



WORLD UNION OF CATHOLIC TEACHERS

Annual Council meeting

(Rome 16 November 2023)



“Associations of the faithful in the Church today”

*Intervention by d. Giovanni Buontempo * at the inauguration ceremony of the headquarters*

I thank President De Groof and his collaborators for the invitation to take part in this ceremony and I bring greetings from the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, Cardinal Kevin Farrell, to all the members of UMEC present here .

I share with you some reflections on the reality of lay associations today. Our Dicastery, within the Holy See, has the competence to grant legal recognition to international associations of the faithful and to accompany them in their development and apostolate. At the moment there are 116 lay aggregative realities recognized by the Holy See. They are very different from each other, in origin, nature and purpose. I focus in particular on those, like UMEC, which have the character of associations of the faithful.

Some of these associations belong to the group of former International Catholic Organizations (OIC), a term no longer used, and find their origins in that associative movement of a lay nature which had a great impetus between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century ¹. The then Pontifical Council for the Laity, in a study dedicated to them, saw a dual purpose of the OIC: "the promotion of the apostolic and missionary life of its members" and at the same time "the ability to organize and manage an incisive Christian presence in life international" ². The ecclesial and cultural environment that gave rise to this "associative current" was characterized by a new vision of

¹For these brief notes on the former OICs, see E. LISIERO, *Typologies of international associations of the faithful: an attempt at classification* , Ius Ecclesiae , Vol XXXV n.2, 2023, pp. 488ff.

²Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY , *The General Assembly of the Conference of OICs* , in *Notiziario* 8 (2003), p. 7; also available online on the Vatican website: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_pc_laity_doc_20040317_notiziario-pc-laici_it.html#L%C3%82%C3%82%E2%80%99%20Assembly%20of%20Conference%20of%20OIC .

the Church as a "mystery of communion", by the desire to bring the Christian message to increasingly secularized environments, by the growing awareness of lay³.

Numerous magisterial texts have supported and encouraged these realities. I cite a particularly significant one, *Gaudium et Spes*, which states: «similar associations are of great help in instilling that universal sense, which is so appropriate for Catholics, and in forming the awareness of a truly universal responsibility and solidarity» (GS n. 90). With the new Code of Canon Law of 1983, it became necessary to review the legal status of these entities, which reformulated their statutes, becoming "International Associations of the Faithful", thus falling under the competence of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and, starting from 2016, of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life.

From the text of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and from the conciliar text *Gaudium et Spes* these four purposes emerge in relation to those Associations of the faithful who have inherited the legacy of the OIC: 1) promoting coordinated apostolic activity; 2) make the Christian presence incisive in international life, 3) promote a typically Catholic international sense; 4) train in universal co-responsibility. What has changed today with respect to these purposes?

A first fundamental difference compared to today is that at the time of the birth of many OICs, Christian education was prior to membership of the association and was received elsewhere: in the family, in the parish, even at school. Now this is no longer the case. In the current cultural context that characterizes many Western societies, many people - in some countries the vast majority - no longer receive any Christian (and religious in general) education either in the family, or in the parish or in other ecclesial structures (which they do not attend more) and, even less, in schools and other educational institutions. A new task and a new responsibility therefore arises for the Associations of the faithful, that of becoming places of Christian formation for their members. Often people approach an association attracted by some event in which they take part, more often due to the friendships they form with those who are already members, but the faith of those who today become members of any association of the faithful cannot no longer be taken for granted. Nowadays, more and more often, the association itself becomes the place of the first encounter with the Lord, of the first encounter with the faith and with the living reality of the Church. Even before promoting coordinated apostolic action, before thinking about the Christian presence in international life and in society, before making an appeal to international responsibility, it is necessary to accompany people on a gradual journey of

³G. Carriquiry Lecour, *The development of the associative phenomenon in the Catholic Church*, in G. Carriquiry Lecour, ed., *Statutes of International Catholic Organizations*, Milan 2001, IX-XI.

initiation into Christian life. The great challenge for many associations is to offer, on a permanent basis, paths of evangelization and catechesis, initial proclamation, faith formation and accompaniment in spiritual growth. I underline that when we talk about "Christian formation" we must not limit ourselves to scholastic conferences, but we mean something more complete which includes live and kerygmatic catechesis, introduction to the sacramental life of the Church, liturgical celebrations, introduction to the life of prayer, verification of life in the light of the Word of God, moments of discussion and dialogue, experiences of brotherhood, experiences of service and charity, missionary experiences etc. The model is the "faith formation" that Jesus did with his disciples.

The Holy Father states in *Evangelii Gaudium* : «The formation of lay people and the evangelization of professional and intellectual categories represent an important pastoral challenge» (EG n. 102). In other times the challenge would have been to "mobilise" the professional categories (with an already well-defined Catholic identity) and to "orient" their commitment towards a common apostolic goal. Now the pastoral challenge is to "evangelize" the professional categories.

A second big difference compared to the times of the origins of the OIC is given by the new cultural context that we experience at a global level. I quote the significant words of Pope Francis pronounced on the occasion of the launch of the great project which goes by the name of "Global Educational Pact":

«We are experiencing an epochal change: not only a cultural but also an anthropological metamorphosis that generates new languages and discards, without discernment, the paradigms handed down to us by history. Education clashes with the so-called *rapidición* , which imprisons existence in the vortex of technological and digital speed, continually changing points of reference. In this context, identity itself loses consistency and the psychological structure disintegrates in the face of incessant change which contrasts with the natural slowness of biological evolution ⁴. "

It is a very dense text. Pope Francis, to characterize our time, has stated several times that it is not an "era of change" but rather a "change of era" which rapidly transforms the way of living, of relating, of communicating and developing thought, to relate between human generations and to understand and live faith and science" ⁵. At the time of the birth of many OICs, there was undoubtedly greater anthropological uniformity, even between believers and non-believers. There was a tacit sharing of an "overall vision", in the sense that there was a fundamental way of understanding the person, relationships, family life, social life, which was the same for everyone. Now, as the Pope says, the "paradigms handed down to us by history" are no longer accepted. Rather than rejected, they are

⁴Pope Francis, *Message for the launch of the Educational Pact* , 12 September 2019 .

⁵Pope Francis, *Speech to the Roman Curia for Christmas greetings* , 21 December 2019.

simply ignored. Let us think, for example, of the way of conceiving man (in his constitutive corporeal-spiritual reality), of the way of conceiving the man-woman relationship, the parent-child relationship, the individual-state relationship, the relationship between the individual and the territory of membership ⁶.

This dissolution of historical paradigms causes the loss of social cohesion and the dissolution of people's identity and psychological structure: just look at the bewilderment of young people to realize this. Precisely in the face of all this, the Father has proposed a "Global Educational Pact" which would like to "build an "education village" where ... find global convergence for an education that can be the bearer of an alliance between all the components of the person: between study and life; between generations; among teachers, students, families and civil society with its intellectual, scientific, artistic, sporting, political, entrepreneurial and solidarity expressions" ⁷, and above all where the person is once again put at the center of everything.

You, Associations of the faithful, and you of UMEC in particular, are called into question in this challenge. It's about giving meaning back to the existence of many people. It's about rediscovering the profound motivations of being a person, of being together, of the man-woman relationship and of the challenge of embracing a life project as engaging and beautiful as family. It is about reflecting on the interconnection of all men and therefore rethinking man's responsibility towards others, towards society, towards creation. Ultimately, it is about "re-telling" man and his fundamental dimensions, in a creative, compelling and encouraging way. With language and styles that are proactive and generate enthusiasm, without using censorious, resentful and condemnatory tones.

It is a task that concerns you personally since teachers are educators and, not infrequently, the most important and authoritative educational figures in the lives of many young people. The Christian faith itself gives a particular impetus to the educational task, because from faith comes an interest, a particular love for the good of the person and for the good of his integral development. In fact, faith brings with it divine charity, which is infused in us and pushes us from within to seek the good of others and to consider their full fulfillment and happiness as our own happiness. Therefore, a truly

⁶In this context, one can think of the well-known distinction proposed by D. Goodhart between the so-called "anywhere" generation (cosmopolitan individuals with little connection to the "local" dimension, accustomed instead to a high level of work and housing mobility) compared to the generation of "somewhere" (individuals closely linked to a geographical and cultural context as an indispensable source of identity, belonging and values); see David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, C Hurst & Co, 2017.

⁷ *Message from the Holy Father Francis for the launch of the Educational Pact*, 12 September 2019.

Christian teacher is almost always a passionate educator, capable of particular empathy with people, inclined to enhance their gifts, to underline their dignity, to bring out their uniqueness.

To conclude, I would like to recall a thought from St. Augustine. In Book X of the Confessions, Augustine observes that all men desire happiness, but, he asks, where did they know the truth? In fact, we only want what we know (*Conf. X,20,29*). Therefore, to desire happiness, men must have experienced it in some way (*Conf. X,21,31*). But, Augustine asks again, what is this experience that made them feel happiness? It must be an experience that is within everyone's reach and that therefore everyone has had and which therefore has left a "memory of happiness" in everyone, a memory that has remained indelibly imprinted in the human soul. According to Augustine this experience is the knowledge of the truth! Knowing the truth causes an intimate joy in man, Augustine states in fact that happiness is essentially the "pleasure of the truth" (*gaudium de veritate*) (*Conf. X,23,33*). But, going even deeper, Augustine goes so far as to say that every experience of truth is ultimately an experience of God. He states: «Where I have found a truth, there I have found my God, who is truth itself» (*Conf. X,24,35*) (*Ubi enim come on veritatem , ibi come on Deum meum , ipsam veritatem*). Every experience of truth is an experience of God which causes an intimate joy in man and which leaves an indelible trace of itself in the memory. Man desires happiness because he wishes to experience again that experience of fulfillment and joy that he felt in knowing the truth. We should note that Augustine was speaking about all truths, not just religious truths.

We therefore understand the great opportunity that a teacher has. Every teacher, of any subject, is a "guide to the truth", one who has the burden and privilege of accompanying his students in the knowledge of the truth, a truth that embraces all fields of human knowledge: be it historical truth , mathematical and scientific truth, aesthetic truth, philosophical truth, and every other truth. This experience is so powerful that it leaves traces of joy in the human soul so profound that they become a silent call from God himself. The knowledge, or rather , the "experience" of the truth ignites in the soul a secret aspiration of the soul towards God which is the fullness of the truth. Helping young people to seek the truth, helping them to fall in love with the truth, therefore means directing them towards God, it means opening their souls to the search for true happiness and therefore true peace. What a great mission, what a great responsibility for every teacher!

I wish you all to continue your associative life fruitfully and I thank you for your listening.

*Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life