Overview and Introduction

The Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Immigrants and Itinerant People convened the IV World Congress on The Pastoral Care for International Students 28 November-2 December 2016 in Rome, Italy, under the theme, “Moral Challenges in the Intellectual World of International Students Towards a Healthier Society.” This international conference built on the work of the three previous Congresses held in 1995 (theme unknown), 2005 (“International Students and Secularization”), and 2011 (“International Students and the Meeting of Cultures”).

Organized primarily for the benefit of Catholic institutions of higher learning across the globe, the 130 delegates – clergy and lay, teachers and students, ecumenical and interfaith partners – heard stimulating talks and participated in small group conversations to address and respond to Pope Francis’ 2013 exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (the joy of the gospel) on the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ for today’s world. An online version of this document can be found at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

Out of respect for the cultures and languages represented by the delegates, the entire Congress was conducted in Italian, Spanish, French, and English. Of the total delegation, thirty were university students from across the globe and four were fraternal delegates from key ecumenical communions – Orthodox, Anglican, World Council of Churches, and Lutheran.

I was privileged to serve as fraternal delegate representing the Lutheran World Federation https://www.lutheranworld.org, nominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America http://www.elca.org, and endorsed by both the LWF and the Vatican.

Convener of the Congress was His Eminence Cardinal Antonio Maria Veglio, moderator was Rev. Fr. Gabriele F. Bentoglio, and local host was Director of the Office in Charge of the Sector for International Students, Rev. Msgr. Robinson Wijesinghe. Their attention to detail, careful planning, and gracious accommodation of all delegates – myself included – made for a robust,
energetic, and educational Congress whose work will help shape the pastoral care of international students long into the future, especially those attending Catholic universities and colleges around the world.

Preparation

I am deeply grateful to the many international students who, for years, have enriched the ministry of Lutheran Campus Ministry at Oregon State University and graciously taught me much about the diverse and interconnected world in which we live. I am especially indebted, however, to four international students who agreed to meet with me prior to my travels to Rome and share with me the challenges they and their peers face as students studying abroad in foreign contexts.

My tutors were Kevin Gatimu (Kenya), Shanuka Fernando (Sri Lanka), Tom Zhang (China), and Tassnym Hussein Sinky (Saudi Arabia/U.S.). Thanks to their candid discussion of moral challenges facing international students today, I traveled to the Vatican much better prepared than I would have without their counsel. These tutorials helped me organize the remarks I presented to the Congress. During the Congress, I took note that many student delegates echoed the themes my student tutors shared with me. There are many aspects of international students studying abroad that are universally experienced.

Daily Schedule

Each day’s schedule included: Morning and Evening Prayer, Daily Mass, scholarly talks on key sections of *Evangelii Gaudium*, interventions by international student responders, and brief presentations by fraternal delegates. Meals and social breaks gave all delegates informal opportunities for sharing stories and developing a network of friendships that will advance this work going forward.

*Evangelii Gaudium* is a formidable document, both in depth and scope. While our few brief days together did not allow thoughtful consideration of the whole document, key sections [EG], especially, did form the core themes of the Congress. These were:

- [EG9-49] The Delightful and Comforting Joy of Evangelizing
- [EG242-243; 176-185] Dialogue between Faith, Reason and Science; The Social Dimension of Evangelization
- [EG61-75] Cultural Challenges – such as: secularization, strained family structures, urban cultures, and social realities (human suffering, narcotics trade, abuse and exploitation of minors, abandonment of elderly and infirm, corruption, criminal activity, isolation, hopelessness and despair)
- [EG50-60] No to an economy of exclusion, no to the new idolatry of money, no to financial systems that rule rather than serve, no to inequality which spawns violence
- [EG244-254] Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue
- [EG255-258; 217-237] Social dimensions of the Gospel for the Common Good and Peace in Society

**Themes, Presentations, Speakers**

Scholars, students, and fraternal delegates addressed the Congress. Each was assigned particular sections of *Evangelii Gaudium* for their careful study and reflection. Below is a list of themes and speakers. Key teachings, ideas, or discoveries are provided as bullet-points below each presentation title:

“Theological and Ethical Impact of the Phenomenon of International Students” – Fr. Dr. Diego Alsonso-Lashaeras, SJ, Professor of the Faculty of Moral Theology, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome
- As humans and as people of faith, we are wanderers, not sedentary
- Biblical narrative gives witness to this reality and, moreover, shows and tells that the gospel is not sedentary either; the Word is alive, on the move, active (the Bible is the ultimate immigration handbook)
- God loves the sojourner, is present with the wanderer; leaving home or migrating are not maladies, they are normal human realities
- When students study abroad it is the opportunity for them to deepen their experience of the pilgrim church, to stretch and grow beyond what is familiar, to open themselves to discovery
- “Receiving societies” bear the responsibility of hospitality to the sojourner; student scholars bear the responsibility of contributing to social improvement (especially) to their home culture

“The Joy of the Gospel Fills the Heart and Whole Life of Those Who Encounter Jesus” – His Eminence Cardinal Antonio Maria Veglio, Pontifical Council for Immigrants and Itinerant People
- Called us to focus on the message of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* – joy; the Joy of the Gospel
- Encountering Christ is fundamentally an encounter with joy
- Every Christian is a messenger of Christ and Christ is joy
- Walk with the young (in accompaniment) as a way to help them experience that joy and resist the evil that tempts

- Responsibility for care of international students must be addressed on multiple levels: by the Holy See, local bishops and dioceses, area congregations and priests, students themselves, and others
- There are three settings (or foci) for new evangelization: the faithful who gather for worship, the baptized who don’t reflect the duties of baptism, and those who don’t know Christ or have rejected him
- Three corresponding strategies address these three groups: fostering spiritual growth for the first, re-awakening joy for the second, exercising authentic Christian witness for the third
- God is always the inspiration; we are always the doers
- To be effective and authentic we need to acknowledge and understand the cultural traditions international students bring with them
- The work of dialog between religious groups is a sign of hospitality for the stranger; dialog contributes to building bridges

“Modernity and Human Values in the University Discipline” – Dr. Sara Silvestri, Professor of International Politics at City University and Affiliated Lecturer at Cambridge University, England

- Modernity opens spectacular opportunities for global understanding and challenging what’s taken for granted
- Universities, by design, are meant to be places for welcoming all people and considering all ideas
- The church must engage the debates of the day
- How well do universities themselves care for their students or the people who work there? Too often, not well enough!
- Worry and warning about the role universities (and therefore its teachers, too) play to track and report students (especially, international students), contribute to economic exploitation of international students, and serve as law enforcement
- Precious little support is given by administrators for teachers or tutors to care for students personally or spiritually, though students often confide in them for just such support
- A key contemporary moral challenge facing academics is to stand up to the moral bankruptcy practiced by religiously-averse, secular institutions of higher learning
- Consider the role of formation teachers play in helping students become full human beings; a key attribute of this is inspiration

“International Student Intervention: Dialog between Faith, Reason, and Science in the University Life: Opportunities and Challenges” – Vi Vu Thao, International University Student in Australia; Mirna Samuel Helmi Wahabaa, University Student from Egypt; Joao Viktor Torres Airava, International University Student in Finland; Shimwa Elise Pscaline, International University Student in Kenya
• Survival in a new country can only be successful if one is socially connected in diversity, networking, and community service (practices of mercy)
• Challenges facing international students include temptation (to immorality), less churchgoing, and radicalization
• We want catechesis and moral teaching that addresses real life issues such as partying, abortion, drinking, violence, drugs, and the influence of social media
• We want opportunities to learn about and practice our faith
• We students have voices and ideas – how can we release them to lead?
• Friends are our best consolers (next to God); nurturing Christian friendship is critical
• Faith has the ability to provide a moral compass; faith humbles reason; faith assists reason by prayer
• What will the church receive and benefit from our scientific inquiry? We have minds and hearts to use and share; will the church welcome the gifts we have to give?
• Help us keep balance in life

• Pope Francis was a teacher for most of his life, and an adaptive, innovative one at that
• This charism (or gift) of teaching influences much of his leadership as Pope
• Evangeli Gaudium is a collection of thoughts that come directly from his experience as a man, a scholar, a teacher, and a pastor
• For him, study is an incredible labor that offers grace
• The university is a place of privilege that leads to constructive dialog, an environment for true dialog based on truth, reason, and faith – it should not be squandered or underestimated
• Don’t live life from the balcony; we need to face challenges of our time and address them (be protagonists for good in the midst of hunger, poverty, and crises of the day)
• “A teacher who cannot or will not risk shouldn’t teach”
• Too often ecclesial documents address institutions rather than individuals; for this reason Francis’ teaching is refreshing as it speaks to individuals and their capacities

“New Evangelization and Academic Culture” – Professor Helena Rebelo Pinto and Professor Rita Francisco, Faculty of Human Sciences, Institute for Family Studies, Portuguese Catholic University, Lisbon, Portugal
• Changes in relationships of families are among the greatest challenges to international students including attacks on religious freedom, secularization, fundamentalism, immediate satisfaction, consumerism, relativism, corruption, erosion of family cohesiveness, and more
• Pastoral care for international students must include care for their families as well

“Moral Challenges in the Academic/University World” – Rev. Fr. Cristian Roncagliolo Pacheco, Vice Gran Chancellor, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile
• The Gospel calls us to shine in settings of higher education as the Light of the World
• In view of commodification, idolatry of money, and use-and-discard mentality, can campus ministries be instigators of learning and faith formation that calls these values into question and offers an alternative way of life and light? Yes
• If so, what formation practices need to develop in fulfillment of this ideal?

“International Student Intervention: Social Dialogue in the University Life toward the Common Good of Society” – Maggie McLellan, International University Student from Canada; Luthando Terrence Mngomezulu, International Student from South Africa; Kellie Underwood, International University Student in Taiwan; Martin Makaya, International University Student in Algeria

• Ecumenical and interfaith religious dialog is essential
• Only through understanding ‘the other’ can we build authentic community
• Human beings are all similar in their search for unity in diversity: understanding what’s unfamiliar, seeking truth, establishing ethics and morals, finding love, and engaging the troubles of our times
• Therefore, we work to knock down barriers, create dialog, and take action in the cause of peace
• Help us develop tools for creating dialog with others, living in joy, and working for the common good
• Help me be the best Christian I can be!
• The church plays a crucial role to: orient international students to their new culture, foster collaboration between people that hold different cultural viewpoints, provide tools needed to build confidence and conversation, provide a safe place to meet and engage one another, develop a buddy program for building authentic friendships, develop a code of ethics for universities regarding treatment of students studying abroad, respect our differences, support us when we experience cultural shock, show us your care through love and respect, and listen to us (we’re not all the same!)
• The world and the church needs international students as change agents of the faith

Next Steps Back Home

Ultimately, the extensive information shared during the Congress will be transcribed into initiatives Catholic colleges and universities can use to better support international students studying in their contexts.

For me, the task since returning from Rome has been to share this experience with as many audiences as possible in order to heighten the awareness of the challenges facing
international students and to invite others into a conversation about how Lutheran Campus Ministry at Oregon State University can more effectively serve this population and their needs. Whatever is done for international students going forward will, by extension, also positively advance the delivery of pastoral care for domestic students who study at Oregon State University and those who participate in the ministry of Luther House.

In my view, there is great urgency for this work. Making networks of friends with key administrators, counselors, and faculty on campus will aid this endeavor. Inviting visionary leadership from our board, student leaders, and campus ministry staff to imagine new ways to support all students will be crucial to its success.

**Papal Audience**

The bonus at the end of the Congress was a papal audience with Pope Francis held just for our delegation. He greeted the assembly in the papal receiving room with gratitude for our work and encouragement to press on in joy for the challenges that lay before us. Then, one by one, he greeted each delegate. First the fraternal delegates were received, then the Catholic clergy, followed by students and lay delegates.

It was my privilege to bring him greetings of gratitude on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation for all the ways he has fostered ecumenical friendship, demonstrated leadership in inter-religious dialog, and participated in the 50th anniversary of the Lutheran-Catholic dialog 31 October 2016 in Lund, Sweden. There he shared leadership with Rev. Dr. Martin Junge, Secretary General, Lutheran World Federation, and Bishop Dr. Munib Younan, President, Lutheran World Federation, in the joint prayer service marking that commemoration. He recommitted the Catholic Church to ongoing dialog between our two church bodies.

While the Congress itself was profoundly moving and deeply inspiring, meeting this remarkable world leader – a forthright, gentle, and wise holy man – made a lasting impression on me. 500 years ago Martin Luther had quite a different encounter in Rome with church authorities than the one I experienced. I’m grateful to live in a time in which church leaders are committed to mending wounds so that the joy of the Gospel can shine forth in this world.
Gleanings

As I’ve reflected on this experience I find myself returning to certain takeaway themes. I am so impressed at how thoughtful and cohesive this Congress was. I was glad that it was so deeply rooted in Scripture and the practice of Christian faith. The Congress was intellectually significant and morally relevant as evidenced by the caliber and passion of its presenters. That it was also global and diverse, ecumenical and (to a small extent) interfaith was heartening.

This was a fine example of leadership at the top of a religious institution making a priority of serving those who might otherwise be neglected and not doing so as an afterthought but as essential to the faithful living of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude and Thanks

I am personally indebted to those international students of Oregon State University who helped prepare me for my travels and provided abundant assistance to understand the challenges of being an international student studying abroad. I owe a debt of gratitude especially to Kevin (Kenya), Shanuka (Sri Lanka), Tassnym (Saudi Arabia), and Tom (China) for patiently describing their experience as international scholars studying abroad and identifying important moral issues that face international students. Without their candor I would not have been adequately prepared for my participation in this Congress.

I am also deeply grateful for the trust and responsibility given me by Rev. Don Romsa, ELCA Program Director for Campus Ministry, Deacon Mark Burkhardt, Director, ELCA Congregational Centers for Mission, the ELCA Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs, and Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop, ELCA.

I am deeply honored to have represented the 72 million Lutherans from across the world whose Lutheran communions are participating bodies in the LWF. I extend my most profound thanks to Rev. Dr. Martin Junge and the staff of the Lutheran World Federation.

Finally, I acknowledge and thank the Pontifical Council as well as local Vatican organizers and hosts, without whom this Congress would not have happened so fruitfully.
For Further Exploration

Many additional resources will supplement a curious reader’s interests. Here are several worth noting:

- Papal Address to IV World Congress: https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/01/161201b.html
- Lutheran World Federation Young Reformers Network

Greeting Pope Francis on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation