

WUCWO Europe Region Conference. September 5- 8 2013 at the Diocesan Centre, Leeds, England

Conference Theme:- RESPECT-Me-You-Who?

Participants from 10 member organisations in England, France, Hungary, Malta, Netherlands, Spain and Wales addressed this theme. Because we were a smaller group than usual at such conferences, it made for a closer exchange and interaction. Working in our favour, it allowed us to spend time with each other and even in spite of language differences we communicated and dialogue was fruitful and constructive.

ECUMENISM and INTERFAITH, through respect for my neighbour... he is known by the dignity which God confers on each human being, independent of race, colour, language and independently of their beliefs. As Christians we should acknowledge that we are all travelling the same path. In communion and exchange with God, we are all called, as human beings, to dialogue together. We have gifts to give each other even while we share the pain of diversion. In recognising our identity we must encounter, dialogue and recognise that the faith of others makes our own faith more vibrant. Jean Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint*, wrote of crossing the threshold of Hope, to walk on the common ground, the path that leads to a wealth of understanding and to see what unites. We must be equipped to talk about our own faith, a deepening understanding of the all-inclusive love in God's plan of salvation. Divine love underpins dialogue and as we embark on our ecumenical journey we will meet conflict, seek co-existence and co-operation, but need commitment together leading to communion.

EVANGELISATION, The content of the address of our keynote speaker Ana Cristina Villa Betancourt was based on the homilies given each morning, by Pope Francis at Santa Marta. In which he moves back to the core of our Faith. We are called to love others, our neighbours, whether family or friends. We are in the middle of a love story and we are all a link in a chain in this story which is the Heart of the church of the Father, a story which has not ended. We belong to a missionary Church and the Father looks to us to look to the future with greater confidence and serenity. We make our Gospel proclamation with both words and witness.....It is like seed...you cannot calculate the results. It is God who does it. We do not gather in the harvest- it is God's to harvest. Women who were the first witnesses have always had a fundamental role as educators, in passing on the faith because of a deep sensitivity. She posed the question, "What part can WUCWO women play in helping to explain and demonstrate their specific and charismatic role in the Church?" After all we are daughters of the church.

SANCTITY OF LIFE from pre-natal care of mothers and babies in need, remembering also fathers and prevention of abortion, together with the healing of post abortion trauma. The Gianna project of Catholic Care specifically assists young women who are tempted to have an abortion because of individual and personal difficulties. Often teenagers, who are referred from school, Catholic Care who run the project will assist them in the months before the baby's birth and for a year or more after, in every practical way; appointments, health issues, counselling, accommodation, baby clothes and everything required for the needs of mother and baby. A very courageous young woman talked to us about her experiences at the age of 17 being single and pregnant and how she had now a

lovely 7 week old baby girl whom she brought to show us. She plans to take up her place at College when the baby is old enough. You could say that two lives were saved.

Rachels Vineyard is another project, started in the USA and now in the UK, which specifically deals with what can be called Post Abortion Stress Syndrome. The weekends, four days, that they run with no more than eight people enable participants to talk about the stress they feel, the guilt, anger, shame and constant grief which seems to haunt them, no matter how long in the past an abortion took place. It is a movement towards letting go, forgiving oneself and reconciliation which heals the wounded and helps the griever to forgive themselves.

40days4life, a world-wide movement to protect mothers and babies also started in the USA and is a peaceful, prayerful and effective pro-life campaign that has already been embraced by more than half a million people worldwide. In the course of their peaceful fasting and prayer vigils outside abortion clinics it has saved 7536 lives from abortion, led to the conversion of 83 abortion clinic workers and seen 39 abortion centres close. It also uses media efforts, advocacy and public visibility to promote the pro-life message to every corner of the city where they are holding their 40 day peaceful public witness. Robert Colquhoun is the Director in the UK and gave many instances of the positive effect such a public witness has in speaking up for those who have no voice.

THE POWER OF PRAYER flowed through the whole Conference. It emanated from the special liturgy written for morning and evening prayers, Prayers of the Faithful at each Mass and the Rosary, each decade in the mother tongue of the leader which was said, for Peace in Syria and the World, on September 7th in accordance with the Holy Father's wishes. There was also a specially prepared wayside prayer station, for meditation and contemplation, honouring our own martyr, mother and wife, Saint Margaret Clitherow, put to death in 1586 for attending the forbidden Catholic Mass and for harbouring Jesuit priests from France.

Prayer as the most powerful weapon against evil in the world was given particular emphasis in the session of "MOTHER'S PRAYERS." this talk was given by Veronica, a grandmother and one of the founder members of this movement. She explained her moment of grace when she came to realise that she had to "surrender completely to the Lord in all her work." Her faith and enthusiasm were a powerful witness to her complete trust in God's help as in the twenty years since they started to pray for their children and grandchildren the movement has spread and there are Mothers Prayers groups all over the world. She shared with us the daunting experiences last May when invited to attend the International Congress "The mission of the ecclesial movements and new communities in formation and spreading of the faith" to speak about the ecclesial movement of Mothers Prayers.

A JOURNEY IN FAITH was approached from two different directions. Father Stephen Webb, told in a simple, and honest manner of his childhood and early life in a village, his early education at the Anglican school there and his vocation to study theology at Oxford and subsequent ordination into the Anglican ministry. His journey towards Catholicism, once his decision was made, took him to the English College Rome and after his ordination in Leeds Cathedral in he was appointed to be an assistant priest first in Leeds and then in a town centre church in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. Now he has been given his own Parish which has problems and he asked for our prayers to help him as he was about to celebrate his first Mass there that very afternoon.

Mrs Rosalind Starkie gave a power point talk about the historical facts which led to the Church in England breaking, from the Vatican and obedience to the Pope, to become the Church of England with the King, Henry VIII, as Supreme Head. Then she took us on her own personal journey of faith in which she said she had to try to keep up with her husband who was making a quicker journey as he moved to being ordained as a Catholic priest in the Ordinariate. She spoke very openly about her doubts and of the matters of faith which were stumbling blocks for her, even though as a young person she had leanings towards Catholicism but thought her parents would not approve. There were many questions for her to answer, about the effect on former colleagues and friends, their five children and her own misgivings about accepting all things Catholic and becoming a part of a small group of friends who were similarly seeking a new focus and a new life in faith, where before she had been the wife of a Vicar, who had a church and a congregation to care for..

The Conference ended with a Mass of thanksgiving at which the Prayers of the Faithfull were read in French and then in English and we received the final blessing in Spanish, Italian, French and English which brought a radiant smile to all there. Photos were taken, goodbyes said and we returned to our own countries and homes filled with a determination to Stand up and be heard, as Father GianMaria Polidoro wrote in his last contribution to Women's Voice, "Let's shout it from the rooftops."

Barbara Stitt.

Vice President Europe Region.