

## EXPERIENCES OF ON-GOING FORMATION IN A WORLD CONGRESS

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The 20th World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) was held at Bangkok in October 2004. Thanks to the superb organization of the host country, Thailand, the World Congress attracted 1071 delegates from 86 countries covering all continents.

When I returned from the World Congress a friend asked me a question through e-mail: What did you as a journalist gain personally and professionally from the Congress in Thailand?

I got so much enriching experiences and professional knowledge that I think, I can write a book about them. So I was not satisfied with writing a short letter to my friend. The World Congress has possessed me so much and was clamouring for expression and communication that I felt compelled and happy to write this article.

As many people know, UCIP is one of the biggest and the oldest organization of professional people in the print media. While UCIP is 75-year old, I am proud that I am associated with it since the last 25 years. I was also lucky to attend 7 previous World Congresses and serve UCIP as a Council Member for 21 years.

I enjoy travelling and visiting new countries and meeting people. But as I had visited Thailand twice on different occasions I was not eager to visit Thailand again. I visited Thailand first time in 1982 during the meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference. Then as the Chief Editor of South Asian Religious (SAR) News I was specially invited to cover the meeting held at Samphran. My second visit was in 1994 to attend a UCIP Council Meeting held at the tourist resort Pattaya.

But the World Congress at Bangkok was very different from my two previous engagements in Thailand. From a personal point of view, every UCIP Congress has been a sort of on-going formation for me in my print-media profession. Living together for a week with about 1000 delegates from a hundred countries and listening to experts in print media and exchanging views help you to widen your vision and extend your horizons.

Like the previous Congresses the Bangkok Meet provided ample opportunities to meet old friends and make new ones in a conducive atmosphere. In my first visit to Thailand I had to work very hard to attend all the sessions of the Asian Bishops' meet and report extensively for SAR News. During the meeting of the UCIP Council too I did not get any time and opportunity to meet and mingle with the local Thai people. Of course, on the two previous visits with the groups I visited some tourist-interest places and attended some typical cultural programmes of Thailand like visiting the beach at Pattaya and the crocodile farm at Samphran.

But the Bangkok Congress provided ample opportunities not only to meet the print-media professionals from around the world but also with the local media professionals and others for personal sharing and exchange of views. I hold that my personality and world views were formed to a large extent from the intermingling with many cultures, languages and races.

Today I consider myself a world citizen. Wherever I travel today, I am sure to find a friend, or at least a friend of a friend anywhere in the world. Institutions and organizations like UCIP and its world congresses have helped me to become a world citizen. I had also the rare opportunity of studying in international educational institutions in London, Paris and Rome.

The greatest attraction for me at Bangkok was the Congress theme : “Media Challenges amidst Cultural and Religions Pluralism for a new Social Order, Justice and Peace.” I liked the topic so much that I wrote an article about it in my weekly newspaper column in Gujarati as a sort of personal preparation to participate meaningfully in the Congress. I also put the article in my web site during the fortnight of the Congress.

It is no wonder that Prime Minister of Thailand Dr Thaksin Shinawatra too found the Congress theme very relevant. Addressing the delegates on the opening day of the Congress Dr Shinawatra said : “I would like to congratulate the organizers for choosing a highly relevant theme for this World Congress, namely “Media Challenges amidst Cultural and Religions Pluralism : for a New Social Order, Justice and Peace.” This theme and its sub-themes are indeed of great importance to all of us, especially in a highly complex and globalized world.”

“We have found,” Dr Shinawatra continued, “that many of the conflicts in this world are based on a lack of understanding of one another, which leads to a lack of trust. On your part, as publishers, journalists, and media specialists, you all have a significant role to play in this matter. Through the power of your writing, you are in a position to influence public opinion in a positive or negative manner. It is therefore vital that you wield such power in a constructive way by helping to build trust, bridge cultural differences, and foster greater understanding among peoples and nations. This responsibility entails, of course, a supreme commitment to truth and justice.”

In my view a unique achievement of the Bangkok Congress was the opportunity of encounter with the Buddhist people, culture and religion. In the Congress apart from Thai journalists there were also 427 local volunteers intermingling with the Congress delegates, and most of the volunteers were Buddhists. In a conversation a young Buddhist lady, told me that, “We do not believe in Buddha as God but as a great Teacher. As our ‘Guru’ he teaches us the way of happy and contented life. He is our inspiration.”

In this context, a venerable Buddhist monk, the Associate Professor of Mahachulalongornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Dr Somchai Kusalacitto’s keynote address on the Congress theme in Buddhist perspective was very significant.

“Buddhism may not be a religion in the general sense as you all know. To me Buddhism seems to be the system of the Holy life. It is not a doctrine to persuade people to escape society and spend all day and night meditating in solitude. Buddhism was established to solve the problems of an unjust society, i.e., the caste system which was strongly practiced by Indians of those days... According to the Buddha, all men, animals, plants and phenomen are interrelated and interdependent,” Dr Kusalacitto said.

Reading from a prepared speech the venerable Buddhist monk emphasised the importance of morality as “The Dhamma or Truth or God in person.”

“Morality, according to me, is most important, as in our country we are facing many crisis such as political crisis, economic crisis and social crisis. I dare to confirm my ideas here as in various places that this is a moral crisis which is the cause of all crises. In case we succeed in developing morality in people, especially children and the young generations, all other crises will be eradicated automatically,” Dr Kusalacitto concluded.

A Buddhist and government spokesperson, Jakrapol Penkair also addressed the Congress. Speaking about Buddhist teachings on justice and peace Mr Penkair specially emphasised on Buddhist ethics.

“According to Buddhist ethical principles, each individual has to strive for salvation through his own power. Each in his own path has to struggle for moral improvement and spiritual enlightenment, the attainment of which entirely depends on his own effort. No one else, human or divine, is able to do this for him.,” Mr Penkair said.

There were numerous addresses by experts from many countries. The speakers delivered well prepared addresses on the Congress theme in the context of their respective countries and continents. The addresses were simultaneously translated as the speakers spoke in any one of the four UCIP languages: English, French, Spanish and German. The people in the audience could listen to the speeches in the language of their choice using headphones.

Two things which distinguished the Bangkok Congress was Thai cultural programmes and lavish dinner receptions. Along with stupendous meals, we could also experience the efficiency, generosity and the warm hospitality of our hosts as the Thai people showed utmost care and concern for us everywhere and in everything.

There were dances and music not only in the five star hotel receptions and cultural events but also during lunch time at the venue of the Congress, Mater Dei School in the heart of Bangkok city.

In short, the UCIP World Congress at Bangkok was more than an experience of on-going formation for me in professional print media but also an unforgettable encounter with people of many cultures, languages and races.