

TESTIMONY FROM WUCWO'S LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN REGION

Situation in our Region

Latin America and the Caribbean is a very big region integrated by 20 countries. In almost every country the official language is Spanish; in the largest one, which is Brazil, they speak Portuguese and in some small countries French.

We have WUCWO member organizations in Argentina, Venezuela, Cuba and Mexico, but we have a lot of friend organizations in many other countries around the region.

Although most of the people living in the region are traditionally catholic, they do not necessarily practice their religion. They are baptized, but very often they return to church only for their first Communion and then to get married (if they ever get married) or to baptize their children. There has been a notorious rise of other Christian denominations, such as Baptists and Pentecostals. There has also been an important increase in the number of sects which mix aspects of Christianity with pagan religions. These sects as well as the protestant churches often commercialize religion and promise financial success.

There is an important number of Jewish communities and we have a minority of orthodox communities a few Muslim groups and some other religious beliefs.

Popular religiousness is very strong and native cultural elements are often mixed with religious practices. Our people are basically believers, but secularism is advancing very fast, particularly in big cities and among young people.

In most countries of the region we have religious freedom, although in some places, like in Cuba, religion was practically forbidden and people were only allowed to practice it inside their homes until very recently. In Venezuela, although the government "officially" allows religious freedom, it is doing whatever it can to limit the activities of religious groups, like forbidding them to obtain funding from foreign countries or foundations.

Once in a while we have religious conflicts in some of our countries, but they happen basically in small villages where population is divided among different sects or protestant groups.

After "*Aparecida*", which was the V Latin American and the Caribbean Episcopal Conference, there has been a fundamental change. As some of you might know, one of the most important participants at this Conference was Cardinal Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, so his ideas can be found throughout the whole final Document.

Following *Aparecida's* conclusions, the catholic church started the missionary apostolate, working to get to the peripheral existence of women and men in the region. *Aparecida* has recognized the sufferings and the great potential of Latin American women and it has given us a great prominence in the development of people and faith.

Finally, the most important part of our faith comes from the Star of Evangelization in Latin American and the Caribbean, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Since her image stayed engraved in part of a humble mexican peasant's clothes, San Juan Diego's "*ayate*", she has been taking care and guiding the evangelization of

the whole continent. Millions of persons through the last five centuries have followed, worshipped and put their trust in the loving hands of Guadalupe.

Obstacles we have to overcome in the region

1. **Family disintegration**, consequence of secularism and a difficulty to assess correctly men and women's role in society. As a result of this family disintegration, more and more women have to work away from home all day long and their children stay alone, subject to the many threats that nowadays endanger their healthy development.
2. **Poverty**: as you might know, most of Latin America Population is still living in poverty and extreme poverty. We have a majority of poor people and a small number of rich people that accumulate the majority of the wealth. As always, the most affected by poverty are women and children. We have not been able to build up a solid middle class.
3. **Corruption** in governments, private enterprises and citizens is a big problem that we have not been able to overcome. It has impoverished our countries and stopped progress and real democracy.
4. **Talking about political situation**, although we have achieved democracy in many of our countries, it is still often a very weak democracy and many states are going back to dictatorships and populism, where liberties are not respected, political participation is almost null and political persecution is everywhere around. We have a good example of this in Venezuela, where a communist and dictatorship regime has harmed and impoverished the country for the last years, as well as in Cuba where they have suffered the communist and dictatorship regime for more than half a century. On the other hand, a good sign is that women are nowadays participating much more in politics and that they are holding better positions in governments; we have now many congress women and even some prime ministers or presidents, like in Brazil.
5. **Education**: Although nowadays people are receiving more and more education, the quality is still very poor in many places. A good sign is that women are having more opportunities of being well educated; the number of women professionals is increasing day by day and, as a consequence, women have better jobs but are still not as well paid as men for the same work.
6. **Migration**: The economic and political situation has forced people to abandon countries in search of jobs and a safer environment. Migration movements are from villages to big cities and are heading basically for the United States of America which is for many "the promised land". Nevertheless, for the majority of the migrants, of which we have a growing amount of women and children, such dream becomes a nightmare. In the way they encounter persecution, thefts, all types of abuse from authorities, imprisonment, kidnapping, human trafficking and very often death.
7. Related with corruption, poverty and migration we have been victims of two terrible crimes: **human trafficking and drug dealing**. The drug dealer bands have left many of our children and young people slaves of drug addictions, have destroyed thousands of human lives and families and have taken away peace and security in many of our communities. Even big and more solid countries like Mexico are suffering the consequences of the crimes committed by these bands.
8. **Human Trafficking**: This problem is terrible; it starts in Argentina and goes all the way up to the United States and Canada. We are talking about boys, girls, women and men, trafficked for labor or sexual exploitation, organ trafficking, illegal adoptions, forcing people to join the drug bands, etc. That is why this last year we organized a Latin American and Caribbean WUCWO Conference with the theme: Human trafficking: our aim to sensitize, prevent and act. Our first goal was to sensitize, inform and prepare Catholics to work in the prevention of human trafficking as well as to attend victims. We also invited all Christian denominations as well as non-confessional NGOs and we had a very important interreligious act. We are starting to network and work in different

projects around the region and some days ago we gave all the resolutions to Pope Francis, who asked us to go on working to prevent this terrible crime.

Signs of Hope

Women are more and more conscious every day of their dignity and their role at the service of life, peace and common good. Such dignity and their particular role in church and in society is more and more recognized each day by men. Nowadays women have more opportunities of studying, are better prepared and therefore their work and opinions are more taken into account. Little by little they have been more integrated in the economic, political and cultural life of our societies, as well as in pastoral activities, including decision making, although we still have a long way to go.

We have a growing population with a lot of young people looking for answers to their many quests and wanting to take care of problems such as poverty, hunger, human trafficking, damage to the ecology, discrimination, etc. The Catholic Church is more and more involved in this issues.

The election of Pope Francis, his words and his testimony have been a blast of fresh air for Christians in the region and in the whole world.

To finish, I must mention that a big sign of hope is the presence here of Christian women from so many different parts of the world, joined together in Amman and moved by the common wish of getting to know our sisters from the different countries in the Middle East and finding ways of working with them and walking side by side in their efforts to profess and live their Christian faith in peace with all the other confessions. Those of you who are living difficult moments in the Middle East, be sure of the prayers and the support of your Christian friends from WUCWO around the world. I know that with the help of our Lord we will find ways of working together and supporting you in any way we can.

God bless you all,

Mónica Santamarina de Robles
Vice President General
Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean