San Donato in Polverosa (Florence, ITALY)

It is an act of trust in themselves and in the future that the religious of the community in Florence (Italy) made in accepting this request of the Archdiocese. Florentin Halandut gives us an overview of the work an the spirit in which the community is approaching it.

Since last November, you have taken on a new pastoral ministry in the Archdiocese of Florence. What is the mission that has been entrusted to you?

- We have been given responsibility for the parish "San Donato in Polverosa" and the task of building up a campus ministry program there. It is one of the largest university districts of the archdiocese with 17,000 students in the fields of political science, economics, and law. Currently, the archdiocese hasn't done much in campus ministry either here or elsewhere. Our task, therefore, is, with the help of others (priests and lay-people), to create a campus ministry program for these students. The parish, which abuts the university, will be the center of that activity.

- What was the determining factor in the community's decision to accept this request?

- For the community, what led us to accept this mission was the opportunity to work with young people. That is the priority for us..... and to be able to do so within the context of a parish.

- Is it a large parish? Can you describe it a bit?

- The parish has about 6,000 inhabitants, but is developing rapidly. It is estimated that it will grow to 8,000 in 10 years. The parish church is quite old, almost a 1,000 years old. It was assigned parochial status about 50 years ago. Before then, it had been the chapel of several monastic communities, which explains why it is not a big church.

- And what about the day-to-day parish life?

- Attendance seems "normal" given national statistics, i.e. about 10% attend Sunday Mass (one on Saturday and three on Sunday); 20-30 come during the week. There are about 80 children in our religious education classes each week. On the other hand, young people who come are not numerous and that is why we need to work on that dimension of our outreach.

During the first fifty years of its existence, the parish had only known two pastors, the first for forty years. With their riches and their limitations, they "built" up the community. There is a lot still to do and our imaginations will get a workout. But desire is not lacking!

- **How are you addressing the work with students?**

- That's not easy to say. We can speak of our dreams and our desires and our plans ....but are they realistic? We're still getting things off the ground. Those students who are "practicing" already belong to the numerous Christian movements present in Italy. Up to now nothing concrete had been put in place, or almost next to nothing. That means there is opportunity but also hard work ahead. Opportunity because the field is wide open and we don't have to worry about the past; hard work, because our first steps are halting and we can already feel that.

- **Have you been able to keep your spirits up in community?**

- The community as a whole really wants to be involved in this project. But before we act, we have wanted just to observe the situation for a while and get a clear idea of the needs. We're looking for the right shoes for the journey so that we can move forward prudently and generously.

Interviewer: J.M. Brochec, A.A.

The community is made up of five members (Italian, French, and Romanian).

The church itself was once called San Donato alla Torre. It was from here that, in the fall of 1087, Florentinian Crusaders left for the Third Crusade. According to tradition, the church dates to the year 1000 when a pagan princess who had converted acquired land and had a house built together with a church and tower. When she died, the entire complex became a monastery, for a long time inhabited by the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, known as "Polverosi", that is to say, "the dusty ones," because of the color of their habit. Later, other monks and nuns lived there, especially Augustinian sisters who eventually became Cistercians. These religious stayed till 1809, date of the suppression of religious institutes in France, the country that then occupied Italy! Allowed to fall into ruins by subsequent owners, it was eventually purchased by the Prince Nicolas Demidoff who had a large Neo-Classical villa built there. In 1960, the entire complex was acquired by the archdiocese to become the parish of San Donato in Polverosa. There is still a lot of work going on to get it back into shape.