

An American in Paris

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It was entirely by chance that two international MSE meetings fell in the same week in November. After a weekend with the Presbyterian and Episcopalian Tentmakers in sunny Southern California, I returned to a rain-drenched Paris to join Stan Frost for the first meeting of the new International Co-ordination for Worker Priests.

Two convents in a week! In Orange, we were using the well-appointed guesthouse of the Sisters of St Joseph's hospital. In Paris, the Accueil Barouillere is home to the Helpers to the Holy Souls, and conveniently only 5 Metro stops from Notre Dame. We also enjoyed some wonderful Parisian hospitality from our French hosts.

With two such meetings a few days apart, there were some interesting contrasts and surprising parallels. The two obviously served very different purposes. That in the US was a residential conference, with time for sharing news and views, and some working sessions built around the theme "Marching to a Different Drummer" – when asked to draw our own individual drum, I gave them a drum of chemicals. There were also loads of worship sessions – led by a lay pastor who, with his son, formed an excellent jazz combo.

The Paris meeting was intended for business – to take forward the proposal made in Bergamo which is included elsewhere in this edition of the Journal. But there was also pressure to use it as a forum for sharing recent experiences and events. And with this fascinating collection of Worker Priests, with their strongly politicised agendas, even the simplest matter of business seemed somehow to generate intense, passionate and often heated theological, philosophical and political debate (and all in French of course!)

The Europeans were asking me to tell more of what I had experienced while in the States – but time did not permit. The hot issue was the looming War in Iraq (which may well be overtaken by events by the time you read this). What views – I was asked by Worker Priests who had been on street protests against any aggression on the part of the US – had I heard while in California?

Well, the first time I mentioned to someone in Orange that I hadn't heard anyone talk about impending war, I was told: "We don't talk about things like that here". I was amazed – not least at the implied separation of a conference of a religious group from the events of the world around them, but more particularly, that this should be said in a meeting of Tentmakers, who are by definition engaged in the world outside church.

But as the weekend progressed, I did find people talking – and I did not find anyone expressing views in support of the intended action of their government, and many were firmly against war. Yet the contrast was palpable – I could not envisage any of these folk engaging in the protests I was to encounter at the European end of my journey.

The European groups are also heavily engaged in work with and for the immigrant communities in their localities – the nationalities may differ, but this is also a keenly felt issue in Southern California. One of the participants in the conference told his story – a young newly appointed Presbyterian Minister, who was indeed of Mexican origin (and a fellow Chemical Engineer). And he had come into the country as an illegal immigrant - arrested for visa violations, deported back to Mexico, guided across the border, dodging the border patrols, and entering the country illegally. The harrowing journeys eventually led to "green card" status, after having lost everything. You could tell that this was not a comfortable story for many in the room.

Also among the speakers was the deputy principal of the San Francisco Theological Seminary. He described with great joy, the enthusiasm which had been generated by the first part-time training course they had run in Claremont, south of LA. All the participants remained in their secular work and some 75% were not Caucasian and 75% did not have English as their first language. It seemed a novel concept to the Americans, so I drew some parallels with the courses many of us have

experienced here in the UK. It is a development to be watched, as it continues to break the hold of residential seminary training.

These are but a few glimpses of the issues which are thrown up by such a full and interesting week. I could say more – but I would rather encourage you to be part of these meetings, either in Europe or the USA, with the Presbyterians next autumn or the Episcopalians in Chicago in the spring.