

UCESM: 35 YEARS IN SERVICE OF RELIGIOUS IN EUROPE

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THE PREHISTORY OF UCESM

1. There was a time when UCESM did not exist.....
Sure, the world was not so nice then and there was something missing! It was the time of Vatican II. Rome was full of religious from all European countries. The reason for UCESM to come to existence was there.
2. It was precisely here in Rome, in the years of the Vatican Council, that the General Secretaries of the Conferences of Major Superiors from Central Europe met informally: they came from France, Germany, the Benelux-countries, Austria and Switzerland. The situation of the Church and the religious orders in Italy, Spain, Portugal, England and Ireland was then considered different from that of the countries in Central Europe. Therefore they were held "distant". Behind the iron curtain, in the communist Central and Eastern-European countries, Conferences of Superiors existed only in Poland and Yugoslavia. In the years after 1972, their general secretaries were invited to the meetings of the "Club" in Klosterneuburg near Vienna (Austria). During the period from 1972 to 1980, the secretaries from the rest of Europe took part in the meetings of the General Secretaries.
3. These annual meetings were informal; there were no predetermined topics, no speakers, no superiors of religious orders, no representatives from the hierarchy and no minutes of the work sessions. The initiative came from the secretary general of the Conference of the country where it had been decided to organize the meeting. The secretary prepared the program for the meeting which mostly lasted four days and also comprised a cultural time (visit to convents or monasteries, cultural sites etc.). The meetings consisted in sharing views and experiences about the situation of religious orders in the various countries after the Council, the adaptation and renewal of religious life in Church and society and all the related changes with their joys and tensions.
4. Over the years the importance of the construction of the European community with centres in Strasbourg and Brussels grew. At the same time the growing number of general secretaries in the "Club" made it necessary to integrate the Presidents of the Conferences of Major Superiors and also the Congregations of women religious with their Presidents and General Secretaries into the European Union of Conferences of Major Superiors.
5. The model for this European Union of Conferences of religious was the CLAR, the Latin American Conference of Religious, which existed since 1959.
6. During the years 1978-1979 a group of General Secretaries, i.e. Fr. Jean Bonfils from France, Fr. Jean Mesot from Switzerland and Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch from Austria committed themselves to the preparation of a project to build an European Union of Conferences of Major Superiors.
7. A first meeting of the Presidents and General Secretaries took place in April 1980 in Paris to cast an eye on the collaboration between all the Conferences of religious men and women on the European level. At that meeting, statutes were elaborated and a President was elected: Fr. Dehovre from Belgium; a vice-president, Fr. Cabra from Italy, and a Secretary General, Fr. Bonfils from France. The statutes from CLAR served as a reference point to those of UCESM.

II. THE HISTORY OF UCESM

8. In November 1981, an informal General Assembly of Presidents and General Secretaries of the European Conferences of Major Superiors was held in Rome, where already the concrete expectations of religious life in Europe and the basic lines of the statutes were discussed. A first Executive Committee was also elected:
 - President: Pier Giordano Cabra csf, President of CISM (Italy)
 - Vice-President: Ignacio Iglesias sj, President of CONFER (Spain)
 - General Secretary: Jean Bonfils sma, Secretary of CSMF (France)
 - Deputy Secretary: Maria Crucis Doka, Secretary of VHONOS (Switzerland).
9. The Committee continued discussions on the proposals outlined at the General Assembly during following meetings. Within two years, the idea of collaboration between all the European Conferences of Major Superiors matured and the text of the statutes was drafted.

10. In November 1983 in Rome, these topics were tackled at the *first ordinary General Assembly* and the final text of the Statutes was discussed. The goal and nature of UCESM were defined as follows: „*The Union of European Conferences of Major Superiors, UCESM, is an association which was founded under the authority of the Holy See through the intermediary of CICALSAL¹. It is a non profit making association and has no limit on the number of its members*“.

The existence of UCESM and its statutes clearly reflect the ecclesial development process and magisterium on Religious Life after Vatican II, especially the document *Mutuae Relationes* (Nr 66) released in May 1978 and the new *Code of Canon Law* edited on January 25 of the year of our first Assembly, which dedicates two canons (708 and 709) to the Conferences of Major Superiors on various levels.

Apparently there were reservations of some members of the Congregation for Religious, especially about the mixed character of the union and the parity between religious men and women on all levels of representation and domestic leadership. But thanks to the support of the Prefect of the Congregation, Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, the Statutes of UCESM were adopted by the Church by Decree Nr AG 54/81.

The aim of UCESM is in line with the Canon 708 in the statutes:

- **undertake reflection and propose action**, through the intermediary of the national Conferences, to help religious in Europe and the members of the Societies of Apostolic Life **to bear witness to the Gospel** in cultural and socio-economic contexts, in the light of the diverse circumstances of time and place,
- **promote collaboration and mutual assistance** between the Conferences of Major Superiors in the various European nations and possibly between these Conferences and other international bodies;
- **foster suitable coordination and collaboration between these national Conferences of Major Superiors and Episcopal Conferences, the Council of European Episcopal Conferences (CCEE) and the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) and with each bishop,**
- **Represent the members of UCESM** whenever the presence of a representative of European religious and societies of apostolic life is desired or required.

11. It is specified that all the Conferences of Major Superiors of the different European nations can be members of UCESM, at their request, and after acceptance by the Committee.

12. The Committee runs and manages the association for a period of 4 years. The members are elected by the General Assembly. In the first few years, as we have seen, it was composed of the president, the vice-president, the general secretary and the deputy secretary altogether. Over the years it has developed to its present form, i.e. a president, a vice-president and two councillors.

They are responsible for the activities and initiatives of the Union in the intra-European area and represent the Union to other organizations on the European and international levels. The Committee appoints the General Secretary, who receives from them his/her mandate and has to report to them on his/her management. The General Secretary is, together with the staff, the true driving force of UCESM, because:

- He/she prepares the meetings of the Executive Committee, drafts the minutes and is charged with the implementation of the decisions.
- He/she ensures that the documents are regularly transmitted to the national Conferences and between them, he/she is charged with the day-to-day management of UCESM and runs the website.
- He/she manages the archives of the Union.

That is why it is so hard to find someone who is good and stays for a long time!!!

13. In the first years, the General Secretary also acted as treasurer. Later on, both functions were separated. A Treasurer is appointed by the Executive Committee among its members or outside, as has been the case rather often, for a period of 4 years. He is charged with the management of the budget, he/she presents the two-yearly balance sheet to the Committee and to the General Assembly, to which he has to report his about his management, for review and approval.

14. These are the people allowing the Union to exist. However, since the beginning, the heart of the UCESM and its true expression is the General Assembly. Thanks to the two-yearly meetings, the UCESM evolved and slowly acquired an identity. Remember the route of these Assemblies is telling the history of UCESM and travelling once again the way of the 35 years since its existence.

15. *The second General Assembly* took place on 10-14 November 1985 in Grottaferrata near Rome on the topic: "Religious life and young people today". Among the decisions taken was that of the confirmation of Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch mi, who had been appointed on July 1, 1984, by the Committee as General Secretary following up on Fr. Jean Bonfils.

16. *The third General Assembly* took place on 8-12 November 1987 in Madrid on the theme "The challenge of happiness: the contribution of religious life to the quality of Christian life". During this meeting, the new Executive Committee was elected for a period of four years:

¹ Can. 709 CIC; Pastor Bonus 109; *Mutuae Relationes* 66.

- President: Sr. France Delcourt sa, President of CSM (France)
- Vice-President: Pier Giordano Cabra, President of CISM (Italy)
- Deputy General Secretary: Sr. Maria Crucis Doka (Switzerland).

17. *The fourth General Assembly* was organized on 18-22 November 1989 in the Retreat House of the Jesuits in Mosta/Targa Gap on Malta on the topic: "Religious and laity for a new Evangelization of Europe". The presence of the Prefect of the Congregation of Religious, Cardinal Jérôme Hamer op, was welcomed with joy. He opened the meeting with a Eucharist, made the homily and the opening speech and took part in the work sessions. The Assembly was also pleased by the presence of the Apostolic Nuncio of Malta, of the local Bishop as representative of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences and a representative of the European lay organizations. At this General Assembly, Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch finishing his mandate as a General Assembly was substituted by Fr. Joseph Dargan sj, the General Secretary of the Irish Conference CORI.

18. *The fifth General Assembly* was held in Lisbon on 16-21 November 1991. The topic was: "New Europe and Third World: What kind of religious life?". Cardinal Jean Jérôme Hamer op, Prefect of the Congregation of Religious in Rome, again took part in the whole meeting. The Executive Committee expressed its keen desire to see the creation of a permanent secretariat. The Conference of women religious of Belgium provided an office at their headquarters in Brussels. In this way, a trial at little cost could be made for two years. However, a part-time post had to be paid for, which meant a budgetary post to be financed by the membership fees.

19. The members of the Assembly expressed two expectations on the permanent secretariat:

- on the one hand to be better informed about what is happening or in preparation at the level of the European institutions, above all insofar as it may concern the life of religious people and the Church;
- that information from the various national Conferences may be transmitted better so as to be able to specify the mainstream trends and think about the mission of religious life in various environments.

UCESM was then in the process of being built and trying to create itself or looking for its identity and mission. In order to do this, the association needed the contribution of all the national Conferences to think together about the role of religious in the construction of a Europe which is not closed on itself but open to the values of solidarity, justice and communion with all other Nations of the world and the poorest worldwide.

20. From 31 August to 6 September 1993, the *sixth General Assembly* took place in Olomouc in

Moravia, Czech Republic. About 60 religious from 18 European countries attended. In the framework of the upcoming Synod of Bishops of 1994 on Consecrated Life, the UCESM-Plenary elaborated and adopted several recommendations. It was suggested to bring to the knowledge of the Bishops of each country participating in the 1994 Synod of Bishops the expectations formulated by the European religious at Olomouc. The agenda for this General Assembly also provided the election by rotation of the General Secretary to be chosen among the General Secretaries of the national Conferences. The voters chose the General Secretary of the Spanish CONFER, Sr. Maria Luz Galván scj as General Secretary, her deputy was Sr. Susanna Baumann scsc from Switzerland. The permanent secretariat of UCESM in Brussels was run by Sr. Françoise Soury-Lavergne odn. The finances of UCESM were still managed by Fr. Wolfgang Schumacher OCarm.

21. From the statistics of 1995, it can be seen that of the a little more than 500,000 religious throughout Europe, more than 75% belonged to congregations of women. Founded in 1983, UCESM counted in 1995 32 national Conferences from 18 countries.

22. *The seventh General Assembly* from 27 November to 3 December 1995 in Freising in Bavaria was held on the topic: "Evolution and identity of religious life in Europe." A new Executive Committee was elected:

- President: the Marist Father Jacques Scholte, President of the Conference of Major Superiors in the Netherlands
- Vice-President: Sr. Françoise Petit, President of the Belgian Conference of the women Major Superiors.

23. *The eighth General Assembly* took place from 8 to 14 December 1997 in Sassone in Rome. The topic was: "To do Justice from a Christian perspective". 60 representatives from 26 national Conferences in total were on the list of participants. Among the important guests were the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference and General Vicar of the Diocese of Rome, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and the representative of the Congregation of Religious, Archbishop Piergiorgio Nesti cp, who read a message of welcome from the Holy Father.

24. There were plenty of changes. The four-member Executive Committee emerged. During this General Assembly, the four-year mandate of the General Secretary and her deputy, Sr. Maria Luz Galván and Sr. Susanna Baumann, came to an end. The meeting decided on an amendment of the Statutes, which was rapidly approved by the Vatican.

- The creation of a permanent General Secretariat with the appointment of a part-time staff at the headquarters in Brussels was decided. Instead of the two voluntary General Secretary posts existing until then, two new functions were created inside the Executive Committee.

- Two new members (called councillors) were elected into the Committee:
 - Jakáb Várnaj ofm (Hungary)
 - Gérard Lachivert scj (France).
- Sr. Françoise Pecqueraux (La Retraite) was appointed new General Secretary. She had already been active for UCESM at the European level in the last two years and had established on its behalf first contacts with institutions, politicians and collaborators of the European Commission and other European organizations.
- After an eight-year term, Fr. Wolfgang Schumacher of the German Conference of Major Superiors put an end to his task as UCESM-Treasurer which he had performed since January 1990. The finances were then taken over by the General Secretariat.

25. The *ninth General Assembly* took place on 6-12 December 1999 in Dubrovnik (Croatia) on the topic "Called to become benediction". 38 representatives of the national Conferences from 23 countries attended part. The new president elected was the Spanish Piarist Fr. Jesús Lecea sp and the Vice-President was Jakáb Várnai ofm from Hungary.

26. The *tenth General Assembly* was held from 26 November to 2 December 2001 in Salzburg. 90 religious from 41 Conferences of Major Superiors from 24 European countries dealt with the topic "The Religious of Europe on the threshold of the 21st century". For a week, they discussed the contribution of Religious Congregations to the Europe that was being built. The presence at this meeting of the President of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences (CCEE), Bishop Amédée Grab osb from Chur in Switzerland, is to be underlined. There were changes on the Committee:

- Vice-President: Sr. Margaret Scott, President of the Conference of England and Wales
- Councillor: Fr. George Frendo op, President of the Conference of Albania (Malta)
- Councillor: Sr. Adrien Pekö, President of the Conference of women Superiors of Hungary.

In February 2003, the mandate of Sr. Françoise Pecqueraux as General Secretary ended. The Executive Committee appointed Sr. Ana Maria Garbayo odn as the new General Secretary for a mandate of four years. Sr. Annick Bimbenet (Daughters of Wisdom) became the deputy Secretary General.

27. At the *eleventh General Assembly* in February 2004 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the Presidents and General Secretaries of 40 national Conferences from 25 European countries were present. UCESM is at the service of religious life in Europe. It fosters relationship, exchanges and solidarity between the national Conferences. It represents the common expectations and interests and is committed to justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation and the building of the Kingdom of God. It is to this end that the General Assemblies serve in a particular

way every two years. The meeting in Ljubljana was more centred on the social mission of religious women and men in present-day Europe. With the forthcoming enlargement of the European Community on 1 May 2004, the theme "The role of religious life in the formation of an ethical conscience in a multicultural Europe" was of burning topicality. There were elections on the Executive Committee:

- President: Fr. August Hülsmann scj, President of the German conference of Major Superiors
- Vice-President: Sr. Adrien Pekö (Hungary)
- Councillor: Sr. Barbara Selih, President of the Conference of Slovenia.

28. The *twelfth General Assembly* took place on 6-12 February 2006 in Fatima on the topic: "Religious life today: our spiritual life vis-à-vis the challenges in Europe". The cardinal Prefect of CICLSAL, Franc Rodé, participated in the debates. Furthermore, the Assembly elected a new councillor as the mandate of Fr. George Frendo had come to an end. The new councillor within the Committee was the Dehonian Father Manuel Barbosa, President of the Portuguese Conference.

29. The *13th General Assembly* took place in Torhout near Bruges in Belgium on 11-17 February 2008 with the attendance of the delegates of 36 national Conferences and of representatives of Conferences of Eastern Europe which did not yet belong to UCESM. The topic was: "What contribution does our community life make to Europe?". Those present passionately discussed the special and essential contribution that our religious communities can bring to Europe in drawing from the strength of the testimony of community life, which is not always obvious, but nevertheless true. The background was, as always, a Europe which continued its rapid and visible construction by the acceptance of a number of Eastern European countries in the peace project of the European Union and by the enlargement on December 21, 2007, of its "Schengen border", which opened a more accessible space to the citizens of the continent. In the debates, the Prefect of CICLSAL, Cardinal Franc Rodé was present again, as well as the Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Godfried Danneels, who presided the opening Eucharist. A new Executive Committee was also elected:

- President: Sr. Lutgardis Craeynest fma, President of the Flemish Conference, Belgium
- Vice-President: Fr. Manuel Barbosa scj (Portugal)
- Councillor: Sr. Danuta Wrobel snmpn, President of the Conference of religious women in Poland
- Councillor: Fr. Mariano Sedano Sierra cmf, President of the Russian Conference (Spain).

At its first meeting, the Committee appointed Sr. Clara Pavanello of the Sisters of St. Andrew as the new General Secretary at the end of the mandate of Sr. Ana Maria Garbayo.

30. *The fourteenth General Assembly* took place at the Diocesan seminary of Częstochowa, not far from the sanctuary of Jasna Góra with the famous icon of the Black Madonna. The representatives of 37 national Conferences met from 8 to 14 February, 2010, in freezing cold with lots of snow, to reflect about the topic: "Religious Life in Europe: stories of hope, hope for history". Among the invited Conferences were those from Latvia, Finland, Bulgaria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The participants took advantage of the riches and the strength of the place to deepen and broaden their reflection. So, the visit to the concentration camp of Oswiecim-Birkenau, where millions of Jews from all over Europe were murdered, was very rich and upsetting. In this framework, we celebrated the Eucharist and we were handed over the book of Revelation as a hope-supporting key to the reading of so many signs of death which threaten the continent.

After two years of mandate, Sr. Clara Pavanello asked to leave her post as a General Secretary because of incompatibility with her mandate as regional superior of her congregation. The Committee appointed in her place Sr. Josyane Cluzel of the Sisters of Christ, from France.

31. From 19 to 25 March 2012, the *fifteenth General Assembly* was held at the Marian Sanctuary of Lourdes with the participation of 32 Conferences from 27 European countries. The discussions were on the topic "Life as a Vocation". Once again, the meeting place gave symbolic and influential strength. The Secretary of CICALSAL, Joseph Tobin, accompanied us during the debates and guided the thinking. The invited young religious from various regions of Europe, who shared with us their vision of religious life as a vocation, with expectations and challenges, contributed by a very special voice. In the course of this meeting, a new Executive Committee was elected:

- President: Fr. Giovanni Peragine crsp, President of the Conference of Albania (Italy)
- Vice-president: Sr. Viviana Ballarin, Dominican, President of the Conference of women religious from Italy (USMI)
- Councillor: Fr. Mariano José Sedano Sierra, Claretine, from the Russian Conference

34. The members participated in the National Day of religious life in Albania with a special and very sincere remembrance of the martyrs of repression in the years of the state atheism. At this meeting, the UCESM President, Giovanni Peragine, urged all members to initiate a process "to rethink UCESM". After almost 35 years of existence, the reality of religious life in Europe (decrease in numbers, ageing, crisis of vocations, loss of social and ecclesiastical importance...) and the membership of a large number of new Conferences from the countries of Eastern Europe (from 1991 to 2016, about 11 new countries and 15 new national conferences joined UCESM) can question the reality of UCESM and its initial goals. The future shape of UCESM will largely depend on this revision process of the route UCESM has walked until now, looking at the present and taking into account the prospects of the future.

- Councillor: Sr. Ivanka Mihaljevic, Franciscan, President of the Conference from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

32. *The sixteenth General Assembly* was probably the most difficult and troubled one in the small 35 years long history of UCESM. The Executive Committee, following the invitation of the Ukrainian Conferences, had chosen Kiev as the venue for the General Assembly which was to take place by mid-February 2014. This would once again combine the symbolic power of the place with the selected theme: "Religious men and women in Europe: Witnesses and Shapers of communion". The place was certainly most appropriate to consider the topic and listen to testimonies, but the historical moment was not quite appropriate. The political and social circumstances, which you all know, did not recommend the place, even if the preparations with the usual expenses and forward payments had already been initiated. Thanks to the initiative of Fr. Giovanni and the invaluable cooperation of the religious and other institutions of Albania we could hold our meeting, even though it was not at the specified date and the usual biennial period. Hence, it took place on 23-27 March 2015 in Tirana with the participation of representatives of 27 national Conferences. It was the year that Pope Francis wanted to highlight as the testimony of the grace to God for the gift of consecrated life in the Church.

33. In Europe there are currently approximately 300.000 religious (1/3 of men, 2/3 of women) who belong to UCESM. The last twenty years were marked by a sharp decline (from 500.000 to 300.000). Western Europe faces the challenge of an aging population with a strong decrease in vocations. But in the East and South-East of Europe there are signs of hope thanks to the growing number of young religious. This reality is pushing us to creativity: how can we allow everybody to live fully his/her vocation as a religious according to his/her if he/she is living in a community with numerous elderly and only few young members? Besides, faced with the internationalization similar to that of society, religious people can become prophets and pioneers and show how it is possible to live in true and happy communion.

35. At the conclusion of the meeting, those who gathered in Tirana already made a first attempt of an analysis and finished with these words:

- We believe in the fundamental validity of the steps we have already taken on the path of communion and collaboration among us, among our institutions and national conferences, and among our pastors, laity, and Church movements.
- We believe in the validity and necessity of UCESM as a witness and instrument of communion between the various conferences of our continent and the other Church bodies in Europe. Faced with the new European and global challenges, we must start rethinking the role of UCESM and its objectives to turn it into a real instrument at the service of a more concrete communion among the religious in Eastern and Western Europe. A forum for discussion and mutual enrichment, which is not afraid of differences and the possible conflicts that the very life of our conferences may cause, which has the power of launching initiatives at the continental level as part of our mission, and which is the polyphonic, but harmonic voice of consecrated life in Europe. We want this to be a choral and enlarged reflection to the maximum extent, where everyone - from the Roman Congregation up to each individual - can express themselves with freedom and creativity.
- In these days in Albania, a land marked by peaceful coexistence among the different religions, but also by the violence of State terrorism and the 'single thought', we have begun a journey of deepening and renewal of our vocation - to be witnesses and artisans of communion in the coming years in Europe.

Rome, February 3, 2016