

# WORLD UNION OF CATHOLIC WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS NORTH AMERICAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE

**Barbara Fawcett**

Guest Journalist

Over 300 Catholic women from all over North America gathered for a regional conference of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) in Winnipeg's Delta Hotel from August 8-10, 2008.

WUCWO was founded in 1910 and represents 100 Catholic women's organizations from all continents and some island states with a total membership of 5 million. In 2006, WUCWO was designated by the Holy See as a Public International Association of the Faithful and has consultative status at the United Nations. WUCWO member organizations in Canada include The Catholic Women's League of Canada and the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League of Canada. In the United States, the National Council of Catholic Women is the WUCWO member representative. WUCWO's mission is "to promote the presence, participation and co-responsibility of Catholic women in society and in the Church, in order to enable them to fulfill their mission of evangelization and to work for human development."



Opening Mass at Blessed Virgin Mary the Protectress Ukrainian Catholic Church

The conference began with the concelebration of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom at Blessed Virgin Mary the Protectress Ukrainian Catholic Church. Archbishop Metropolitan Lawrence Huculak, Archbishop Richard Smith, of Edmonton, and Archbishop Martin Currie, of St. John's and Grand Falls, were joined by five other clergy. President-General Karen Hurley was presented with a blessed icon of Our Lady of Pochaiv and the assembled executives of the gathered organizations received a sung blessing. A reception followed mass and gave convention attendants their first opportunity to renew friendships and make new ones. To further emphasize the international nature of WUCWO, many of the members dressed in ethnic attire from many countries.

During the Saturday morning liturgy, as a reminder of women's needs and concerns worldwide, pictures and life-stories were brought forward in a ritual action of solidarity. Pictures of women from Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America and North America remained on display throughout the conference. At the end of the conference, each picture was collected by members, to be carried with them in solidarity and prayer.

Following opening prayer on Saturday morning, the keynote address was given by Archbishop Richard Smith. Archbishop Smith was surprised and delighted to be introduced by his mother, a long-time League member. He spoke on Peace and Love, Gifts to be Shared and explored the deeper meanings of these powerful words, reminding the assembled that, "Peace is a state of full communion with God, humanity and nature, all fulfilled in the person of Jesus."

Barbara Dowding reflected on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of *Mulieris Dignitatem* in Rome in March 2008. Human rights activist, Nazanin Afshin-Jam, Miss Canada in 2003 and subsequently first runner-up to Miss World, spoke on Justice and Peace in Our World. She focused on an international initiative, Stop Child Execution.

On Sunday morning, President-General Karen Hurley addressed the conference theme of *Women as Peacemakers*. She shared her enthusiasm as she begins her travels to a series of five regional conferences in Verona, Mexico City, Johannesburg and Seoul. The next general assembly will be held in October 2010 in the Holy Land and will mark WUCWO's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Hurley said of her audience with the pope on November 27, 2007, "It is a great privilege to share with you the heartfelt appreciation of our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI for all that you do to give witness to your faith as you strive to do the Lord's will." She affirmed, "Women are strong because of our awareness of the fact that God entrusts humanity to us, always and in every way. Our awareness of the fundamental dignity bestowed on us by God makes us strong so we can embrace our God-given vocation, to do His will and be signs of His love."

Brief presentations were made by WUCWO Treasurer-General Joann Hillebrand, WUCWO Board Member Joan McGrath, WUCWO's representative to the United Nations in New York Arlene Baron-Champoux, and Pat Smuck who brought greetings from Sally Jackson and Friends of WUCWO.

Goals were affirmed, prayers were offered and members were blessed and sent forth with the words, "I bless you for the work of the gospel. Go with courage!" †