

HUMAN TRAFFICKING. Our Challenge: To raise awareness, prevent and act.
V Regional Conference of WUCWO in Latin America and the Caribbean



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Our fifth Regional Conference took place from 8th – 12th April in Mexico City. We chose the WUCWO priority for this period, “Love in Action”, the resolutions adopted at the last Assembly and the priorities set for our region. The object of this Conference was to raise awareness, sensitize and train lay people, religious and priests, as well as the lay organizations and parochial communities to actively and effectively participate in the prevention of human trafficking by assisting victims and by demanding that those in authority fulfill their duties in this field. We joined with the efforts of other Catholic NGOs, religious groups and lay people who work with the cause and we invited them to share their experiences in order to look for common grounds from which to take action.

More than 120 prominent people from over 30 organizations from Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Cuba, the United States of America, Italy, Spain and Mexico took part. After being welcomed and given an explanation of the goals of our conference and the vital importance and urgency of the topic to be discussed, Maria Giovanna Ruggieri, our President General gave a clear message: “United, we want to approach a topic that requires attention, respect, responsibility ...walking together with all those who are specifically dedicated to the prevention and care for victims of trafficking; conscious that our Christian communities ought to take action, without hypocrisy, with courage and humility to go to the assistance of those who are facing difficulties.” She listed the objectives to be achieved:

1. Learn about and understand the causes which precipitate and lead to these tragic consequences.
2. Acquire the competency and ability to awaken the conscience and interest of the people with the aim of getting them to understand and undertake their responsibilities as citizens and believers.
3. Contribute to a major awakening of the consciences of all the members of Catholic women’s organizations with regard to this grave problem.
4. Influence public opinion to strengthen laws and public policies which will stop or at least reduce human trafficking.

During the opening sessions, Mons. Gustavo Rodriguez Vega, Bishop of Nuevo Laredo who is a member of the Department of Justice and Latin American Solidarity of the Episcopal Council (CELAM), anchored all the conference with the Christian perspective of the dignity of people as children of God.

Development of the Program

After the lecture on the dignity and liberty of the person in the Social Doctrine of the Church, the program was divided into three parts: in the first session we concentrated on becoming more familiar with the phenomenon of trafficking and its effects. We gave close attention to the definition of the phenomenon, its causes, the consequences for the

victims and their families, the way traffickers operate and the profile of the exploiters, the victims and the consumers. A video was shown which can be seen on our webpage.

From a Latin American panel we learned about the reality of the phenomenon in the region, as well as hearing a brief account of the situation in some countries including the United States. A video presentation of victims, as well as the personal testimonies of those who attended, was introduced. Later, we worked in workshops on trafficking and migration, social and governmental responsibility with regard to all trafficking including trafficking with the intention of sexual commercial exploitation and trafficking with the intent of labour exploitation.

During this first session, we faced the realities of the terrible pain and suffering of the victims and their families, as well as the generous, tireless, and, on occasion, frustrating work of those who work day after the day to recover the victims and avoid new cases of exploitation. We were made keenly aware that trafficking, that is the buying and selling of fellow human beings, is the second most lucrative business in the world, after drug trafficking.

In the second part of the program several different models of ways to prevent trafficking and showing how to channel and provide support to victims were presented. Experiences were shared by, among others, the religious Scalabrinian order who have worked for many years with immigrants and refugees; the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who have always worked with dedicated women who were involved in counteracting paid sexual activities; Hilary Chester, of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of USA; Yahoska Lopez of Caritas Nicaragua and various specialists from NGOs in the region.

One of the most significant exhibitions was the presentation of the program "Creating Secure Communities" which was put into practice for the first time in a parish in Mexico. In this program the principal protagonists were the ordinary members of the community: housewives, youths, men, etc. All the experiences and the methodology upon which it was based were captured in a book that was shown and made available at the conference.

In this second part there was also a presentation of panels regarding networks in which representatives of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, Talitha Kun – Brazil –, the CELAM and Caritas International spoke of the importance of networking nationally as well as regionally and internationally. Here we counted with, among others, the participation of Sister Ligia Ruiz Gamba, Executive of Human Mobility of CELAM, and Martina Liebsch, member of the WUCWO Board.

We explored topics such as the massive means of communication and the social networks confronting trafficking, both demonstrated by practical experts. Of special interest were an Interreligious Panel and the spiritual reflection in which a Catholic priest, an Evangelist Minister and three women: a Baptist, a Buddhist, and a Jewess participated. At the end all the participants of the Conference united together in a spiritual reflection and candle lighting ceremony.

Finally, we had a panel of young people. It was deeply moving to hear them speak about their position with regard to trafficking, their responsibility in the prevention of the same, and the importance of work in the family and with young men, the potential clients of female victims. At the conclusion the panel showed and distributed the booklet "Open Your Heart: a programme for young people on affectivity in the light of the beatitudes", a publication produced through the collaboration of WUCWO and the International Forum of Catholic Action.

The third part of the programme was dedicated to working in workshops and group dynamics, on the conclusions and making commitments on a personal as well as organizational level. Strongly motivated by these five days of work and inspired by the words of Pope Francis who in his Easter message reminded us that: "Human Trafficking is the most extensive form of slavery in the XXI century" we prepared and announced the Final Declaration of this Conference in which WUCWO members in the Region commit to:

- Work in depth to bring about greater awareness of the grave problem of trafficking;
- Raise awareness among public opinion to demand efficient policies from the State
- Involve laity, religious and priests, church communities and pastors in the prevention and care of victims, carrying this out by deeper formation of Christian values and

- Network with other national, regional and international organizations, share good practices and make joint efforts to prevent trafficking, rescue and help those affected to recover.

This declaration, which is in the process of acceptance by the participating organizations, was announced to the national and international press present throughout all of the event. You can also find it on our web page.

Likewise we agreed:

- To invite all the organizational participants of the Conference and other bodies to agree formally to promote our Final Declaration.
- Send the conclusions and the Final Declaration to all bishops and Episcopal Conferences of the Region.
- Create a commission composed of Lia Zervino (WUCWO), Martina Liebsch (Caritas International and WUCWO) and Gabriella Bottani (Talitha Kum) to follow-up the adopted agreements, and
- Create or join with a regional Catholic network on Human Trafficking.

Spirituality

Living in the fundamental spirituality of the Work of God and in the Eucharist was very evident throughout the whole Conference. The opening Mass took place in the solemn setting of the Metropolitan Cathedral and was presided over by His Excellency Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes, Archbishop of Tlalnepantla and President of CELAM. The closing ceremony was performed at the feet of the Our Lady of Guadalupe and was presided over by His Excellency Bishop Christopher Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to Mexico. On the other days, the Mass was celebrated by Friar David Diaz Corrales, Episcopal Vicar for the Institutes of the Consecrated Life of the Archdiocese of Mexico; Fr. Luis Aguilar Badilla, of the Social Pastoral Council of Caritas, Costa Rica and Fr. Gabriel Orlando Agostinelli, OMV of Argentina.

We give thanks to our Lord and the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe for the fruits obtained from this meeting and we ask for His light and His assistance to inspire us to “transform into action the silence and the omissions confronting Trafficking and the abuse of the most vulnerable.” I invite all the members of WUCWO to take on the challenge with us responding to the call of Pope Francis who, as a cardinal, urged us, “let’s not give excuses to pass by ... Let every one of us draw near to the severe pain and do all we can to stop it, because if we wash our hands of it we will be accomplices of this cruel slavery.”