

WUCWO - Words of greeting for General Assembly

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Grateful for the invitation and for the opportunity to highlight, with my presence, the deep appreciation with which the Holy See regards the life and work of WUCWO.

The General Assembly is a core moment for the life of WUCWO. We start these days of work praying the Holy Spirit to preside over the dialogues, deliberations and choices you are called to make these days so that this Assembly brings fruits of a renewed life in the Spirit and a renewed commitment to work in favor of women around the world and in favor of the mission of the Church.

1. Looking at the history of WUCWO's relationship to the Holy See

I have had opportunity to speak to some of you about the many times during my work, while digging in archives or documentation, I have met the richness of WUCWO's history and particularly the close link with the Holy See that becomes evident along that history.

For example, recently I was reading a volume of the writings of Cardinal Raphael Merry del Val, a key figure of the Church in the first decades of the XX Century. This man was the young secretary of state of Pope Saint Pius X, faithfully served Pope Pius during the 11 years of his pontificate and, afterwards was entrusted other responsibilities within the Church. Among those, he was Cardinal Protector of the International League of Catholic Women, from 1922 until his death in 1930. He presided over three International Congresses of the League. His speeches to the League are a beautiful testimony of the close relationship with the Holy See even from those early years. Of course in reading those texts one can notice the ninety years that have passed, their tone seems to us a little outdated, but it is still very interesting to get to know them as they are part of your own history and allow you to be aware of this important link always present, of this history of which we all, in our littleness, are called to take part of in our own times.

I quote Cardinal Merry del Val's example because it might be less known, but apart from that example it is also interesting to note the many times that Pontiffs, have given speeches, messages especially directed to WUCWO. To give you a taster:

Pius XII, Speech to participants of WUCWO Congress, April 1952: (*available from www.vatican.va only in Italian, I provide our free translation*)

We are convinced that women can make a great contribution to the cause of peace. We address this paternal Message to you, mothers, wives, daughters of every nation, and you in particular, Catholic Women. We are aware of your filial devotion to the Vicar of Christ, and through Him to Jesus himself ... We are always anxious to promote the work of peace in every way until its light envelops the earth forever, and

so we wish to entrust to you, beloved daughters..., the arduous but sublime office of working for peace.

John XXIII, Speech to Delegates of WUCWO, May 1961 (*available in Spanish, our free translation*):

Dear daughters, the excellent work undertaken by your organisation over a half century – with this beautiful title of World Union – is the best guarantee that you will know what to do for the Christian renewal of society. Society resembles families, and they in turn reflect women who are the true heart of the home. Be therefore proud of your noble mission to which the Church calls you through our humble voice. May the divine grace that we wholeheartedly call upon to shower abundantly upon you, your families and all those whom you represent, make your work fruitful!

I quote only these as they might be the less known... Anyway, this is a witness to that history of closeness and alliance with the Holy See for the good of humanity that we can only hope and pray will grow stronger.

During these days, may I suggest that each one of you keep in mind what does it mean for your local associations, what does it bring to them the fact of belonging to WUCWO? I think one of the obvious answers is that WUCWO gives local associations world-wide and Church-wide breath and horizons.

WUCWO has many and strong relationships with different organisms of the Holy See. I have been able to witness particularly the close relationship with the Pontifical Council for the Laity; a relationship present since the Council's origins (we're younger than WUCWO!), but one that has grown stronger in latest years since the updating of WUCWO's statutes to make it become an International Public Association of the Faithful.

As a Public Association, WUCWO is not just a private initiative of the laity but acts in the name of the Church, its activity involves in a certain way the Church itself; being a public association of the faithful involves a special bond with the hierarchy of the Church and, because you are a World Union, that special bond is lived particularly with the Holy See.

An important fruit of this General Assembly would be if all delegates get to know and understand better the richness that comes from the multiple countries and realities here represented. This is an experience of the Catholic Church: Catholic = Universal.

Having a truly Catholic spirit means that, being enrooted firmly on our Catholic faith, the firm core of who we are, we find a deep unity despite our differences. We may have different ways of doing things, different worldviews, but what unites us is most central and important: the love for Jesus Christ, the certainty that in Him is the source of everything that is good for the world, the faith of the Church, the certainty that our faith is our main contribution to the world: *“He that does not give God gives too little”* (Pope Benedict XVI – Message for Lent 2006).

2. Mission

At this point I'd like to invite you to allow *Evangelii gaudium* to interrogate you.

The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come. (EG 1)

Renewal of the Church is the declared purpose of EG, but not any type of renewal, a *Missionary Renewal*. Pope Francis is inviting the whole Church to renewal, including himself (see his desire for a conversion of the papacy in EG 32). Therefore, also WUCWO's General Assembly should take into careful consideration this context, this call to a Missionary Renewal:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord". The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: "Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace". (EG 3)

Allow me to add that, being as we are in a Marian Shrine, this call to "a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ" can happen through the motherly love and motherly prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We are visiting her in her Shrine; She is willing to help us, to make it easier for each one of us to leave behind the hardness of our own heart that keeps us away from Jesus and let our hearts be transformed into hearts of flesh, touched by His healing grace.

Allow me also, to go through a few points written especially for us, committed Catholics that actively work for Him and seek to serve Him. Points Pope Francis provides as an examination of conscience... In keeping with the practice of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius and in order to be able to perceive God's will and adhere to it, it's necessary to bring light to the things that might be keeping us from accepting God's will and welcoming it.

1. **Lack of Joy.** Joy is one of the fundamental dimensions of the Christian faith; a joyless Christian is a contradiction-in-terms, like saying a rich person without money... The Pope invites us repeatedly in EG to ask ourselves if we are truly joyful of being Christian: Why do our lives so often seem a Lent without Easter (EG 6)? Or why do our faces look so often as if we have come back from a funeral (EG 10)? Egoism, self-centeredness are at the core of this sadness; having

renounced the joy of witnessing Christ, having closed ourselves to Grace, therefore to joy.

Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. EG 2

Pope Francis invites us to rediscover the joy of having Jesus in our lives, the joy that faith has brought to each one of us and the joy that comes from witnessing our faith to others, to the world.

Let us ask Mary, our Mother to help us these days, while we are gathered at her shrine, to rediscover the joy, the beauty of our own faith and to renew our desire to share it with the world around us.

2. **Lack of missionary enthusiasm:** means “a sort of inferiority complex” which leads us to conceal or water-down our Christian identity; “a kind of obsession about being like everyone else” (EG 79); a “practical relativism” that “consists in acting as if God did not exist” and therefore unable to be moved and provoked by the poor, by others, by people who have not received the Gospel. This is the sickness of Catholics attached to their securities or desiring “for power or human glory at all cost, rather than giving their lives to others in mission” (EG 80).

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (EG 80)

Let us ask Mary our Mother of Fatima to renew the missionary enthusiasm of each one of us here present, of each member association, of the ones that will be elected to serve in the leadership roles for the Union. Mother Mary, make WUCWO women ardent with missionary enthusiasm!

3. **Hopelessness:** seeing the many evils around us, the social, economic and cultural difficulties of our time, seeing also the many evils present in the men and women of the Church, we risk becoming hopeless, we risk being disenchanted, and “diminishing our commitment and our fervor.” But the “eyes of faith” allow us to “see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness, never forgetting that ‘where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more’” (EG 84).

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope! (EG 86)

Mary, Mother of WUCWO, Our Lady of Peace, help us to keep hope always alive, knowing that Your Son is always with us and His is the mission entrusted to us. The mission is always greater than our possibilities, but we are not alone, Jesus Your Son walks with us and sustains us. You are our mother and we can count always on your powerful intercession. Mary our mother, renew our hope!

4. **Lack of community life, of fraternal love:** None of us has been called in an isolated manner but always “belonging” with others to God’s people. But we experience that sharing life, work and ideals with others can sometimes be challenging, can demand from us conversion... Pope Francis invites us to live true encounter with others, “to accept and esteem them as companions along the way,

without interior resistance... finding Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas.” (EG 91) To form a “community which is the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (EG 92) where we love each other truly, where we tolerate the nuisances of each other, where we forgive and are forgiven, listen to and are listened. In the name of the Lord that loved and forgave each one of us we can find strength to love and forgive our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! (EG 92)

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love! (EG 101)

Mary our Mother, your presence and prayer helped create a community when the scared and discouraged disciples gathered at the Cenacle after your Son’s death. Be present in the midst of this General Assembly too, help us know that we count on the new life of your Risen Son, pray for each delegate that she be open to the Holy Spirit because He is the only one able to create true unity among our differences. Come Holy Spirit! Come through our blessed mother Mary’s intercession!

- 5. Spiritual worldliness:** “consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being... one’s own interests and not those of Jesus Christ.” (EG 93); it looks on “from above and afar, ... reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters,... discredit those who raise questions... constantly point out the mistakes of others and are obsessed by appearances”.

The remedy is the mission focused on Jesus Christ, the commitment to the poor; it’s “breathing the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness”, from “an outward religiosity bereft of God” (EG 97).

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel! (EG 97)

Mary, our mother, allow us to live and walk as authentic disciples of your Son Jesus Christ. Let no other rule of life, no other interest come before the rule of the Gospel, the interest of loving and serving your Son and witnessing his love and mercy to our wounded and needed world!

Conclusion

Our Baptism makes us all missionary and living up to this missionary vocation makes us grow closer to Jesus Christ, more open to the Holy Spirit, makes us experience the joy of making our own lives a gift for others, for those entrusted to us by God in His loving Plan: our families, our colleagues in our associations, our sisters with whom we work, the poor we serve, the weak we defend and advocate for!

Pope Francis beautifully describes the mission of evangelization in the life of the Baptized: “*My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.*” EG 273

What great novelty, what great Christian fortitude could come about if each one of the delegates to this General Assembly re-encounters deeply this missionary heart of her own vocation within the Church! There is much that needs to be done and despite our littleness God himself wants to be able to count on us.

I hope and pray that these days in Fatima are true days of renewal for WUCWO. Days to renew in each one of you here present the joy and hope of belonging to a World Union with such rich history, a history with many prophetic characters, a tradition of love for the Church, closeness and collaboration with the Church's hierarchy.

Today there are many challenges, new things are being asked of you. God opens new paths. Sometimes the times seem bad or difficult, things seem lost or even finished. But anchored in the beauty and richness of the heritage you have received, founded in the love of Jesus Christ and the protection and example of His Mother, with the firm base of the Church's faith, we can look towards the future without fear.

May the Lord abundantly bless the works of this General Assembly and allow them to bring many fruits for a renewed vocation of this World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations at the service of women in the world and at the service of the Church from women.

Thank you.