

Interview with Redemptorist Superior General Michael Brehl

From October 19 to November 14, 107 Redemptorists from around the world gathered in Rome to hold a General Chapter. A General Chapter is the highest form of governance in the Redemptorist Congregation. The General Chapter sets the missionary direction of the Congregation and elects its officials.

On Nov. 4, 2009, Redemptorist Father Michael Brehl was elected the 17th Superior General of the Redemptorists. He is the first Canadian to hold the position. He succeeds an American, Father Joseph W. Tobin, who had served as Superior General for 12 years, but was ineligible for re-election due to the statutes of the Congregation.

The Director of Communications for the Redemptorist General Government in Rome, Father Gary Ziuraitis, recently sat down with Father Brehl for a post-election interview.

Father Ziuraitis: For the next six years you will lead 5,300 Redemptorists scattered in 78 countries. What are your priorities at the start of your mandate? What are today's pressing concerns for the Congregation in the continents in which we work?

Father Brehl: *As the Redemptorists entered this General Chapter, and as this General Chapter finishes, our first consideration is simple: Where is God calling us to bring Good News to the abandoned and the poor? Our first priority is to respond to the call of God and the cry of the abandoned and the poor with fidelity and hope.*

In order to respond more effectively to these needs around the world, we have chosen the following priorities:

- Strengthening and developing structures which foster an effective international solidarity among all Redemptorists and those who work with us.*
- A renewal of our Redemptorist Apostolic Life which will result in greater freedom and availability for the Mission.*
- Formation of new members, and ongoing formation of all Redemptorists, to better equip us for missionary service to God's people.*
- A critical examination of our human and temporal resources in order to make concrete, prudent and courageous plans for the future.*

Father Ziuraitis: The Redemptorists are an international Congregation. What are the five biggest nationalities (Provinces?) in the Congregation?

Father Brehl: *Our five largest nationalities would be Brazilian, Polish, Vietnamese, American, and Colombian. The five largest Provinces currently are: Warsaw, Poland; Vietnam; the St. Clement Province, which is made up of Germany, the Netherlands, Flanders and Helvetica; Denver, USA and Bogotá, Colombia. However, this can be a bit misleading because some Units are made up of former Provinces that have merged, or have significant numbers of members working outside of their Province boundaries in affiliated Vice Provinces, Regions and missions.*

Father Ziuraitis: About the Redemptorist Congregation in the United States: Where do the Redemptorist work and what type of ministry does the Congregation do?

Father Brehl: *We minister all across the country. We have two Provinces and two Vice Provinces in the United States: the Baltimore Province; the Richmond Vice Province; the Denver Province; and a Vice Province called “Extra Patriam” of Vietnamese Redemptorists originally from Vietnam and working in the United States. Our ministry in the United States is all encompassing. Besides our charism of preaching parish missions, we have a major publications center, Liguori Publications, we staff many inner-city parishes in major cities, and we are very active in ministry to Spanish-speaking and Vietnamese immigrants. We also are known for our long tradition of spreading devotion to Mary under the title of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.*

Father Ziuraitis: The general theme of the just concluded General Chapter was "Restructuring for the Mission: Hope in Action." Where do you begin to rethink the structures of the Congregation and its presence in the world? How do you reinvigorate its nearness to the poor, to proclaim the Good News to the most abandoned in its various fields of service and commitments?

Father Brehl: *Those are a couple of very big questions. First of all, we have begun to rethink our structures on a regional basis. The General Chapter just established Conferences in five major geographical regions — Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Madagascar, and Asia Oceania. Conferences will help the Provinces and Vice-Provinces in those regions to work more closely together to address pastoral needs which go beyond particular geographic boundaries. These needs involve such questions as mass migration of peoples, inter-religious dialogue, social apostolate, mass media and communications, Shrine ministry and others. Conferences will also help some units with a sharing of human and material resources. Since Conferences are especially mandated to address the needs of mission, they will examine and determine priorities which can be addressed through international collaboration. We have already begun this kind of collaboration, but conferences will move this question forward.*

The General Chapter has also invited us to re-evaluate our pastoral commitments wherever we are found. We hope to invigorate a new availability for mission, especially among the abandoned and the poor. Again, this is not a new thrust, but we hope to renew the missionary dynamism with which we engage in this ministry. Since we are called by the abandoned and the poor, we must draw near to them in order to hear this call. This availability is the result of conversion — deeper conversion to Christ, and conversion towards the abandoned.

Father Ziuraitis: Father Tobin, who preceded you as Superior General wrote in his letter of September 8 to the confreres: “After eighteen years of listening to the Redemptorist confreres and collaborators as well as members of other Institutes of Consecrated Life, I am more than ever convinced that something new is being born into our Congregation." In your opinion, what is this ‘something new’ that is being born?

Father Brehl: *Over the past six years, we have witnessed a greater solidarity among the members of our Congregation, and a stronger commitment to an international identity as Redemptorists. The General Chapter in 2003 mandated our General Government to begin a process of reflection on the restructuring of our Congregation so that we might respond more effectively to our missionary vocation in a globalized world which is rapidly changing. The commission established to coordinate and stimulate this reflection was very effective at engaging many of the confreres in a serious examination of our apostolic life. We came to the General Chapter in 2009 with an attitude of hope-filled expectation that we were on the threshold of something new. In one sense, this ‘something new’ is the birth of conferences and networking. But it is much more than this — I experience this ‘something new’ in the Spirit which animated us to make these choices. We experienced a very positive spirit of solidarity, cooperation and collaboration, mutual respect and*

trust. This spirit is at the heart of our confident and hopeful decision to restructure our 'organizational' aspects. We want to give flesh to this spirit in concrete ways which will facilitate its growth and effective engagement of the whole membership of the Congregation.

Father Ziuraitis: What new elements of formation are being utilized to train future Redemptorists? What kind of attention is devoted to the "signs of the times" in their initial discernment? What personal difficulties and external obstacles are encountered in their call, in total acceptance of the call?

Father Brehl: *In recent years, we have become much more aware of the human dimension of formation which complements and strengthens the spiritual and academic dimensions. Although this is not strictly speaking a 'new' element, it is a renewed element in our formation programs. As we have been encouraged to do by the Vatican statements on formation, we employ all the social and human sciences not only in the process of discernment of vocations, but also in the ongoing development of whole human persons who give themselves generously to the mission.*

The signs of the times also have called us to place a greater emphasis on a healthy formation for celibacy, on formation for international communities and ministry, on formation for collaboration with lay men and women in ministry, and on formation for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Of course, these 'signs of the times' also signal difficulties for the ongoing process of formation. We do not live in a climate and culture which values, promotes and supports permanent commitment. This has a serious impact on perseverance in all life-long commitments.

The rapid pace of change in our world can also seriously affect candidates — and professed members. While we need stability in order to develop and cultivate an authentic identity, we also need to be immersed in the world of the abandoned and the poor in order to hear God's call clearly and authentically. This involves risks — and can be difficult.

Father Ziuraitis: The Congregation is characterized by a missionary impulse and evangelization. How does it live out this today in a globalized world on the one hand and a world marked by a deep crisis of values and finances on the other?

Father Brehl: *As Redemptorists, we are moved by the mission of Christ. Although he was born into a very particular place and culture, Jesus came for the world and for all people. The Good News that he brings proclaims the love of God for all, and the value and dignity of the human person. In a globalized world, this message has more and more relevance. As the boundaries between particular human communities break down and the mass migration of peoples can lead to a greater sense of abandonment and isolation, the message of Jesus gives us a more profound basis for affirming the universal values of community and respect. I would add that the message of Jesus must be understood to extend beyond the human community to the community of all creatures.*

Globalization has many positive aspects, but we cannot ignore the dangers and failures which threaten human dignity and the future of our planet. The global financial crisis reminds us of the interdependence of the world economies, and how the failure of one system has devastating effects on every system. When people are treated as commodities in a global economy, this leads to a greater breakdown in values and harmony.

The longings of people for meaning, for dignity, and for well-being for themselves and their children continue to resonate with the Good News of Jesus Christ. As He sends Redemptorists to the abandoned and the poor, we proclaim His message within in the present reality. As well, we

are working with others to better understand the structures which perpetuate poverty and division, violence and oppression. It is quite a challenge! The international nature of our Congregation, and of other Congregations in the Church, is a great resource and strength to respond not just to individual situations and needs but in a more comprehensive way.

Father Ziuraitis: In your view what are the realities and the strengths of the popular missions today, in Europe and in Latin America, North America, Africa and Asia?

Father Brehl: *The strength of the popular mission is that it is just that — a popular mission. It is an effective instrument in reaching people where they live with the gospel message. Of course, this must be adapted to the particular cultures and realities in which Redemptorists are preaching and working. Throughout our Redemptorist history, the popular mission has gone through many changes according to the needs of the moment and the situation in which it is preached.*

In North America, the popular mission is shorter than in the past, and addresses a context in which more and more families have both parents working outside the home. It works in conjunction with the pastoral plan of the local Church. It is becoming more common to preach a 'regional mission' which can reach every parish in a diocese or part of a diocese. In Asia and Latin America, there is a strong emphasis on building up local communities. This is often expressed in a much longer period of mission in one area. The period of explicit proclamation is in the service of a greater plan of catechetical and evangelical formation. In some parts of Africa, the popular mission is a great evangelical event with powerful preaching and celebration. In other contexts, it is more through the witness of life and presence that an opportunity for explicit proclamation is prepared. In Europe, the popular mission must be adapted to the variety of cultures and experiences of the different local contexts — from shrines and pilgrimages which continue to have a great attraction even in very secular societies, to more traditional missions in others.

It is perhaps this very flexibility of the popular mission which continues to assure that it is a valuable evangelical instrument and a rich part of our heritage from St. Alphonsus.

Father Ziuraitis: In the United States and Canada, (and in other countries of the world where the Congregation is present) what pastoral challenges does it face with immigrants? Does the internationality of the Congregation help you in this mission?

Father Brehl: *Yes, the internationality of our Congregation is a great help in the mission to be present to the communities affected by mass migration. Until the present moment, I have been living in Toronto, Canada — which the United Nations says is the city most affected by immigration. About half the residents of this city were not born in Canada! In Toronto, we have Redemptorists from nine different countries serving God's people.*

The migration of peoples presents a number of pastoral challenges. First of all, immigrants or migrants often experience a profound sense of loss, disorientation and isolation. Language, culture, family, familiarity — in many cases they have left all these behind. Some are migrating freely, attracted by new opportunities. Others are fleeing situations of danger. At the same time, migration deeply affects the families and communities which are 'left behind'.

Both situations present pastoral challenges. Then there are also the challenges of integration and welcome. Xenophobia, especially in societies which are affected by unemployment, continues to arise. The 'welcoming community' or country is not always so welcoming!

In a very real sense, pastoral ministry begins with accompaniment — becoming neighbours. Accompaniment always leads us to ask deeper questions which are often concerned with structural questions.

Father Ziuraitis: Among the Congregation's many commitments, will it be sensitive to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue? In what way?

Father Brehl: *Yes, I can say that I am sensitive to this dialogue. Up to the present, this has been a normal part of life for me, especially working with people of other faiths and other Christian denominations especially in social issues. I know that this is a major question for our members in Asia. I hope to learn more about the formal aspects of this dialogue and how we Redemptorists can contribute to its progress.*

Father Ziuraitis: The Congregation contributes a great service to the Church through the Alphonsian Academy in Rome. In this time of moral instability and secularism, what are the fields of research and curriculum that you think needs attention and deepening?

Father Brehl: *I must confess that in the very short time since I have been elected to this office, I have not had an opportunity to speak with the president of the Alphonsianum. I know that we have very well trained and dedicated specialists in moral theology. This has been an important part of our service to the Church throughout our history. So, it will certainly be an area where I hope to become more actively aware and engaged.*

Father Ziuraitis: What countries are Redemptorist vocations flourishing? What areas of the world are receiving special missionary attention?

Father Brehl: *Vocations to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer are flourishing in parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa. In Asia, in Indonesia and Vietnam, in India and Thailand, there are many vocations. In the Ukraine and Poland in Europe continue to have many vocations. In Africa, vocations are flourishing especially in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and we also have vocations in Burkina, Angola and Congo. In Latin America, there are many vocations in Brazil, in Peru, and also in Colombia and Haiti. There are vocations in almost all Latin American countries. This is just naming a few countries in which the Redemptorists continue to grow.*

We continue to expand our missionary work. In recent years, we have begun new missions in several countries of Africa such as Mozambique, Ghana and Madagascar. We have also started new missions in the Russian Federation and continue to expand our missionary endeavours in Vietnam and India.

Father Ziuraitis: In 2032 the Congregation will celebrate its 300th anniversary of founding. How will your charism be renewed in these years? And how will you incarnate that in the life of your community, and in the lives of those you co-exist with, believers and non-believers alike?

Father Brehl: *Until you asked this question, I had not thought of this particular anniversary. It is still over twenty years away — but it is never too early to start thinking. Every Charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Renewal of the charism is first and foremost the work of the Spirit. As the 'Spirit blows where the Spirit wills', I am confident that we will be surprised by how this charism will be renewed — and I also believe that this is a good thing. This element of flexibility and surprise is essential. We can become too preoccupied with figuring everything out, and that might leave little room for the work of the Spirit.*

On the other hand, I believe that it is the action of the Holy Spirit which is renewing in our Congregation a much greater sense of belonging to an international Congregation which reaches almost every corner of the Globe. This is a response to the signs of the times and the needs of the world. How will this be incarnated? It is my prayer that it will take ever greater flesh in the very structures of our Congregation, with local communities reflecting in their membership the very international character of our whole Congregation. This is already taking greater expression among us. It is also my prayer that this movement will lead us to an ever greater openness to the cry of the abandoned and the poor in every situation, and a greater availability to respond with the compassion and care of Christ, the Most Holy Redeemer.

Father Ziuraitis: Thank you Father Brehl for your time. And may the Redeemer bless you and keep you as you carry out your service as Superior General of the Redemptorists!