

NORTH AMERICA

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Madame President, My Brothers and Sisters:

There are four of us from North America with you this evening: Luba Kowalczyk, WUCWO representative from Canada, Joann Hillebrand, WUCWO Treasurer-General, Karen Hurley, Immediate Past WUCWO President General and myself, Maribeth Stewart, US Representative to WUCWO. I know that I speak for all of us when I say that we have eagerly anticipated this meeting and now that we are here, we very much look forward to getting to know all of you and learning the realities of your countries and your daily life.. Right now, please let me tell you a bit about our reality in North America.

The North American Region of WUCWO is comprised of two countries, Canada and the United States of America. We recognize that our countries have received many blessings, from the gift of prolific natural resources to conditions that have permitted us to become recognized as largely prosperous nations.

Both Canada and the United States enjoy the following positive aspects:

1. Great freedom for all citizens in terms of speech and press, ability to worship as we please, to live where we please, to elect our governments through a democratic process.
2. Free education for all through the high school level (Grade 12) and the availability of many scholarships offer the opportunity for world-class post graduate education.
3. Excellent healthcare
4. Both remain lands of opportunity where one can come with nothing and make a very good life.

However, both Canada and the United States also have segments of our societies that suffer poverties of hunger, violence, complacency and intolerance and some of these poverties know no social or economic boundary.

The root causes of these poverties can be traced to the following:

1. A growing demise of the family structure.
2. Greed on the part of large corporations that causes a rise in unemployment for the middle and poor classes aggravating a growing divide between rich and poor.
3. Legislation that ignores the natural order and God's law resulting in legalized abortion and embryonic stem cell research and efforts to decriminalize assisted suicide and/or euthanasia.
4. Media that is focused on material attainment at all costs and that no longer promotes basic human decency, truth and respect as core values.

The result of the above produces segments of society that:

1. Lose hope
2. Lack a moral compass
3. Engage in a sense of selfish entitlement and complacency toward those in need
4. Become violent as a search for the love, security and values formerly found in family and society that are now lacking in their lives leads to finding "substitutes" for these basic human needs in street gangs and/or drug use

An incorrect sense of right and wrong and lost hope result in:

1. The wealthy feeling a sense of entitlement that allows them to pursue completely selfish ends, disrupting family structure on a personal level and manipulation of the economy to achieve even more wealth at the expense of others.
2. Those without hope may embark on downward spirals leading to violence in or dissolution of their families, drug or substance abuse, the young running away and ending up trafficked or involved in other unlawful situations, giving up on themselves and society.

As noted above, unemployment and lack of traditional family structure are at the root of poverty and contribute to violence -though domestic violence is known to take place at all social levels and economic strata.

Despite positive gains in recent years, poverty is still more pronounced in some segments of our societies than in others. Chiefly, in both the United States and Canada, more women than men live at the poverty level and more single parent families headed by women are at the poverty level than families with both parents or single parent families headed by men. In both the US and Canada, a significant percentage of our aboriginal people are below poverty level. It should be noted, however, that in recent years, much work and legislation has improved the position of these demographics and this work continues.

We recognize that material poverty alone is not sufficient to lead to lack of hope and a downward spiral. Persons have traditionally, and today, often continue to rise from poverty to achieve remarkable lives. Those who do not do so suffer from a lack of love and guidance.

Persons need to feel loved and valued and need to use their God-given talents to produce work that is beneficial to mankind in order to lead fulfilling lives. When someone's work is taken from them or when there does not seem to be any hope of finding good work, it is tempting to spiral down.

What is needed is a reinforcement of the values that made our societies great and that are still present in most of the populations of our two nations. These values include integrity, honesty, respect for one another, hard work, an appreciation for the opportunities provided to better oneself such as education, and, most importantly, a society based on trust in God.

The obsession of the media to portray success as an accumulation of material goods is disastrous for our youth. With many lacking a secure family structure, they are only exposed to false information concerning what can make one happy in life. They are not learning that they need to apply themselves to their studies and work hard as material success does not come just from existing or wanting. They need to learn that there needs to be a balance between acquiring the material goods required to live a decent comfortable life and the true treasure of loving and helping each other.

This is where the work of our member organizations comes in. Guided by the statements of our Episcopal Conferences, we collaborate with programs that are formulated nationally and locally to reach out to those in need. We establish shelters and soup kitchens. We offer job training

and help with struggling students. We offer daycare where children can experience loving guidance. We offer counseling for families in distress, persons suffering from domestic violence, and for those recovering from addictions. We offer leadership training for women. We establish and support ministries to bring children and adolescents off the streets and out of the reach of traffickers and work to get those trafficked back into society providing programs where they will learn that they are safe and valued. Our international outreach is extensive with strong support given to Catholic Relief Services in terms of financial and volunteer assistance. In our countries, we have special collections for the Holy See and Catholic societies that support projects in the Holy Land. The list of what our women do in terms of reaching out to help those in need goes on and on. But, we are cognizant that charity alone is not a solution to these problems. Advocacy to effect real change in the lives of those who suffer, such as provision of an adequate minimum wage and continuing work to provide equal pay for men and women, etc., is needed to provide an environment where all can experience the dignity inherent in their beings as children of God. Advocacy is required to establish a means for all people to receive what they need so that they can go forward with their lives and succeed in the mission for which they were created. And our women and organizations do advocate. We are heard in our legislative bodies. We visit our state and national congresspersons in the US and in Canada we meet with the Prime Minister and members of Parliament to advocate for a just society.

And so our work is three-fold: First, Prayer, for with God, all things are possible. Second, Charity, in terms of offering our treasure, our time, our talent and our love to all in need. Last, Advocacy at the local, national, and international levels to realize a world where all are brothers and sisters and each life is treated with dignity from conception to natural death. To establish a world where there are no boundaries in terms of love, service, and care for each other; A world of peace, where all can feel joy, a sense of being valued and loved, and well-being.

When we look at the daily news with stories of war, violence and hatred, we may say that a world of peace where all care for each other is a dream; but for those of us who live in North America, we know that we have inherited a magnificent legacy of those who once had a dream. Their dreams resulted in our nations; living dynamic realities. So, we dare to dream and to work for such a world and our dream is based upon and guided by our faith. We believe that we can right the wrongs in our own lands and we believe in a world where we can indeed fashion God's Kingdom on Earth. We will pray and we will practice being peacemakers and one day, this dream will be reality.

Thank you for your gracious attention. Madame President, this concludes my report.

Maribeth Stewart
WUCWO Vice President, North America

