

# History of the Union of Conferences of Major Superior UCESM From 1983 to 2008

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Presentation at the  
13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly  
in Torhout (Belgium)  
on 11-17 February 2008



## I. The beginning

### 1. *The “General Secretaries Club” of the male religious institutes of Europe*

The Second Vatican Council, 1962 – 1965, was already marked by the informal meetings of the General Secretaries of the “core countries” of the European Community: France, Germany, the Benelux Countries, as well as Scandinavia, Austria and the neutral country of Switzerland. It was considered that the situation of the Church and the Religious Institutes of Italy, Spain, Portugal and England was very different to that of the French and German speaking central European countries. These were party to it.

Behind the iron curtain, in central and communist Eastern Europe, the Conferences of Major Superiors existed only in Poland and Yugoslavia. In the years following 1972, their General Secretaries were invited to the meeting of the “club” in Austria, in Klosterneuburg near Vienna. It was easier to get a visa for a visit to Austria.

During the period from 1972 – 1980, the General Secretaries of Spain, Portugal, England and Ireland were welcomed to the annual meetings of the General Secretaries Club. These meetings were always informal; there was no predetermined theme, no speakers, no Superiors of Religious Congregations, no representative from the hierarchy and no minutes of the meetings. The invitation was sent out from a definite country. The secretary of that country prepared the programme for the meeting which often lasted four days and also comprised a cultural time: visits to convents, cultural sites etc. The principle theme was an exchange on religious Congregations after the Council, the renewal and adaptation of the religious life in the

church and Society and all the transformations reported in the communities, and the regions of the religious Congregations.

### 2. *The Committee of the creators of UCESM*

Because of the growing importance of the construction of the EEC and the EC in Europe having its centre in Strasburg; Council of Europe and in Brussels EC, and of the much greater number of General Secretaries in the “Club”, it seemed necessary to integrate the Presidents of the Conferences of Major Superiors and above all also the feminine Congregations with their Presidents and General Secretaries into the European Union of Conferences of Major Superiors. The model for a European Federation of Institutes of Consecrated Life was the CLAR Latin American Conference of Religious.

During the years 1978 – 1979, a group of General Secretaries: Fr. Jean Bonfils sma from France, Fr. Jean Mesot smb from Switzerland and Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch mi from Austria committed themselves to the preparation of a European Union of Conferences of Major Superiors.

A first meeting of Presidents and General Secretaries was held in April 1980 in Paris and took as theme the collaboration between all the Conferences of Religious (male and female) on the European level. **Already at this General Assembly, statutes were elaborated and a President, Fr. de Hovre s.j. from Belgium, a Vice-President, Fr. Cabra csf from Italy and a General Secretary: Fr. Bonfils sma from France were elected.** The statutes from CLAR served as a reference for those of UCESM.

## II. The History of UCESM

### 1. From the creation up to the year 1992

1. 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 the Religious Life in Europe were discussed and the basic lines of the Statutes for this association. **An Executive Committee was also elected:**

**Fr. Pier Giordano Cabra csf, President of CISM in Italy, was elected President; Fr. Ignacio Iglesias sj. President of CONFER in Spain, Vice-President; Fr. Jean Bonfils sma, General Secretary of CSMF in France, was elected General Secretary. Sr. Maria Crucis Doka, Secretary of VHONOS in Switzerland was designated as Deputy General Secretary.**

During following meetings the Committee continued discussions on the propositions outlined at the General Assembly. In the space of two years, the idea of collaboration between all the European Conferences of Major Superiors and also the texts of the Statutes matured. In November 1983, these themes were discussed and adopted during the first ordinary General Assembly. The Statutes defined the aim and the nature of UCESM 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 CIVCSVA<sup>1</sup>. It is a non profit making association and has no limit on the number of its members."*

**The aim of UCESM (cf Can 708) is to:**

a) Engage in reflection and propose action so as to help the religious of Europe and the members of the Societies of Apostolic Life gathered together in the national Conferences, in the current cultural and socio-economic contexts and according to the diverse circumstances of the time and place, to bear witness to the message of the Gospel.

b) To promote the collaboration and mutual help of the Conferences of Major Religious Superiors of the different European countries between themselves and if not possible also with other international organizations.

c) To promote an adequate coordination and collaboration between the national Conferences of Major Superiors and the Episcopal Conferences, the Council of European Episcopal Conferences

CCEE and the Commission for the Episcopates of the European Community COMECE and with each Bishop.

d) To represent the members of UCESM in cases where the presence of a representative of the European religious and Societies of Apostolic Life is desired or requested.

Together with the President and Vice-President, the General Secretary and Deputy General Secretary form the Executive Committee of UCESM. They are responsible for the activities and initiatives of the Union in the intra-European domain and represent the Union to other organizations on the European and international levels. The function of the General Secretary is described as follows by the Statutes: "The General Secretary is elected for a period of four years: his/her mandate is renewable. Here are the tasks of the General Secretary in collaboration with the Deputy General Secretary:

- He/She prepares the meetings of the Executive Committee, takes the minutes and is charged with the putting into practice of the decisions.
- He/She sees that the documents are transmitted regularly to the associations or Conference members.
- He/She manages the Archives of the Union.
- He/She manages the budget."

**Despite the reservations of some delegates of the Congregation for Religious and thanks to the support of the Prefect of this same Congregation, Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, the Statutes of UCESM, which unites the religious (male and female) in a single European organization, were approved by the Church in the Decree n° AG 5-4/81.**

Soon after his re-election at the first ordinary General Assembly in Rome, Fr. Jean Bonfils, the first General Secretary of UCESM, was appointed, Bishop of Dijon. His successor in the direction of the General Secretariat of UCESM was the General Secretary of the Austrian Conference of Major Superiors, Lic. Theol. Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch mi, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1984.

On 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> November 1984 in Rome a Committee meeting was held at the General Secretariat of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors. The following points were discussed and decided:

a) The preparation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ordinary General Assembly of UCESM was fixed from 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> November 1985 in Rome

b) The European meeting on Vocation Promotion to the Consecrated Life in Rome from 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> May 1985. Two representatives of each European

<sup>1</sup> Can. 709 CIC: Pastor Bonus 109; Mutuae Relationes 66

Conference, in all about 50 persons, were invited. It was led by Fr. Ciro Quaranta from Rome.

c) The international meeting of young professed on the theme: "What do young religious say to present day youth?" It took place in July 1985 in Santiago de Compostella in Spain. Two young professed in formation having less than 10 years of profession, were proposed by each national Conference.

### ***UCESM developed thanks to the General Assemblies***

The 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly was held from 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> November 1985 in Grottaferrata near Rome. It has as theme: "Youth in Religious Congregations" Fr. Gian Carlo Milanese spoke on "The new culture of the youth of today". There were reports on the European meeting of those responsible for vocation promotion and from the congress of young religious in Santiago de Compostella. Fr. Jean Dravet sj evoked the theme: "How do we announce Jesus Christ to the youth?"

In the plenary session, Fr. Enzo Franchini made a Critical evaluation of the Movements. Narratives of experiences were given on collaboration with the Third World, on Pastoral work with young drug addicts in Italy.

Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch mi, who had been named General Secretary of UCESM on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1984 by the Committee as successor to Fr. Jean Bonfils, was, according to the statutes, confirmed in his functions by the General Assembly for the four following years.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly took place from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> November 1987 in Madrid with the theme "the Challenge of happiness; the contribution of the religious life to the quality of Christian Life". Fr. Severiano Blanco cmf gave biblical explanations on the theme of the Assembly; Fr. Simon Decloux sj in his exposition described the questions and the impetus that exist today beyond Christianity on the theme of happiness, and Fr. Pier Giordano Cabra explained: how the religious life responds to the question on happiness.

During the General Assembly, a new Committee of UCESM was elected according to the statutes given that the the preceding council's four year mandate had expired.

***Sr. France Delcourt sa, President of the CSM of France, was elected President; Fr. Pier Giordano Cabra, President of the CISM of Italy, became Vice-President; Sr. Maria Crucis Doka, General Assistant from Switzerland, was elected as the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Secretary.***

The 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was organized from 18<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1989 in the Jesuit Spirituality

Centre in Mosta/Targa Gap in Malta. The general theme of it was: "Religious and laity for a new evangelization of Europe". The second key moment of the four day Congress was the reports of the representatives of the national Conferences of Major Superiors which were prolonged in the informal contacts, the "meetings in the corridors". The presence of the Prefect of the Congregation for religious, Cardinal Jérôme Hamer op, was welcomed with gratitude and joy. This latter inaugurated the General Assembly with a Eucharistic celebration, gave the homily and the opening talk and participated in the work sessions. The participation of the Apostolic Nuncio to Malta, of the local Ordinary as representing the Council of the European Episcopal Conferences and of a representative from the European organizations of the laity was also applauded. At this General Assembly, Fr. Joseph Dargan sj, General Secretary of the Irish Conference of Major Superiors CORI, was elected General Secretary in place of Fr. Leonhard Gregotsch mi, whose five year mandate had expired

The 5<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was held from 16<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> November 1991 in Lisbon and the theme of it was: "New Europe and the Third World. What religious life?" Cardinal Jean Jérôme Hamer op, Prefect of the Congregation of the Religious Orders in Rome, was present throughout the whole General Assembly in Lisbon.

It is to be noted that at this meeting, the Committee exposed its keen desire to see the installation of a permanent Secretariat. Thanks to the good will of the Belgian feminine Conference, the Secretariat of URB put an office at its headquarters in Brussels at the disposition of UCESM. Thus it was that a trial of two yeas was made with the minimum of expense. Nevertheless, we had to pay a part-time post, which mean a budgetary post to finance by UCESM member's subscriptions.

So as to assure the profitability of this service, it was necessary to define the expectations of the members. These took two directions:

1. A better information about what is happening at the level of the European organizations, be they secular or Christian organizations, by trying to put the accent on the consequences for religious and ecclesial life. The UCESM office in Brussels, financed by the Conferences of Religious of the European countries, is situated in the immediate surrounds of the headquarters of the European Commission. This association of national Conferences of Religious Orders corresponds to the "Council of European Episcopal Conferences", CCEE with which UCESM maintains an assiduous exchange, as with the Commission of the Episcopates of the European Community,

COMECE, the European Conference of Churches, KEK, the European Forum of National Committees of the Laity, the associations of Major Superior of other continents thus with other continental and worldwide ecclesial organizations.

2. A better transmission of information coming from the different national Conference while putting the accent on the questions and problems that concern the Religious Orders in the different countries. It was thus that we were able to identify tendencies and "currents" and reflect on what evangelization signifies in these milieus.

UCESM was in the process of being built. It needed the contribution of each European country to bring our modest but significant contribution to the construction of a Europe in solidarity with the needs of our brothers and sisters in all the countries of the world, above all with the poorest among them.

## **2. From 1993 to the present time**

**From 31<sup>st</sup> August to 6<sup>th</sup> September 1993, the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly** of the Union of European Conferences of Major Superiors UCESM was held in Moravia, in the Czech Republic. Some 60 Religious from 18 European countries participated in it.

In the framework of the imminent Synod of the Bishops of 1994 on the Consecrated Life, the plenary Assembly of UCESM, gathered together at Olomouc, elaborated and adopted some recommendations. It was suggested to bring to the knowledge of the Bishops of each country participating in the Synod of Bishops 1994 as synod members, the expectations formulated by the religious of Europe in Olomouc. The agenda for this General Assembly also foresaw the election by rotation of the General Secretary to be chosen among the General Secretaries and Generals in function in the national associations of Major Superiors as well as a representative.

The voters chose the General Secretary of the Spanish association of Major Superiors, Sr. Maria Luz Galvan scj, from Granada, as Secretary General. Sr. Susanna Baumann scsc from Switzerland became her deputy.

The permanent Secretariat of UCESM in Brussels was directed by Sr. Françoise Soury-Lavergne odn. The finances of UCESM were still managed by Fr. Wolfgang Schumacher O. Carm. From the last statistics given from 1994, it can be seen that of the 500.000 religious throughout Europe more than 75% belonged to women's Congregations.

The 7<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of 27<sup>th</sup> November to 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1995 was held in Freising in Bavaria with

the theme: "Evolution and identity of Religious Life in Europe".

The Dutchman, Fr. Jacques Scholte, fms was elected the new President. The 51 year old Marist Father was President of the Conference of Major Superiors of the Orders of Brothers in the Low Countries as well as Provincial of the Marist Fathers. Sr. Françoise Petit auxiliatrix, President of the Major Superiors of Belgium was elected Vice-President.

UCESM, created in 1993, counted in the year 1995: 32 national Conferences representing about half a million religious throughout Europe.

The 8<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was held from 8<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> December 1997 in Sassone near Rome. The theme of it was: "Render justice without a Christian perspective?" The list of participants counted in total 60 representatives from 26 national Conferences of Major Superiors. Among the important guests, one noted the presence, among others, of the President of the Episcopal Conference of Italy and Vicar General of the Diocese of Rome, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and of the representative of the Congregation for Religious, Archbishop Piergiorgio Nesti cp, who read a message of welcome from the Holy Father.

During this General Assembly the four year mandate of the General Secretary and her deputy came to an end, i.e. Sr. Maria Luz Galvan scj from Granada and Sr. Susanna Baumann from Switzerland. The General Assembly decided on an amendment to the Statutes that was rapidly approved by the Vatican, which stipulated that from this time on, there would be a part-time General Secretary operating professionally from the headquarters in Brussels. In place of the two voluntary posts of General Secretary existing up till now, two new functions were created within the Executive Committee. A new person elected to the Committee was the President of the association of Major Superiors of Hungary, the Father Provincial Jakáb Várnaj ofm, and the General Secretary of the Conference of Major Superiors of France, Fr. Gérard Lachivert scj. Sr. Françoise Pequeraux, la Retraite, was named new General Secretary. She had already been active in UCESM these last two years on a European level and had in its name established the first contacts with the Institutions, the politicians, and the collaborators of the European Commission and other organizations. After a mandate of eight years, Fr. Wolfgang Schumacher of the German association of Major Superiors brought to an end his function as treasurer of UCESM which he had exercised since 1<sup>st</sup> February 1990. The finances were, afterwards managed again by the Secretary General of UCESM alone.

The 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> December 1999 was held in Dubrovnik, in Croatia, on the theme "Called to become benediction" 38 representatives from the national Conferences of Major Superiors of 23 countries were present there. The President elected at the Assembly of UCESM was the Spanish Piariste, Jesús Lecea sp, the Vice-President, the Hungarian Jakáb Várnaj ofm.

The 10<sup>th</sup> General Assembly on the theme "The Religious of Europe on the threshold of 21<sup>st</sup> Century" was held in Salzburg from 26<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December and gathered together some 90 religious from 41 Conferences of Major Superiors from 24 European countries. For a week, they discussed the contribution of Religious Congregations to the Europe that was being built. The presence at this Assembly of the President of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences, CCEE, Mgr. Amadeus Grab osb from Coire in Switzerland is to be underlined.

At the 11<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in February 2004 in Ljubljana in Slovenia, the Presidents and the General Secretaries of 40 national Conferences from 25 countries of Europe participated.

UCESM is at the service of the religious life in Europe. It encourages relationships, exchange and solidarity between the national Conferences. It represents the expectations and interests common to the interior and toward the exterior, is committed to justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation as well as 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 General Assembly of Ljubljana was more centred on the social mission of the religious in present day Europe. Because of the imminent enlargement of the European community on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004, the theme "The role of the religious life in the formation of an ethical conscience in a multicultural Europe" was of burning actuality.

The final message of Ljubljana stated first of all that Europe is going through a profound mutation, something new is emerging, a prodigious cultural

diversity exists. The relationships between Eastern, Central and Western Europe are in process of modification. Secularisation continues its work. A mobility and permanent faculty of adaptation are required. Many feel insecure, often their questions go unanswered. We religious, are women and men of our time and we share the same experience:

- to be on the road with others, to "pilgrims" with them;

- to live values such as liberty, tolerance, the rights of man and our evangelical poverty not only as a personal commitment, but as a commitment for the others with hope and courage.

*We religious are on the road:*

- with an omnipresent attention so as to discern the signs of the Kingdom of God and the presence and action of the Spirit of God;

- in dialogue with all: silence and fear cannot prevent dialogue;

- in our acceptance of the difference; in carrying the burdens of others so as to witness to the "common good";

- in research and questioning, in patience and perseverance.

For we trust ourselves to the Word: "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you may see what hope his call holds for you" Eph. 1:18.

The 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> February 2006 tackled the theme: "Religious Life today. Our spiritual life faced with European challenges".

The 13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly which will be held in Torhout near Bruges in Belgium from 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008 in reference to the great Congress on the Religious Life of November 2004 in Rome will tackle the theme: "Passion for Christ, Passion for humanity: lived in community". Again it will be a question of debating the particular and indispensable contribution that our religious communities can bring to Europe in drawing from the strength of community life; a Europe that continues its lightening construction and visible by the acceptance of a series of countries of Eastern Europe in the peace project of the European Union and by the enlargement, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2007, of its "Schengen frontier".

## **ADDENDA**

**At the 10<sup>th</sup> General Assembly**, from 26<sup>th</sup> November to 12<sup>th</sup> December 2001 in Salzburg, *were elected*:

- ✓ *Sr. Margaret SCOTT asc, Vice-President of UCESM.* She was Provincial of the Sisters "Slaves of the Sacred Heart" and President of the Welsh Conference, COR.
- ✓ *Fr. George FRENDÓ op, Councillor.* Father was President of the Conference of Albania. KShĚL
- ✓ *Sr. Adrien PEKŐ ssnd, Councillor.* Sister was Provincial of the Congregation of School Sisters of Notre ~Dame and President of the Hungarian Conference MRK

**In February 2003** the mandate of Sr. Françoise PEQUERAUX, la Retraite, as **General Secretary of UCESM** came to an end. *The Executive Committee appointed Sr. Ana Maria GARBAYO odn, religious of the Company of Mary N.D, new General Secretary with a four year mandate.* *Sr. Annick BIMBENET of the Daughters of Wisdom was appointed Deputy General Secretary.*

**At the 11<sup>th</sup> General Assembly**, from 16<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2004 in Ljubljana in Slovenia, *were elected*:

- ✓ *Fr. August HÚLSMANN scj, President of UCESM.* Father is Provincial of the Priests of the Sacred Heart and President of the men's Conference in Germany VDO
- ✓ *Sr. Adrien PEKŐ, ssnd, Vice-President.*
- ✓ *Sr. Barbara SELIH, Councillor.* She is Provincial of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul and President of the Slovenian Conference KORUS.

**At the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly**, from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> February in Fatima in Portugal, was elected as *Councillor, Fr. Manuel BARBOSA*, Provincial of the Priests of the Sacred Heart and President of the Portuguese Conference CIRP.

Fr. George FRENDÓ had come to the end of his mandate.