



Summary of the 2013 WUCWO North American Region Conference

On beautiful sunny days in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA, over 170 women and priest spiritual advisors gathered for our WUCWO North American Region Conference at the Marriott Harbor Beach Resort and Spa. Awakening in the morning to the sound of the surf and watching the sun come up coloring the sky with a rainbow of beauty inspired thanks to our Creator even before a word was spoken.

The theme of the Conference was, “Love your neighbor as yourself” and was derived from the WUCWO Plan of Action for 2013: Peace in Action. The actions ascribed to the year of Peace in Action are Reduction of Poverty, Violence, Human Trafficking and Increased Support for Migrants. These actions were the basis of the presentations, prayers, and discussions at the Conference.

We were very pleased that members of the press were present to observe and report the proceedings.

Our meeting began on Sunday, 29 September when we convened in a spacious room set with round tables of ten. Each table had a small stand in the center that carried three small national flags. All the flags displayed on the tables were the flags of our WUCWO member organizations’ countries with the addition of the flags of the United Nations, the Vatican, and the State of Florida. Each place at the tables had a prayer card of our WUCWO patroness, Mary Queen of Peace, and a folder emblazoned with the logo of the meeting which is our WUCWO logo flanked with crossed Canadian and American flags on either side. In the folder, participants found a large pad of paper and a pen with the words WUCWO North American Conference, Fort Lauderdale, FL , USA, 29-30 September 2013, a copy of our new WUCWO brochure, a prayer card of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha that had printed on the reverse, “Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, WUCWO NA Region Patron Saint,” with the location and dates of the Conference and a prayer, “Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, please pray for us and guide our spiritual journey.” The folder also contained our program and a single sheet that provided the 2- day program at a glance.

Registration was conducted in the back where all attendees received a name badge that also contained the logo and wording that branded our Conference. A podium banner in the front with the same logo and wording completed the scene. So, the stage was set for our meeting to begin as everyone was comfortable and had the materials required.

At exactly 9:30am, Maribeth Stewart, WUCWO North American Vice President, welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming to the Conference. She then invited the following to the podium where each gave greetings from their organizations: Maria Giovanna Ruggieri, WUCWO President General; Betty

Anne Brown Davidson, President of the Catholic Women's League of Canada; Luba Kowalcyk, WUCWO Board Member from Canada who brought greetings as the Past President from the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League of Canada; Rebecca Woodhull, President of the National Council of Catholic Women USA; and Vertelle Kenion, Supreme Lady of the Auxiliary of the Knights of St. Peter Claver USA. Following these lovely greetings, Maribeth read letters of welcome from: Rick Scott, Governor of the State of Florida; Archbishop Thomas Wenski, Archbishop of Miami; Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and to the Organization of American States; Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council of the Laity (Vatican); Archbishop Pedro Lopez Quintana, Apostolic Nuncio to Canada; and Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America who conveyed the Apostolic Blessing to all in attendance and to their families.

We then prayed the Opening Prayer Service which was adapted from our 2013 WUCWO Day of Prayer, focusing on the Poverties of Hunger, Injustice, Violence and Complacency. This service set the focus for our meeting and the theme of "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Following the Prayer Service, all were asked to rise as the Broward County Fire and Rescue Honor Guard marched in smartly displaying the flags of Canada, the United States of America, the State of Florida, and Broward County. As they stood at attention in the front of the assembly, we sang the national anthems of Canada and the United States. The Honor Guard then marched out with our grateful appreciation for this opportunity to honor our countries and our North American unity. We realize that even though our two nations are beset with difficulties, those difficulties pale in comparison to what some other areas of our world suffer and we accept that we are blessed and charged to share our good gifts.

Our first speaker addressed Reduction of Poverty. Alexie Torres-Fleming spoke with the conviction of having lived in what is considered material poverty and having triumphed over it with a very responsible job with one of the wealthiest persons in the world until in her late 20's, though she was considered a "success," she suddenly felt great emptiness in her life. She spoke of how she felt compelled to return to her family and parish in the South Bronx (NY) and to advocate for a better life for the youth there. She did this through her parish and they organized a march against the drug dealers that were ruining their neighborhood. Despite their parish church being torched and death threats, they continued to march and gain more and more support and media attention until they did rid their neighborhood of this terrible curse. She then went on to devote herself to establishing an organization that helps the youth of the area to better themselves while appreciating their roots and the beauty of the family they came from. This effort has grown and has been very successful. Alexie, like all our first day speakers, was a strong example of a young Catholic woman who lived the reality they spoke about and who triumphed over that reality, be it poverty, violence, or human trafficking, through their faith and their dedication of their life to righting that wrong. Everyone came to their feet in applause as she finished and all were moved by her story and her commitment. We thanked her and presented her with a beautiful double matted signed print of Our Lady, Queen of Peace. We were so fortunate that the artist who created this lovely painting for WUCWO, Diane Andraska, was with us for our Conference. Alexie

loved the gift and indicated that she will treasure it and pray for us. We, in turn, promised her our prayers.

We then broke for a delicious luncheon of Caesar salad, chicken marsala, and apple pie. After this repast we were recharged for an afternoon that few will soon forget.

Our speaker on Violence, Dawn Eden, was a gentle yet powerful presence as she interwove her story of being sexually abused as a child and adolescent with the stories of saints who suffered and overcame abuse to go on as examples for those who have lost heart and will due to being abused. Dawn is a convert to Catholicism and her zeal for and learning of our religion rang strongly as she related her life, depression, and then her triumph through faith, turning her pain into a gift for others. She has written two books, *The Thrill of the Chaste*, and *My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints* that have become best sellers and she is often seen on television, especially the EWTN network. She had copies of the latter book with her and many were pleased to obtain an autographed copy. Something came to our attention later as several women came forward to thank us privately for having this speaker. Dawn's story and courage in telling it, enabled these women to speak with her for quite some time after about their own abuse suffered growing up. For many, it was the first time that they had been able to admit this and discuss it. How blessed we were to have Dawn to speak with them. This alone was worth any work that this Conference entailed. God is so good. Dawn loves her Mary, Queen of Peace print and all that WUCWO does.

Our last speaker of the day was such a sweet yet powerful presence. As all of our speakers, Katariina Rosenblatt addressed her topic from personal experience. As a young girl of 13, Kat was lured by a "friend" away from a hotel pool in Miami into a trafficking ring. After refusing to participate, she was kidnapped, given a lethal dose of drugs and driven to a deserted location and left to die. Miraculously, she held onto life and was rescued. This was not the end of her story. Not long later, another friend of hers, a classmate in Middle School, invited her to a party. She eagerly attended only to find that her friend's father was a trafficker and this time she was not so fortunate. She was given drugs and raped and then life and self esteem spiraled down for her as she became a drug addict, a drop out and involved in this local trafficking ring. She supplied us with stunning statistics that most of these trafficking rings are right in respectable neighborhoods. The price originally negotiated for her virginity was but \$550 and worse, the going price is now around \$150. Her voice wavered as she described how she went through this time but she bravely continued to share her story with us, making us understand that hers was not an isolated case but that human trafficking occurs throughout our NA Region in nearly every town and often does not have the happy ending found in movies. Throughout all this, she indicated that she stayed alive because when she was a young girl, she went to a Billy Graham Crusade and his message that "God loves you" stayed with her and she remembered the peace she felt as a child when her neighbors would take her to Mass with their family. Eventually, she was "sold" to a man who was a former police detective. After awhile, she got her courage together to escape to her mother and together they went to the police. There, she met with another disaster. She was told, "Who is going to believe you, a dropout and drug addict vs. a decorated police detective?" Thankfully, times have now changed but that is what she faced. She resolved never to touch drugs again, got her GED (high school equivalency) and then her Bachelor degree. She found her faith and has gone on to establish an

organization, There Is H.O.P.E. for Me, that finds young persons, boys and girls, and rescues them from trafficking rings locally (Broward County, Florida). She will soon receive her Ph.D. and indicates that she owes her own salvation solely to God. She has dedicated her life to saving others from the scourge of trafficking that she suffered. By the end of her story, many persons had tears streaming down their faces and a great resolve to return home, learn the true story of trafficking in their own area and work to end it. She was delighted to receive her Mary, Queen of Peace print and we promised to pray for each other.

After a much needed break, we returned to the meeting to break into discussion groups. The three discussion groups were Poverty, Violence, and Human Trafficking and each received a set of questions to answer that would lead to the formulation of the Final Declaration of this meeting. The women and spiritual advisors present worked hard and came back with wonderful statements that were shared with all in attendance.

The day ended with our Closing Prayer to Mary, Queen of Peace. All left remarking the power and emotion of our speakers and prayers.

On Monday morning, September 30th, we gathered in the meeting room and started our day at 8AM with a hearty American breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, pastries, grilled tomato, and coffee, tea, and juice. So fortified, we began the final day of our Conference.

At 9AM, Father Stembler led us in a beautiful prayer service, First Hour, from the Ukrainian Catholic Rite that was selected and brought to us by Luba Kowalczyk. What a lovely way to start our meeting day praising and thanking God.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski, Archbishop of Miami, then came to speak to us about immigration and the difficulties faced by immigrants and migrants. The Archbishop has long been a strong supporter of these communities since his seminary days. He has led committees at the United States Council of Catholic Bishops and has worked directly and extensively throughout his priesthood with immigrants and migrants. He emphasized the dignity of each human being and the Church's teachings on this subject. He was a wonderful and interesting speaker and we were pleased at his delight when artist Diane Andraska presented him with his framed print of Our Lady, Queen of Peace.

Following a short break, Jane Carter, a member of the Friends of NCCW for WUCWO, provided a lively and very informative interactive workshop on poverty and its repercussions in the US and Canada. She combined statistics with created characters that represented a working person who received below minimum wage, a child, a woman in the "sandwich generation" who was struggling with her husband to support their children and her elderly father, and an independent senior woman who was at risk should an extra bill arrive. These were developed as we learned more and more about them. We then received a sheet that had two footprints, the right labeled charity and the left, justice. We were asked to place our right foot forward representing charity. Then we were asked to place our left foot, representing justice, forward which of course made us take a step forward. This showed how charity alone does not solve a problem but can only alleviate it for awhile. Advocating for justice causes a step forward in the fight against poverty. It was a simple and powerful lesson. We then broke into one of

ten discussion groups. Each group received a quotation about justice and was asked to come up with two actions that could address poverty. We reconvened and heard the actions which were powerful and could be accomplished. Education and Advocacy were common themes with actions such as pushing for a higher minimum wage. Jane provided a fun, faith-filled, educational session that tied together our action themes by demonstrating that poverty is the base for violence, trafficking and complacency concerning migrants. It was an amazing session that left us educated and inspired to get out there and do something about these issues using the concrete measures we developed. We are so grateful to Jane for all the work she did to provide such a wonderful interactive workshop for us. We presented our “beach lover” with a personalized beach tote and towel as well as a beautiful double matted signed print of Our Lady, Queen of Peace.

We then heard an inspiring talk from our President General, Maria Giovanna Ruggieri who reminded us of our increasing voice and place in the Church as women. She indicated that as our place evolves so does our responsibility to act using our particular feminine genius to make this a better world. Using many quotes she wove her talk around these responsibilities and opportunities and the role of WUCWO in securing a world of faith and peace. It was a beautiful message and the standing ovation she received affirmed that it rang true with all present. We presented Maria Giovanna with a Vera Bradley Grand tote for all her travels and we filled it with two books, *Spectacular Canada* and *Spectacular America* so she could enjoy the beauty of our region through the pictures in these books. We also included a large double matted signed print of Our Lady, Queen of Peace.

Our Conference ended with a lovely and peaceful closing Mass with Father James Stembler as principal celebrant. We are so grateful to all the priests who attended and participated in our Conference and who concelebrated the Mass. It was a fitting and beautiful ending to our meeting. A meeting that we shall certainly remember as we work to make this world one where all are accorded the dignity inherent in their beings as children of God and where all receive what is needed to accomplish the mission for which they were created; a world that is possible if we but remember to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

Maribeth Stewart
Vice President, North America