

WORLD COMMUNITY, WORLD MISSION

CLC's General Assembly, 1998: An Interview

During the ten days ending with St Ignatius's feast, nearly two hundred members from sixty nations met in the Thirteenth General Assembly of World CLC. In the splendid Jesuit retreat house and conference center outside São Paulo, Brazil, they performed the usual periodic tasks. They elected new officers and welcomed a new Executive Secretary, Gilles Michaud of Canada and a new Ecclesiastical Assistant, Fr Fernando Salas of Chile. They also performed an unusual task: They hammered out a statement of this apostolic lay community's world mission. The following interview with Roswitha Cooper reports the importance of this periodic meeting of friends in the Lord. In a small office off the main concourse of the UN-like conference hall, on the last evening of the assembly:

The uproarious and joyful goodbyes of the delegates are shaking the moon--their assessment of the meeting. What would your first assessment be like? Well, to me, the assembly was hugely impressive--people from everywhere, and it was such a peaceful and quiet meeting, very prayerful, one you would almost want to call a happy meeting, even if it was long. We are in a beautiful place; every one of the four great quadrangles is truly a garden. And we have a beautiful reason for being here, our life in Spirit. The delegates deserve to feel joyous; they worked hard here and they had been preparing for this meeting for a long time.

The communities worked all last year. But take a longer view for a minute--of the past seven years. What happened during those years that would affect this assembly?

I think an awareness of being a world community--not just a scattered sprinkling of local communities--has been slowly but steadily developing, all around the world. The Jesuits had to grow that way, and even the Church, too. Members are not so absorbed with our own groups as we used to be. And this developed in the delegates to the assemblies--a feeling of being responsible for the community as a whole. No doubt this is also due to the new possibility of communication with e-mail. It has surely opened up new horizons.

Another development of these years, which is truly notable, is the number of people in the national communities who have now gone through the *Spiritual Exercises*. This is still a problem, particularly in some countries, where there is no possibility of making them. To make *Exercises* you have to have guides, and we lack them--some countries lack anyone, Jesuit or lay or religious, to guide the Exercises. Connected with this is another increasing awareness--a very good and real one, I should think--the need for lay guides.

And then, another change is that the community has been growing in numbers. That was a notable development coming right up to this Assembly. Present here in the Assembly is the very promising group from Africa. We had established Kenya already in Hong Kong, and Syria and Nicaragua. Today, we established Cameroon along with Korea and Lebanon. And even with that very quick growth, there also came a growth in understanding what CLC is about.

These are probably the more important backgrounds for this World Assembly 1998, the things that influenced the delegates who came. But I could add another thing during these last seven years: more people became aware of the need to get further into what CLC is, really. Past world assemblies worked at that, especially the last few, and now these members are more aware and could build on that.

This Thirteenth General Assembly--sixty nations, every continent--delegations that surprise or just delight: Australia, Congo, Wales, Lesotho, Malta, Poland, Sri Lanka, Taiwan--amazing. What was it really about?

To put it perhaps a little too simply, it was about what, as a community, we are to do. Now we know what we are; now, what are we to do? The theme was mainly to ask ourselves what does the Lord want from us facing the third millennium as a community--as a world community, which means that everywhere around the world, somewhere, we face every one of the horrible problems that make people suffer. Every one of them. So we had to listen to each other's worries and problems. This is not so easy when you are speaking in English and French and Spanish, and many, many people have to speak in their third or fourth language. It was not so easy. It took a lot of prayer. For me, one of the very clear fruits of this assembly--I think it came out clearly even in all of the workshops--is the christocentrism of our spirituality. Of course, the topics of the four workshops...

Four... let me make sure. There were four umbrella workshops. Every delegated worked in one of the four, staying with the same multi-lingual sub-groups. And each of the four workshops was based on one of the themes that national communities have been reflecting on.

Yes, the communities have been working on the four themes over a year, and those four themes became four workshops. I was saying that the themes and the workshops brought out a great fruit, which I think we must call an awareness of the centrality of Christ. Christ is in every one of their titles: "Christ and growth in Christian life;"

"Christ and culture. . . and social reality. . . and daily life." Of course, the *Spiritual Exercises* were present in some way in all the workshops. But as we went along through the days, it became very clear through the work of Workshop One: Christ and growth in Christian life, that the *Exercises* are not only the basis for our own preparation for our mission in culture, in social concerns, and in daily life--but also, that the *Exercises* are the gift that we are called on to pass on to others. The Exercises are not only the instrument for our own spiritual formation, which we have been thinking all along. They are also our mission in the world and in the church. This was formulated in the final statement. We have to offer the Annotation 18 Exercises to as many as possible, and Exercises in Daily Life. This is our way, CLC's special way, of proclaiming Christ.

Our Common Mission

First, we want to bring the freeing power of Christ to our social reality.

Second, we want to find Christ in all our varied cultures and to let His grace illuminate all that needs transformation.

Third, we want to live Christ so as to bring him to every aspect of our daily life in the world.

These three areas of mission were enlightened by the spiritual source which nourishes and empowers us for mission: the *Spiritual Exercises* which help us to grow in Christian life.

In addition, we must attend to our own formation for mission, so that our community may ever become a more effective instrument of service.

31 July 1998

Villa Kostka, Itaici, Brazil

The final statement, then. Its content began months ago all over the world. Then it went through a clearly defined process of discernment. And it ended in a nine-page document.

Yes, one we called "Our Common Mission." Since we are now aware that we are a world community, and before everything else, we are an apostolic community, then we have a common world mission. But what is that mission? How do we express it? That is what we asked ourselves in this assembly, and that is what the regions and local

communities have been discussing and praying about for many months. We were trying to describe what we are going to do as a world body. But for me, let me say in an aside, what made me most happy in this assembly was the conviction, said repeatedly, that although we are active, we are also contemplatives. It really came all together here. Our mission grows from our relationship with Christ. We are contemplatives in action. One way in which this was said--it came out very clearly--is that our vocation is to be leaven. I already liked one way to say it, and I am glad the assembly adopted it, too: "CLC, a letter from Christ written by the Spirit sent to today's world." That is the real title of our final document. It is important that we keep this in the front of our minds. We are first of all to proclaim Christ by just being in our everyday world what we really are. That is, a Christian Life Community.

As someone here said, the Jesuits are a community "ad dispersionem", a community to be dispersed; CLC is a community "ad insertionem", a community to leaven the place where it is.

Yes. I think that is true, and it was the kernel idea that Fr Francisco Ivern wanted to get across [in his homily at the closing liturgy]. But what I am talking about here is not an idea, somebody's good idea. What came out of the long discussions was a deep desire to proclaim Christ in all that we do. The final goal is proclaim, build the kingdom of Christ. I particularly liked the way this was expressed in the workshop and in the final document, about culture. We are not going to condemn things. We are going to find God everywhere in the world. We go back to our fifty or more cultures and we expect to find God there, working there. When this emerged so clear, I felt very proud of my companions.

There were some remarkably sane and carefully crafted exchanges about neoliberalism and globalization, a kind of mature world citizenship.

Yes. And even more, there was a mature spirituality. People came not only to be given some kind of spiritual input. They came to be responsible for the world community, to take their responsibility. They were carriers of the charism. The elections were a sign of this. They were marvelous. They were a consolation. The voting was so responsible, and resulted in the very wise choice of a diversity of talents and even of regions. We do not elect representatives by region or to represent specific areas; but the body collaborated maturely to elect people from various regions, respecting different cultures and accommodating the diversity in members.

As the by-laws ask, about a third of the delegates here were Jesuits. They were reminded about GC34, Document 13. Where is collaboration now?

Well, there is a history, of course. It has been interesting to see the threads of how the Spirit led us to where we are today, sometimes collaborating more closely with the Jesuits and sometimes not collaborating much at all. And at the end of these seven years, I can also see a difference in the Jesuit presence. In CLC--well, the partnership that

GC34 talked about is already functioning in some parts of the world. I found the Jesuits who were here more ready for partnership with lay people, to build the Kingdom, more ready than ever before. This is mutual: our CLC members have become more ready to work along with Jesuits, too. This awareness on both sides is more developed now than even at Hong Kong, and we saw the fruit of it in this assembly. Now we will see how collaboration works out in the mission.

Yes: the mission. You know this enormously diverse community well. What would you expect to happen when these delegates get back to their fifty or sixty very different nations?

Some things in our life now are common--unhappy, but common. The principal realization is that in a world where relations are decaying, and family is under undue strains, and it is hard to keep clear the common good for all the people--in this real, everyday world of ours where all these things affect all of us--to build a Christian Community is, itself, a mission. And when you see that this special community, CLC, is itself an apostolic community, you understand what we meant in the assembly by "our common mission." Of course, this common mission has to be implemented according to where the communities are. So the statement is rather long; some said it was very long. It's nine pages. It is so long because a common mission for a world community cannot be put into one sentence. The real heading for this document is to bring Christ into today's world. This is only spelt out in different ways for where Christ is most needed. I was so grateful that something came out that does not say that we are to go into an "anti-AIDS campaign" or something like that, something too specific and specialized. In the end, it's just to bring Christ. And when they received it, people said I am going home with fire in my heart.

Certainly, as the representative of each national delegation came to acknowledge the document, the impression grew overwhelming that the assembly had achieved something that it had hoped for.

It was received as well as I would have hoped. People could have said that it was not what they had hoped for. Or they could have just been nice and said thanks. But what they said was that the document calls for more work, it's an interim document. And I think, of course, that that is right. And as I said, they're going home with fire in their hearts. That's the best reception we could have hoped for.

When a world assembly ends, a lot of ordinary projects have to keep going on. What would be CLC's list?

In the community, itself, we need better formation for lay spiritual guides, especially for the Exercises. And we need formation for group guides, because they have such a big influence on how a community can grow and be apostolic. Formation is one of the biggest things. But that is inside, and also, I think, I hope that on the outside that our global responsibility will continue strong at the UN. We could hear from the reports

by Fr Dan Fitzpatrick from New York and Fr Henry Volken from Geneva how important it is for World CLC to be registered as an NGO--that is consummately important. Those are two projects, inside and outside. Also, I would add another ongoing project: collaborating more closely with the Company. It was very good that Fr Bernard Lestienne represented the Social Secretariat, and Fr Jesús Montero Tirado represented Education, and that the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality was here for the whole meeting. We do a lot of collaborating already in all those areas. When we heard the overview of the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality, it was so clear that CLC should cooperate more with the Jesuits, but also it was clear that CLC is already doing that, a lot.

The joyous noise has not lessened and you will want to tell people goodbye.

This has been such a revelation, this assembly. We are always talking about the negative side of globalization. But this proved that globalization is not only a negative, but that it has a creative and positive side. People from everywhere came to sit here in peace and love. I do not want to overstate this. But we all gave a big hug for the peace at the Mass, African and Afrikaner, Indonesian and Australian, everyone. Croatia has chosen Slovenia as its accompanying community, to get ready for membership. And Korea and Japan can sit here together and there is nothing but peace.

Of course this is not everyday life, but the Lord gives us grace to be in the kingdom of God. We get enough energy to continue in a torn world, where Christ is already, in each of us and in our community.

Thank you.