

## **The Forum of the International Catholic Inspired Associations: The Way Forward**

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We live in a rapidly changing world marked by intense societal challenges affecting traditional moral values and the very social fabric of our societies. The responsibility of the Church in the many societal debates has in even more ways than ever before become of growing importance; and questions are raised how to counter some of the consequences of the present times, how catholic inspired organizations can best contribute to nurture the many political debates with a catholic inspired perspective and how the impact of this voice can be increased as to make a difference.

Early last year (2007) a working group of volunteers started preparing a process to examine these questions on what was to become a major gathering of some 90 international Catholic inspired Organisations with International status. The resulting Forum, which was held in December 2007 united during three days of exchanges the representatives of the Secretariat of State, representatives of various Pontifical Councils, the representatives of the Holy See at the various intergovernmental bodies and of the major International Catholic inspired Organizations. The meeting succeeded at raising a number of positive considerations, conclusions, questions and ideas on which to build future collaboration.

The major significance of these first exchanges cannot be sufficiently highlighted: the meeting focused on the concern most of the organizations share in their search for better positioning, impact and identity and which had lead them into many debates over the past years; it brought together most valuable expertise and commitment in operational activities and in policy work covering a vast number of activity fields; last and certainly not least, the meeting received high level significance with the message of the Holy Father, who not only expressed gratitude and appreciation for the work of the international associations but who also reminded that “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful - including the members of Non

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Governmental Organisations - who are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity and to configure social life correctly respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competences and fulfilling their own responsibility.”

The catholic inspired NGO's have been active in a vast panorama of activities and work fields which inevitably results in what may at first sight appear to be a heterogeneous group. Dialogue, coordination and exchange of information will always be essential in our work as organizations but the wide scope of issues covered by all of these organizations define the vast and challenging character of this ambitious process. The fact that all of these organizations share the same goals of defending human dignity and human rights and that they all agree on exploring paths to integrate as much as possible the social teachings of the Church in order to contribute to a more just world is probably more relevant than the seeming heterogeneity of the group. I find here one more reason to say that this first gathering was an impressive achievement.

All this means that a new process was given birth. It became rapidly obvious that the broader panorama of participants as well as the main objectives that had been defined for the new initiative, reached far beyond the historic mandate of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations which had been created some 80 years ago. The Forum indeed united many more actors (90) than the Conference (42) and the content of the debates of the Forum was more specifically focused on those elements that would enhance catholic presence and impact on the political scene. The relevance of the Conference, which had throughout its existence proved to be very supportive and constructive, had been repeatedly questioned over the past years and though major efforts had been made to give this platform new life and perspectives, a majority of member organizations were gradually convinced its very structure was no longer the most appropriate setting for future collaboration. The General Assembly in May 2007 subsequently ended a nearly three year process of evaluations and discussions with a clear two thirds majority to dissolve it. The dissolution of the Conference should therefore not be understood as a negative choice but rather as the outcome of a positive approach to the new challenges ahead of us.

Nor is the Forum just another structure replacing a previous one. Even if there is a certain continuity between the Conference and the Forum because most of the member organizations of the Conference have already found their way into the Forum, the Forum doesn't yet have legal identity, the number of participants has tripled in comparison with the Conference members and its scope of action is different. It would therefore be a mistake to compare the new Forum initiative with the previous Conference structure. Until today the initiative has been carried by a number of volunteers coming from the various types of organisational cultures who have been working with representatives of Holy See and it will take another Forum meeting before a clear structure can be envisaged. Focus has been on the building of this Forum as a dynamic process rather than as an institutional identity. Priority is today still given to the dynamics that should carry the work rather than to the structure of the Forum. It is believed that these dynamics will in time generate the appropriate structures. The recently enlarged working group will discuss future collaborative models to suit the objectives and enhance the networking of the catholic inspired organisations. There is today indeed a clear option for more flexible models rather than to return to the more traditional ways of bringing institutional actors together. We indeed need to develop ways that better respond to the globalizing world in which many more actors take part in the global policy debates with whom many of our organisations are already intensively interacting and for which it is necessary to develop broader consensus and stronger identity. All of our organizations have learned that such processes must be defined by specific goals and verifiable result indicators.

The creation of the Forum is therefore not so much to be understood as a change in structure but rather as a renewal of dynamics and of a willingness to establish new roads to better networking amongst the organizations. The Forum is indeed a way to assemble organizations together, not a means to direct or govern them. Returning to the more traditional ways of more formally organizing the various catholic networks is today believed to be less productive. The lessons learned in structuring traditional ways of collaboration may no longer apply in a world which is actively networking at various levels. There is an urgent need to develop ways that better respond to an ever moving and globalizing world in which many more different partners are playing coordinating roles. Responsibility -for the standpoints taken, and accountability- to the catholic identity, are key words to be renewed. Catholic inspired organisations today already mingle with

many non faith-based and other organisations even before reaching the intergovernmental debates. Indeed, building identity and perspective in these platforms is today probably as challenging as looking for impact on the international political agenda. There is here a clear call for broader consensus, better analysis and stronger identities which in turn demands the kind of structural flexibility the Forum hopes and intends to achieve.

The change also invites the existing International Catholic Centres in Geneva, New York and Paris to host the organizations in their networking efforts. They are invited to play an important facilitating role in bringing these organizations together to discuss and reflect upon a number of themes that are on the political agenda. Themes will therefore not be owned by the centres but rather by the group of experts in the organizations who will together decide on the goals to be pursued in a common effort and in defining the appropriate work methodology. The International Catholic Centres which had been started many years ago in the immediate environment of the international institutions are the 'natural place' for the organizations to meet. The new dynamics are in turn an invitation for the centres to play a more important role as information spreader or even stronger as a voice booster for the catholic identity as experienced and lived through the thematic debates. The synergy between the various organisations and actors could therefore constitute part of the identity of the International Catholic Centres, which would then prove to be useful resources for the organizations. Today work has already started in the centre of Geneva where a number of organisations meets on three major themes: education, migration and human rights. The results of these efforts will likely feed the agenda of the next Forum meeting to be held probably at the end of 2009.

We do not hesitate to acknowledge that there are elements of doubt and hesitation in this approach. The lack of a clear and transparent structure doesn't facilitate its reading and understanding. The present working structure is furthermore considered to be too weak and too much based on voluntary participation to really achieve the major goals it was set up for. We fully agree on these impressions which we consider an additional challenge in building those structures that will serve the purpose for the coming decennia. The Forum is a place for exchanges but it is the task of the working group to develop a more defined working methodology - call it a communication strategy or an interactive network strategy - with and amongst the Forum participants to be submitted to the participants of next forum meeting of December 2009.

A new structure or new dynamics do not mean that we have to start from scratch. The associations that have been invited to the Forum have a longer standing experience. Some of them obtained UN ECOSOC status more than fifty years ago and have been active in the various fields for many years. Many of these associations have already established a closer relationship with national and intergovernmental structures in the specific field of their action. Bringing these efforts together in dynamic perspectives will no doubt contribute to successfully pursue our goals as separate organizations and as Catholics.

The challenges ahead are not the easiest and for reasons of clarity I would tend to divide them into the challenges from within and those imposed on us from without. The first group of challenges is related to our specific organisational cultures, which sometimes greatly differ and which have evolved over the many years of their existence into structures that are not immediately compatible. It is commonly understood that the potential of improved collaboration and networking is huge but this will demand work and time which today most of our organizations cannot easily provide. There is furthermore a need to reach a better reading and understanding of this potential to be translated in specific goals and for which working methodologies will need to be developed. There is a need to better understand the map of the various issues and challenges that invite us to develop positive answers and to define positions and strategies strengthening the catholic identity rather than enforcing competitive attitudes. A mapping exercise of the present goals and activities has been planned and should allow us to strategize and include as many organisations as possible in some of the identified goals. There is also a need to leave short term thinking and to plan for the longer term. This may seem very obvious but most of our organizations have learned or at times are forced to work with very short deadlines, and it must be said that the world around us, including the political world, is heavily marked by short term thinking. I would add to this non-exhaustive list the need to analyse our position as Catholics in the post modern world and to question the fundamental reasons for losing grip on the profound societal changes.

This point already introduces the much longer list of challenges that stem from the rapidly changing world. Without even trying to be exhaustive a quick look around at the intergovernmental bodies shows how these bodies are themselves in a period of

restructuring and self questioning. There is nothing wrong with that but the changing relations between intergovernmental bodies and national structures have an impact on the international decisions which are today increasingly based on national commitments or non commitments. This in turn demands differentiated advocacy efforts to be developed at both national and international level. That is where a well defined and quality relationship between the international advocacy and the national advocacy is of the essence. Institutional realities of intergovernmental organizations also differ from one another and require greater flexibility and diversity in our approach. There are the many political contradictions we face between what has been agreed upon in e.g. a UN sphere and what is then not or insufficiently ratified or implemented in the countries. There are questions on how to act when the world rather spends more money on consequences of conflicts, rather than spending less on preventing them... It is furthermore noticeable that many of the decisions affecting the lives of millions are taken in corporate multinationals which calls for a full new scope of relations to be developed.

It is part of the responsibility of the catholic-inspired NGOs to contribute to a better and more just world and all have been engaged for many years in the various fields of action combating poverty, defending human dignity and the rights of the human person. Together we need to reach for further analysis and for improving strategies. The Forum may prove to be too large a place to analyse and conceptualize but it certainly is a place for organized exchange. To respond to the need for a deepened approach, I would suggest the creation of a think tank where the more fundamental movements and challenges can be given due time for analysis and strategic considerations which would then again be carried by the respective organizations in their own ways and patterns. This think tank is not yet given a clear format and is part of the future discussions.

Civil society is clearly a strong carrier of ideas. Many of the civil society organisations are of Christian / catholic identity. It is therefore strategically understood that their role in society as carriers of a moral message is not to be underestimated. Subjects today cannot be tackled by one person or one organization only. The multi-dimensional aspect of some of the societal challenges clearly calls for better coordination and new adapted strategies and methodologies. The organisations have heard this appeal and the way forward is being defined.