternity

It is sort of a joke in Slovenia. When asked, "What are the three largest Slovenian cities in the world?" the answer is, "Ljubljana, Maribor and Cleveland." That's right! The city of Cleveland has between 60,000 and 80,000 Slovenian immigrants. It was fitting then, as a native Clevelander, that I should go to Slovenia and sow the seeds of Fraternity among their clergy.

Slovenia is the most northern part of what was Yugoslavia. About the size of New Jersey, this relatively prosperous country of two million inhabitants borders Italy, Austria, Hungary, Croatia and the Adriatic Sea. The country has much physical beauty: lush forests, fertile plains, a portion of the Julian Alps, the limestone mountains in the east called the Kras, and just a sample of the blue waters of the Adriatic.

However, over forty years of Communist rule by Tito has taken its toll. Though the Church was not



The group begins to assemble and gather for the conference.

outwardly persecuted, social and economic advancement depended on belonging to the Communist party. The Church's moral influence on society was shut down. Even today, ten years after the collapse of Communism in Yugoslavia, the abortion rate almost equals the birth rate. Slovenia's suicide rate is the second highest in Europe.

I joined up with Renewal Ministries, which had been working with renewal leaders in Slovenia for a number of years. This mission in Slovenia, May 16-24, would consist of two FIRE rallies, a number of street evangelization events, and a priest retreat.

After a day of travel and getting settled in at our home base in Ljubljana, the team pressed on to Maribor for an evening reception with the Bishop. The FIRE rally was held the following day. It was unlike the FIRE rally I had experienced in the United States. Each talk was followed by a prayer ministry

time. It was here that I came to know some of the burdens and pains the people of Slovenia suffer. In both FIRE rallies, the Lord used these moments to set His people free.

On the lighter side, the first person I prayed with in Maribor, Peter, ministered to Fr. Mike Scanlan and myself in a providential way. Our team was to report to the bus immediately after the closing mass for the trip back to Ljubljana and the next day's FIRE rally. Since we had to take off our vestments for mass, we came out to the parking lot a few minutes late, only to see our bus driving away without us! Though my shouting and arm waving did not attract the attention of anyone on the bus, I did get the attention of someone along the road where the bus was traveling. You guessed it! It was Peter. He was able to flag down the bus and we were able to board.

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Twenty-three priests from all three diocese of Slovenia (Ljubljana, Maribor and Koper) attended the retreat in Celje. The focus of the retreat was Pope John Paul's apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Pope's plan for the new millennium. Ralph Martin, Fr. Mike Scanlan and Peter Hrbeck challenged the priests: "put out into the deep." They taught that parishes were to become

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Fr. Bob Franco listens intently to the presenters.
(Fr. Franco seated in left foreground)

Dear Friends of the Priesthood

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Dear Friends of the Priesthood,

How is your Summer going? Hopefully it is restful and rejuvenating for you and your loved ones. This month I'd like to share a reflection on Lk. 9:51, 57-62. Biblical scholars tell us that verse 51 is the turning point of Luke's Gospel where Jesus "resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem" to face His passion and death. I'm sure He wasn't crazy about going there, and He probably dreaded the idea. However, He was "determined" to go and He set His sights on the journey to fulfill His father's will for our salvation. Stop for just a moment: think of how much you mean to God!! The rest of Luke's Gospel describes this journey to Jerusalem.

Vv. 57-62 describes three "would-be" followers of Jesus. The first tells the Lord that he will follow Him anywhere. Jesus tells him how difficult it is to be a disciple. He lays all the cards out on the table: foxes have dens, birds have nests, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head". It's as if the Lord is saying, "if you would follow Me, count the cost and know what you are doing." So often the response to the Lord doesn't seem to make much of a difference to people; yet, it makes all the difference in the world!

Jesus invites a second person to follow who responds, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." Jesus' response to this request seems heartless and harsh, "Let the dead bury their dead." Let's look at this a bit. Perhaps the man's father isn't dead or even near death; maybe he is still a young man. When the Lord calls, that moment is the critical moment, not at some future time when I think I might be more ready to respond (when I'm holier, or more free, or richer, etc.). If I put off the response to a later time, I might miss the call altogether. When the Lord knocks at the door, the challenge of the moment is to open the door—as St. Paul reminds us, "Now is the acceptable time, now is the moment of salvation" (2Cor. 6. 2).

To the third "would-be" follower who asks to say farewell to his family Jesus paints a vivid image: "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God." The Lord always calls us forward; if we keep looking back at what we've left, we'll have disastrous results. It's like driving down

a highway with one's hands on the steering wheel and one's eyes riveted to the back seat—disastrous! How many of us keep looking back to the "good ole d a y s" — o u r churches were full, people had more respect, etc. The reality is that the Lord is calling us

here and now, the "good ole days" are history; the Lord of history calls us forward. There is a great rose window in Precious Blood Church in Woonsocket, Rhode Island (where I am pastor) of St. George slaying a dragon. It contains two simple Latin words which I believe should be the motto for every Christian: "Numquam retro"—"Never backwards!"



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As Jesus resolutely sets His mind to journey to Jerusalem and to the cross for our salvation, He invites His disciples to journey with Him and to have the same determination. It is not an easy journey, it calls for the cross, but our response is critical and forward. The Lord invites us as He has invited disciples for centuries, "Follow Me!"

As we in the Fraternity of Priests seek to respond wholeheartedly to the Lord's call, and to bring other priests along with us, please know that your prayers and generosity are vital. It is the prayers and donations of our friends and benefactors that enables us to continue to proclaim a message of hope and restoration to our brother priests. Once again, thank you and God bless you. Remember to pray for your parish priest.

In Jesus,

Fr. John

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schools of prayers and communities that evangelized.

It was at this point that I was able to deliver the message of Fraternity of Priests. The call of the priest to be holy and to evangelize would be greatly strengthened when he knows the encouragement of brother priests. I shared my witness of how the Fraternity of Priests strengthened me in my priesthood and ministry. The priests attending the retreat responded with many comments and questions. Ralph Martin gave the Fraternity an endorsement by encouraging the other priests to have the Fraternity of Priests return to Slovenia for a conference.

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That afternoon I met Fr. Zoran Kodela of the diocese of Maribor. He and another priest from his diocese, during a trip to the USA a year earlier, had visited Visitation House and the New Jersey fraternity and had been impressed by the Fraternity of Priests at that time. He asked me that afternoon if their priest gathering in Maribor could be considered a Fraternity. They were seeking to live out the Fraternity of Priests as best they knew it. I said, "Of course," and reiterated our desire to return for a Fraternity conference.



Fr. Mike Scanlan, TOR listens to a question.

Immediately after the retreat, I was whisked away to the city of Kranj, where I engaged in street evangelization. This consisted of a rally outside of the local Catholic parish. This church was nestled among cafes and shops. This busy area was a wonderful place to sing songs of praise and preach the gospel. The local prayer group provided a sound system, chairs, a music group, and translators. I was joined by two of the Renewal Ministries team. We witnessed and

preached between groupings of songs. I led people in the renewal of their baptismal promises, prayers of surrender to Jesus Christ, and yielding to the Holy Spirit. It was here that the Holy Spirit prompted me to lead the people in a time of inner healing. I trust that the Lord was healing some of the wounds that result from political oppression and family disintegration. Our outdoor rally concluded with mass inside the church (which was packed!) and a time of prayer ministry.

Sr. Ann Shields, Sr. Sarah, Peter Hrbeck and I traveled together to the USA on Ascension Thursday. I was able to celebrate mass for us in Frankfort, Germany between flights. The words of Jesus that day from the Gospel of Luke: "repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations..." were especially meaningful. Though the people of Slovenia speak a different language and have a different history and culture, we share a common need: salvation in Jesus Christ. And though I am separated from the priests of Slovenia by almost five thousand miles, we are joined by a common mission that Jesus gives us: "make disciples of all the nations..." (Matthew 28:19).



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A PRAYER FOR PRIESTS

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Mary, Immaculate Conception, Mother of Jesus and Mother of priests, pray and intercede for (.....). Amen.

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