

## SECIS 2018 MADRID

Dear all,

After the welcome speech of Raquel who organized this meeting, I am pleased as chairman of **SECIS** (Service of European Churches for International Students) to briefly present to you this association.

The **origin** of SECIS is rooted in the desire of some persons of different countries who were responsible for institutions for the benefit of international students, most of them coming from Africa or South America, to work together. The idea was to share their experience and help each other in the spirit of the Catholic Church. SECIS was founded in the context of an initiative of the Vatican aimed at coordinating the various projects in this field and strengthening its presence in the international sector of European universities. It was until recently the Pontifical Council of Migrants which had in charge the sector of international students. The Council organized in Rome the first international congress on the pastoral of foreign students in September 1996. Now, it's a new dicastery under the direct guidance of the Pope and dealing with migrants and refugees. The fact that SECIS belongs to the Church is expressed by the request for their members to be accepted by the bishops' conference of their Country.

The first **meeting** of SECIS took place in Bonn in July 1997 and presented a « chart of the international student ». The 14 participants were coming from 7 countries: The Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, France and Great Britain. Two years later, the legal form of an international association according to the Belgian law was adopted. Canon Charles de Hemptinne was elected as president and Hermann Weber as vice-president. Since there, the number of participants to the annual meetings oscillated between 6 and 14. Two meetings happened in Germany ; 2 in Switzerland ; 3 in Austria; 4 in Belgium ; 4 in Rome ; 1 in The Netherlands, 2 in France ; 1 in Great Britain, 1 in Luxembourg and 2 in Spain, the current meeting being included. SECIS brings together institutions that perform activities of benefit to international students. It includes welcoming, pastoral guidance, education, running of dormitories, establishment of grants, assistance for reintegration in the country they come from... The **aim** of our meeting is to exchange and gather information on the management at the benefit of international students in various countries as well as on the way they are accompanied in their spiritual life, all of this, in a spirit of interreligious dialog and intercultural encounter.

The word **welcome** is taken here in all its extension: from the arrival of the host-student until his or her return to the country he or she is coming from. This implies, as you experience in various ways, a lot of material as well as human and spiritual steps, all evolving with the time. We shall deal with some of them today and tomorrow.

There are in each country belonging to **Occidental and Central Europe** (where you come from) homes/services dedicated to students coming from abroad. These homes/services you represent here are inspired by the fact that you are **Christians**.

What is the **originality or specificity of SECIS** ? We think that (today) the most important is that those who arrive in our centers (homes) feel free, happy to meet us, to exchange with us. We help them to meet the administrative as well as the personal requirements needed to carry out their studies with the objective of going back home for the development of their country. We help them to discover our identity, our way of live and to respect it as we respect them... It is through all these services that we assume our Christianity. It is through all these services that they discover who we are, what motivate us. The pastoral work doesn't mean much out of this context.

The majority of **European Universities and High Schools** are not Catholic. The majority of Faculties of sciences, applied sciences, medicine could not simply exist without a financial support from the State. So, we have to be conscious that our work is much larger than within the Catholic Universities. It's intended for **all students**, Catholic or not, who are **asking our support or simply want to meet us**.

My purpose was to give you a **global view** of who we are and what is the aim of our organization. It is not intended to do better the work already done in the Church for the pastoral care of the youth. But, in a context of young intellectuals migrating all over the world and open to the message of Christ, we think that their religious experience must be at the level of requirement of their professional experience. Otherwise, the gap between both shares the risk of desertion of their faith. It is the reason why I am convinced that the work done by all of you is essential for the future of the Church. Through a good experience abroad, students going back home shall help local Christians communities to be at the same time rooted in the home culture and open to others culture.

**I hope that** this meeting, through the contribution of all participants, shall nurture, reinforce our motivation to do our job and create fruitful exchanges between us not only here in Madrid but also after this meeting.

### **Note on the story of the pastoral care of international students in Belgium**

From August 1965 onward up to December 1998 the pastoral care for international students was organized in Belgium as a personal Vicariate under the direct responsibility of a Bishop. It was financially sustained by « Missio-Rome ». In October 1998, the Bishop in charge of it pushed the Belgium Bishops conference to abolish the Vicariate. His idea was that the responsibility of the pastoral care for foreign students would be organized locally by each diocese. A chaplaincy could be kept on national level, but without any financial support. I was the last responsible. The non-profit association « National Chaplaincy » merged with the non-profit association « Fédération Nationale des Centres d'Accueil pour étudiants étrangers » (FENACA).