

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FORMATION

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International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) is the biggest of organization in the print media world with more than 1500 members around the globe. The eighty-year-old UCIP held its once-in-three-year World Congress first time in Canada at Sherbrooke in June 2007. The last UCIP Congress was held at Bangkok in Thailand in September 2004.

The venue of the Congress was Bishop's University founded in 1843 in Lennoxville. The spacious university campus has St. Francis River running on one side and a thick forest on the other. The campus is located a few miles from Sherbrooke city centre in the heart of Eastern townships in Quebec district not too far from USA boarder. Eastern townships cover the most beautiful region with lakes, mountains, rivers and forests. Apple orchards, vineyards and maple trees also add to the lush greenery of the region.

The theme of the World Congress was Media and Religion: Risk or Opportunity – the Impact of Modern Media on Religious Experience and Social Conscience.

The local organizing UCIP Congress Committee 2007 of Canadian Association of Catholic Periodicals (ACPC) under the leadership of its President Gaetane Larose and the Coordinator Fr. Pierre Belanger, SJ did splendid work in preparing for the Congress for two years and then conducting it to the satisfaction of most participants. Mrs. Martine Pelletier and Prof. Patrick Snyder of the Department of Theology, Ethics and Philosophy of Sherbrooke University contributed to the articulation of the Congress theme.

Ten eminent keynote speakers including three professors from Sherbrooke University expounded the Congress theme from different perspectives and points of view. Their addresses helped the Congress to form a fair idea of the modern media in the world especially on the impact of the media on religions and vice versa. Some participants like me felt that most the sharing were head-level and lacked practical wisdom.

The President of UCIP Prof. Dr. Ismar de Oliveira Soares had said in his inaugural address that in Bishop's University "the emphasis is placed on personal contacts between faculty and students through small classes and frequent use of seminars. This is what our Congress is looking for: opportunities to inter-change experiences." He noted that under such methodology and through networking we are "getting to know one another, and building friendship in view of future cooperation."

Referring to the Congress theme Prof. Soares said that "contemporary religious situation is commented on every day by the media." He said that the Congress will deal with three topics: "1) The media and the making of contemporary religious phenomena, 2) Ethics and the media and 3) Religious journalism and the awakening of a social conscience."

Commenting further on the theme "Media and Religion: Risk or Opportunity?" Prof. Soares clarified that, "for us, the risk is to believe that we know all about media and its impact, rejecting the possibility of discussing this subject itself. The opportunity is to freely share experiences

among professionals without prejudice, and warmly stimulate dialogue beyond the borders of religious beliefs.”

Another inspiring talk was that of Prof. German Rey of Colombia on “The Media and the Making of Contemporary Religious Phenomena: a Latin American Perspective.” He said that Latin America has the largest number of Catholics in the World. Yet the gap between the rich and the poor is very big. “In many Latin American countries the people live in extreme poverty... The media need to focus on Christian faith and social justice,” Prof. Rey said.

In an interesting keynote address the Director of Communications and Society, Mr. Bertrand Quellet spoke on “Media and Religion in this Time of Zapping and Clicking – The Impact of Digital Revolution.”

Quellet said that it is not enough to be interested in the media but you need to really know the media. After making 7 observations about digital technology Quellet quoting Pontius Pilate said that “What is written is no longer remain written in our digital world as what is written can be changed now on the Internet in this time of Zapping and Clicking.”

In all 10 keynote speeches the most enlightening one for me was that of Mrs. Else Strivens, the Editor of ‘Trefoil’ – The Southern African Catholic Quarterly.

In her scholarly and yet down to earth speech on ‘Religious Journalism and the Awakening of Social Conscience’ Mrs. Strivens said: “Religious journalism is not only about the ideas and events of the world of religion but, particularly that has as its purpose the development of individuals and communities who have integrated faith and life and who work to promote the dignity of the human person, the common good and who work for justice.”

Mrs. Strivens summarized her idea quoting the visionary mystic St. Catherine of Sienna “that we are to walk on the two legs of love – the love of God and the love of neighbour.”

During her 40 minutes speech Mrs. Strivens elucidating her points quoted extensively Canadian Philosopher Bernard Lonergan, SJ (1904-80) on critical thinking, eminent theologian Karl Rahner, SJ (1904-84) on human person’s a priori transcendental orientation to God and South African theologian and writer Albert Nolan, OP on reading the signs of times and many other eminent thinkers and authors like the Nobel Laureates Solzhenitsyn and Rudyard Kipling.

“Awareness of critical thinking processes, and where our readers/audiences are, is important when our aim is to awaken social consciences and develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking involves having a point of view and being able to defend it but also being able to understand the other’s point of view. Hence it is important that we do not write only to people’s level of comfort,” said Mrs. Strivens.

Another keynote speaker Dr. Michael W. Higgins, the President of St. Thomas University Fredericton quoting the former Editor of Tablet, London John Wilkins said, “Those of us who have a religious mission of some sort, whether in religious or the secular media, must at least do

the best we can to see that sometimes in our work there is an echo of the truth without which the world perishes.”

In the Congress auditorium the speeches were given in French, Spanish and English. The Congress being held in a Franco-phone area most speeches were delivered in French. But with the facility of simultaneous translation the participants could hear in the language of his/her choice. Still, with my limited knowledge of French, I understood better by reading a few texts of keynote speeches than by listening to their simultaneous translations!

There was also time to question and seek clarifications from the speakers. Opportunities were also given to meet in small language-wise groups and discuss the talk. This way every participant could take active part discussing and evaluating the speeches in the context of one's own knowledge and experiences. The Congress proceedings were covered by Sanador's Catholic Televisions Salt + Light Television both in French and English. We had also facilities of web site and Internet. But there was hardly any time to make use of those facilities.

There were also separate meetings of various Regions and Federations of UCIP. Though Asian continent is divided into three UCIP regions, all participants from Asia gathered together in one regional meeting as we were few in number including seven participants from India.

These different group meetings were helpful not only to discuss and share the Congress theme but also to establish new friendships and renew old ones. Thus the whole Congress provided the ambience and opportunity to experience international formation and brotherhood.

The local organizers had also arranged five optional workshops for the Congress participants. I attended one on 'Internet'. Though it was in French I could follow the lecture working on the computer in front of me and profit much from the workshop. My friend Simon Parmar chose to visit 'La Tribune', the local newspaper.

An important but optional part of the Congress was an excursion on the last day of the Congress. Two separate tours were organized. The first was to the ancient 400 year old Quebec city and the second was a tour around Eastern Townships. Most participants chose to join the Quebec city tour. Since I have been to Quebec city to attend a UCIP Council meeting in June 2003, I together with my friend Mr. Simon Parmar choose to join the second group.

Our small group of seven started in a minibus with Gaetane Larose as our guide and leader. Our first stop was in Sherbrooke city to visit two huge murals on Bowen Street South called "Once upon a time in the East" (68' by 39') and "Progress in the East" (76' by 28'). One mural depicting a city street, shops below and residential quarters above looked so realistic that at first I thought, that they are real and not painting on an exterior wall of a city building!

Then after driving around Sherbrooke University Campus in the city we headed for Magog region. We visited the "St. Benedic Abbey on Lake" beautifully situated on the shore of Lake Memphremagog. The Benedictine Monks have been living there from 1912 focusing on the search for God.

The Abbot told us that they have a life by prayer balanced with study, physical work and pastoral ministry to the people visiting the monastery for prayer and retreat. Then, after a relaxed lunch in a restaurant jetting out into Memphremagog Lake we headed to a popular 'Le Sanctuaire de Beauvoir' shrine of Our Lady at Beauvoir on a hill. The long ride was enchantingly fascinating amidst hills, rivers, lakes and forests. The old shrine is a small chapel but a big Church is built next to the shrine. There is also an open-air church with altar and benches to accommodate a few thousand pilgrims especially on the feast days of the shrine.

The shrine chaplain Fr. Jean-Claude Trottier, S.M. warmly welcomed us and took us around the long hilly paths of 8 stations of Evangelical walk where Gospel scenes are depicted in life-size bronze statues. The two-kilo-meter walk on 'Path of Peace' through a thick growth of maple trees was truly enchanting and spiritually nourishing. The chaplain also arranged for us to celebrate the Eucharist in the small shrine and then entertained us with cold drinks and sweets.

I learnt the next day from my friends like Dr. Takaaki Yasuoka of Sophia University, Japan that the Quebec city tour was also very enjoyable and enlightening. After a choice dinner in a wayside restaurant we were back in Bishop's University at 9.30 PM.

Simon and I were not sure where to meet the next day early morning to go to the Montreal airport. So with Gaetane's help we woke up Fr. Pierre who told us to meet him at the 'security' at 4 AM. Simon woke me up at 3.25 AM and we were at the 'security' at 4 AM with other Congress participants to catch the taxi bus to Montreal.

In conclusion, I can say that the 22nd World Congress of UCIP in Canada fructified the blessings of the Archbishop of Sherbrooke Andre Gaumond. In his inaugural blessing the Archbishop said that the different activities of UCIP have made it possible for the journalist men and women to meet each other, share professional interests and mutually enrich and establish international brotherhood. In deed, the UCIP World Congress was for me was an experience of international formation and brotherhood.