

2018 GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD UNION OF CATHOLIC WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS
DAKAR, SENEGAL 16-21 OCTOBER 2018
WUCWO Women-Carriers of 'Living Water' to a world that thirsts for Peace

Arriving in Senegal, the first impression was of the heat and humidity but that was coupled with the excitement felt over the anticipation of the Assembly finally happening after so much planning and discussion and work.

On the first day, we were bussed from our hotel, a property that was situated right on the ocean and had lovely accommodations, about an hour away to Dakar. On the way, I could not fail to note the number of idle men who had no work, and the women and children along the dusty red roads selling mangoes or brightly colored and patterned lengths of cloth. There were many unfinished buildings made of concrete blocks and upon inquiry I learned that people who own land first build a concrete block wall around their property and then build their house whenever they are able to afford the next stage of construction. We also saw round buildings made of upright branches covered with tarps and corrugated metal sided homes and businesses with tarp roofs. I could not help but look at those beautiful children and wonder what the world was missing as it is likely that they would never have the opportunity to contribute their particular gifts to the world. Many prayers remain in my heart for these people.

The opening Mass was lovely after which we were taken to the Grand Theater in Dakar to a huge tented area where we had a formal opening ceremony attended by the Cardinal, papal Nuncio, several cabinet ministers and the President of Senegal.

We then began the first of two Study Days in which we explored different aspects of the theme of the Assembly. We first heard from Maria Giovanna Ruggieri, WUCWO President General, who pointed out that as carriers of 'living water' we go out into a world where hunger is growing and care for others is disappearing. Persons from different cultures are not well received. As WUCO women, we need to think in community, in solidarity.

We then heard from Dr. Isable Recavarren of Peru who is the founder and coordinator of the Women's Forum of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly, She spoke of socio-political dynamics at work in our world and called her talk, *A World That Thirsts for Peace*.

We then saw a video presentation from Dr. Anne Therese Gallagher of Australia, President of the International Catholic Migration Commission. Dr. Gallagher pointed out the different types and causes for migration and the dangers and difficulties encountered by migrants around the world and emphasized the proper Catholic social response to this issue, reiterating the Pope's words that each person, by virtue of human dignity and human rights, has the right to migrate to seek a safe and healthy existence and it is a baptized Christian's responsibility to recognize this and act accordingly.

We then heard from Sister Therese Samake, VP of the Catholic University of West Africa in Mali. She spoke on what is happening to our common home in terms of how women can impact the environment in both negative and positive ways. She introduced three symbols with which women are familiar: A broom used to separate waste leading to cleanliness; a bowl that can carry water and food; and a well that can symbolize the cultivation of our interior spiritual life. She called for women to move to a new awareness and a new way of doing things, a liberation of the feminine genius both physically and spiritually with gestures that can lead to peace.

We then heard messages from cardinals and presidents of African countries as well as a message from the Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life in which we received an Apostolic Blessing that extended to our families.

A special effort had been made to include young women in this Assembly and scholarships had been offered for this. It was wonderful to have these young people with us and to learn their perspective on things.

We then enjoyed dinner together at the hotel where food was served buffet style and the restaurant itself was full of tables and chairs where we could eat together inside or outside.

On the second day, after Mass, we had Dr. Linda Ghisoni, Undersecretary for the Dicastery of Laity, speak to us on *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia* and the relevance of those two documents to our life as WUCWO. She challenged us to ask ourselves if we are too satisfied with our own lives or too busy or too tired to proclaim the Gospel. We need to be aware of the baptism we received that makes us proclaimers of the Gospel in all we do. As WUCWO, we are called to awaken the thirst for all that is love, beauty, trust, peace, and faith. To do so, we must have a personal relationship with Jesus. When Jesus arrived at the well and asked the Samaritan woman for a drink, He was tired and He was thirsty. He asked for her help and in doing so, He established a personal relationship with the woman and He awakened her thirst for an interior encounter for peace and truth. He prepared her to receive His message and she ran to proclaim that message. As baptized women, we are called to awaken the thirst for peace and truth. She encouraged us to read *Evangelii Gaudium*!

We then heard from Dr. Maria Teresa Compte Grau who teaches Social Doctrine of the Church at the Pontifical University in Salamanca, Spain. She spoke to us about *Laudato Si* and its application to our work in our organizations and in our lives. She told us that this encyclical should encourage deep reflection for women. The symbol of water restores and purifies, regenerates and brings life. Women do the same. She suggested that we need a counter-culture reaction so that technology does not take over human interactions. She said we need to understand gratitude since the world is a gift from God and is our common link with all creatures. We need to experience an ecological conversion.

We then heard from Dr. Donna Orsuto, Director of the Lay Center at Foyer-Unitas, USA. She opened with a photo of a fountain empty due to drought. In the same way, we are faced with the problem of presenting Jesus to the world. This is a gift and responsibility given to us. Many need to have the water of life brought to them, even if they are unaware that they thirst for this and we are called to bring the water through Jesus Christ. *Gaudete et Exsultate* teaches us how to do that. Rejoice and Be Glad -Jesus' words to us and our call to holiness today. In responding, we receive the joy and energy we need. The Lord asks everything of us because He wants us to live ordinary lives with extraordinary holiness; He wants us to be saints. Each day is a holy day, each place is a holy place. Women need to be joyful and confident in living God's message. DO not be afraid. Keep following our Mission. Be completely open to the freedom to take risks, go to the peripheries, ask what God wants of us at this moment in time.

We next broke into working groups where we learned the work of each other's organizations. We explored the similarities and differences among us. We then addressed the main challenges the Church proposes for our actions as carriers of living water. We heard single motherhood, unemployment, the need to step out of our comfort zone and go out to the peripheries. Following these sessions, we met together in the main hall to learn of the work of each of the working groups.

Thus ended our Study Days.

After Mass at the start of the third day, we began our Statutory Days.

We went through all that is needed to conduct a proper business meeting: Establishment of a quorum of voting delegates, approval of past minutes, tellers appointed, adoption of the agenda and rules of procedure, and so forth.

We then voted on acceptance of three new member organizations, one each from the UK, Switzerland, and Lebanon.

We then heard reports from the officers of WUCWO and the Ecclesiastical Assistant, Father Whelan, SJ who told us that lay women are a gift to the Church.

We then heard reports from the Finance Committee that covered past and proposed budgets and financial reports covering the four years since the last General Assembly. A vote was taken to increase the dues across the board by 10%. There had not been an increase in 12 years and this increase was needed to ensure the financial stability of WUCWO. We also spoke of the need to move from our bank in Paris to one in Rome because of the relocation of the Secretariat to Rome and all that is needed to accomplish that move legally.

We then heard a consolidated report of the work of the International Representatives at the various UN agencies and the Council of Europe over the last four years. It was noted how important it is for us to be present at these fora to apply moral principles to particular cases and to provide awareness of Catholic responsibility and teachings.

There was a proposal that WUCWO not advertise a scholarship for young women awarded annually by UNESCO because the money funding the scholarship comes from China. There was much discussion and the final vote allows WUCWO to advertise the scholarship going forward because it is offered by UNESCO and not directly by China, that country having no influence over the recipient or subsequent studies.

We then broke off into regional meetings. WUCWO divides the world into 5 regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and our region, North America. Accordingly, our ladies from the US met with those from Canada. All regions were asked to examine the proposed resolutions and seek consolidation in the number and in the wording as they were too lengthy and too many for any organization to accomplish.

Day 4 began with Mass organized by our North American Region.

Each region reported on their proposed modifications to the resolutions. Maribeth, as VP General, was charged with making the final consolidation that would be voted upon after lunch.

In the afternoon, we went through each resolution, the changes made, amendments suggested, and each was voted upon. The final resolution titles are:

1. A Healthy Planet Depends on All of Us
2. Care for the Family in Difficult Situations; Especially for the most vulnerable members
3. Elimination of Discrimination and Violence against women
4. Educate to respond to the call for holiness

The complete resolution texts are found on the WUCWO website (www.wucwo.org)

That afternoon was free and many took advantage of a trip to Goree Island where slaves were collected and shipped to points in Europe and Latin America. Historians have now made known that Goree Island

was not a shipment point for millions of African slaves to America as is the story in Senegal and that actually it was originally a woman from Senegal who sold hundreds of slaves through Goree Island and they principally went to Central and South America from there. The slaves that went to Europe and America were shipped from more northern points up the coast in Africa. However, the fact is that Goree Island serves as sobering reminder of man's inhumanity to their fellow men and the abhorrent practice of slavery in that time. We think today of the victims of human trafficking and pray and work for an end to this modern day slavery.

After Mass, Day 5 began with the introduction of a beautiful issue of WUCWO's magazine, *Women's Voice*, that is a review of WUCWO for the last 4 years.

The new candidates for the Board were then presented and voting proceeded. All 22 candidates were elected to the WUCWO Board.

Then each of the three candidates for President General gave a 5 minute talk. The new Board then left and gathered in another room where they elected Maria Lia Zervino of Argentina the new President General and Maribeth Stewart Blogoslawski of the US the Vice President General. The Board then returned to the main meeting hall where the elections were ratified by the Assembly.

We then ratified the International Representatives who will serve at the UN and the Council of Europe for the next 4 years.

We next enjoyed a message from the Youth Group who said they learned so much, shared so much and were very grateful for the opportunity. They thanked WUCWO for considering them to be important and felt that they had lived the best part of the Universal Church at this Assembly. They requested that they be allowed to keep in touch via Social Media. The young women came from Ghana, Mali, Gabon, Hungary, Lebanon, USA, Tanzania, Spain, Mexico, and Argentina.

The Assembly then selected a priority theme for the next four years after considering suggestions from each region. The priority for the next four years will be:

WUCWO Women called to Holiness to sanctify the World for a Holistic Development

We were then referred to a statement sent from the Vatican that asked all organizations to formulate guidelines to ensure the protection of the young and vulnerable. For WUCWO organizations, this would more likely lead to guidelines that require reporting when transgressions are observed.

We next heard the Final Declaration for the 2018 Assembly read. It is available on the WUCWO website.

After thanking Maria Giovanna for her devotion and leadership, we broke for the day.

That evening, we gathered to enjoy the Cultural Evening with presentations of song and dance from different countries. For the US, we had flag patterned scarves and small US flags and sang God Bless America. It was a fun evening for all.

On the last day, buses transported attendees to the Shrine of Popenguine where we joined WUCWO women from all of Senegal and other countries in Africa for the Closing Mass.

The joy, colors, dancing, and music made this a truly unique experience for WUCWO General Assemblies and I am sure that those attending will long remember their time together in Senegal.

Maribeth Stewart