

The International Federation

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Greetings to all the distinguished participants convening to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Conferenza Italiana Mericana, which has such a fruitful role of unification and communication within our widespread and diverse spiritual family. As always, I must begin by asking your kind indulgence for my meager ability in Italian.

In preface, let me express my gratitude to Maja Dravecka and Geneviève Chambris, Councilors of the Federation. They and I collaborated in 2015 to research and tell the stories of Companies outside Italy. A synopsis of our work can be found in the latter chapters of *Storia della Federazione: Compagnia di Sant'Orsola* by Professor Paolo Gheda. I appreciate our sisters of Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, Cameroon, and Brazil, who recently shared their experiences with me. Today's presentation will draw on all that information and offer a few observations about some of the challenges we face and some of the riches we share.

Finally, I am grateful to the former president of the Federation, Maria Rosa Razza, for deputing me to speak on behalf of the Federation. It has been an opportunity to deepen my own awe before God's work among us, in history, amid our spiritual family.

To quote a member of a small Italian Company in the Federation: "I will go home and tell my Company: yes, we are diminishing. But the Company is not diminishing. The Company is growing." A Sicilian told me, "St. Angela is flying to Africa."

Our recent Assembly was a powerful experience that St. Angela, who promised, "I will always be among you," is capable of being present on many continents. Attendees included almost fifty from Italy, seven from elsewhere in Europe, three from South America, four from North America, three from Asia, one from Australia, and fifteen from Africa. Our largest Company is in Burundi. While Italian, French, and English were the languages facilitated by simultaneous translation, sisters also communicated across national boundaries in Swahili and in an African form of Pigeon English. The range of beauty was most obvious in a colorful palette of clothing and skin tones, but this was also a tapestry of culture and human experience.

Let us begin by following the trajectory to this point, recognizing patterns of development. I will close with some observations.

Obviously, the historic trajectory begins here, in Brescia, in 1535. I strongly believe that this spreading vine must continue to be nourished by the soil where it first took root. Merican spirituality grew out of the lived experience of a particular woman in a particular time and a particular place. Her spirituality has a universal relevance, but it is also particular. Authenticity and fidelity to the charism require that each new branch of the vine remain connected with Angela Merici's reality. It is not possible for each member to walk in Angela's footsteps here in Brescia and in Desenzano. But I believe that it is important for at least some in each Group or Company to make this pilgrimage and to carry its graces home. Thus Angela's experiences as a daughter of the land, as a girl and a woman in Desenzano and Salò, as a refugee in Cremona, as a

Catholic Christian and a spiritual Madre in Brescia, as a pilgrim in Rome and Varallo – those very experiences that shaped her spiritual legacy to us – all come to life here.

The hospitality of Angela's Daughters here in Brescia and the activities of the Merician Center permit Angela's daughters from all continents to drink from this well, both here and online. Thank you! The Federation's leaders have also provided opportunities for members of our newer Groups and Companies to have this life-giving connection with our origins.

Now to go abroad, with a brief mention of some historical factors, past and present. The Company first became international in France in the late 16th century and in Switzerland around 1600. Today's merged Company of Como-Switzerland is the only officially international Company, though other Companies have Groups or individual members in more than one country. This way of life spread from Italy to Malta in 1884, with links to the Girelli sisters. Multi-lingual members, like Malta's Doris Cordina, have assisted the Federation's international development by facilitating communication.

The present French Company was constituted in 1920. It embodies internationality. It has generously fostered new Groups in Congo, Cameroon, Singapore, Australia, and Thailand. Its membership – even in Europe – is more and more inter-cultural with the admission of Congolese women living in France and in Belgium.

This new reality of immigrant members is also enriching the Italian Companies of Milan, Torino, Cremona, and Padua. A Nigerian member of the Company of Padua has taken the Company home with her and has begun a group in Nigeria, now numbering seven, soon to be nine.

Members of the Company of France manifest a pattern seen widely in the last fifty years: they learned about the Company through Ursuline nuns. For centuries Ursuline religious have introduced St. Angela to many countries. In recent decades this introduction includes awareness of the secular Ursuline vocation. Sisters have even worked directly to assist our new Groups in Poland, in Slovakia and its Group in England, and in Indonesia. Their relationship endures beyond the beginning stages and is especially strong in Indonesia and England.

At its founding in 1958, the Federation gave the diocesan Italian Companies a wider horizon. That new identity was just beginning to develop when the Second Vatican Council called all institutes to retrieve their founding charism. This impulse prompted in Ursuline sisters a new awareness of and – let us be honest – a new respect for the Company as the original form of Ursuline life, still alive and well. Nicole Jandot in Brazil and Jacqueline Morin in Canada turned their eyes to Brescia and then initiated Companies in their countries. Now Brazil has two Companies: South and Northeast. Canada has a Group in the USA and has given birth to a second Company in Toronto. Toronto's ethnically diverse members, including many Filipina immigrants, inspired a new Group in the Philippines.

God provides also in other ways, for example in Cameroon through a lay man and French students. In Singapore, where there was no Ursuline presence, our sister Ebba says, "St. Angela found me."

Elisa Tarolli nourished the Companies in Slovakia and especially in Indonesia, both of which have already celebrated their silver anniversaries. Besides Elisa, Federation Presidents Lina Moser, Caterina Dalmasso and Maria Rosa Razza and many Councilors and other members and Companies have made it a priority to visit the far-flung Companies, building bridges with their presence and both teaching and learning. These services demand time, energy, language, and adaptability. Doris, a former council member, recently offered this prayer: "May the Lord Jesus, our mutual Spouse, bless the new council in the steps of St Angela Merici and give each member great energy and love for the entire Company spread out in the world."

European Companies in Slovakia, Poland, and Germany have a hard-earned history of endurance and survival amid repression and even persecution in the second half of the twentieth century. The support of other Companies was crucial and wove bonds of sisterhood that endure in today's connections among them and with Italian Companies, such as Trent. This feature of international, inter-group relationships appears also in Asia. The tiny, newly constituted Asia-Pacific Group has close ties with the Company of Indonesia and participates regularly in its spiritual exercises.

Not every new shoot survives. The Group of Texas, USA, no longer exists. Only one sister remains in Bangladesh. Elsewhere, a single member lives in hope of new growth, as in Mexico, Australia, and Singapore.

Some Companies connect and collaborate with Ursuline religious in the same region. Their experiences may offer suggestions for others in a spirit of unity which was fostered so many years ago by the annual circulars from Jacqueline Morin, who established the Company of Canada. Many celebrate the feasts of St. Angela and St. Ursula and other significant moments together. Ursuline sisters of the Roman Union have nourished the beginnings of new Companies, as mentioned earlier. Some religious invite secular Ursulines to talk about St. Angela and the Company as they explore our shared origins - and vice versa.

Let me offer some specific examples. Last year Ursuline seculars and Ursuline religious in Slovakia co-sponsored a study conference about St. Angela (including Professor Belotti). The Company of Brazil South and Roman Union Sisters have a joint presence at the annual diocesan vocation exhibit. The Company of Canada (with our Group in the USA) has always participated with the Ursuline Sisters in the North American Ursuline Leadership Conference, its publications, and its triennial Convocations. This is not true in the Asian Ursuline Conference, which tends to focus on education. In a poignant sisterly gesture, the Ursulines of Rimouski, Canada, donated to the Company's vocational centers the Merician books that are no longer needed as their religious houses diminish. Generally speaking, the religious have more publications and other materials than the secular groups and are a source for such resources.

Nonetheless, in some places the perception remains that the religious sisters are the “real” Ursulines.

A remarkable feature of our recent Assembly was the large number of Africans. This phenomenon is not entirely new. Its historic roots are traceable to both colonialism and missionary activity. The Companies and Groups of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Madagascar, and Burundi all first encountered St. Angela through Italian priests who knew the Company in Italy and who recognized in particular African women St. Angela's charism of espousal to Christ within the world. The Council of the Federation has been responsible for these Groups. Council members travel regularly to assist in formation and to nourish these developments in the hope that they will mature into autonomous Companies. The most recent to become autonomous is Burundi, in 2017. Burundi is also our largest Company, with over 230 members. The Company of the Democratic Republic of Congo became autonomous in 2016. It began under the mantle of the Company of France, which still extends to Cameroon.

Our Constitutions have been translated into Portuguese, Indonesian, Slovakian, Amharik, Kiswahili, English, French, Maltese, German and Polish.

Cyber communications play an increasing role. Social media expand our awareness of each other, maintain our bonds at a distance, and serve in formation. Vocational searches now take place on the internet. In just one example of many, Esther, a Kenyan woman, contacted our Australian sister Monica through Monica's website. Monica connected the seeker with me in the USA. I connected her with Perpetua in Nairobi. She will enter the Group of Kenya next week.

Mons. Adriano Tessarollo, then the Federation Council's ecclesiastical assistant, saw a need for two vice-assistants familiar with the realities of Sicily and of Africa. Don Gaetano Zito of Catania and Don Raymond Nkindji Samuangala of the Democratic Republic of Congo (living in Italy) now serve as vice-assistants. The Assistant and Vice-assistants have joined the Federation's officers and Councilors in visiting Companies and Groups on several continents.

The Assembly of 2018 set goals for the new six-year term. Some are relevant to individual members or to Companies. Others encourage programs and tools for unity or particular themes, such as social justice. One goal summarizes today's topic: “fare del mondo il nostro ‘villaggio’, dove tutte si conoscono e si vuole collaborare per il bene di tutte”.

Let me close with a few observations.

Expanding horizons demand that we listen for the Holy Spirit's guidance in these new circumstances. I will mention only five of the challenges, then a few of the gifts we experience.

First, distance itself poses a challenge, both between countries and often within countries. Most Groups and Companies are national rather than diocesan, for example, in Ethiopia, Eritrea, the United States, France, Slovakia, and Madagascar. Distance can impede formation and relationships. Even forming an identity as a Company or within the Federation is difficult. We offer instruments of connection in print, online, in gatherings, and through social media, like

WhatsUp. Besides providing information, how can these resources best be used to sustain genuine relationships and a sense of belonging to the whole?

Second, differences of language and culture challenge mutual understanding. Even internally, multi-cultural Companies risk segmentation by language, ethnicity, race, culture or tribal identity. If we are all spouses of the Lover of us all and daughters of the same Madre, how do we cultivate our sisterhood? What do we do specifically to explore together our deepest shared realities? This is how we find our deepest level of unity.

Third, cultural values vary. One example would be the individualism of the global West vis à vis the communal identity of African culture. Can we all – all – assume the attitude of learners? This is how we can allow different expressions of the Merician charism to enrich us all.

Fourth, the history of colonialism – including economic and cultural colonialism – continues to injure and distort the world. Though relatively poor within our own context, our members in the global North benefit from our countries' economic positions and from a colonial history that has impoverished others. Our challenge is to allow awareness and solidarity to teach us what to do with our resources, including our political voice.

Fifth, secular consecration is little known in general, even among bishops, priests and religious. Catholics in Kenya say to me, “Where has this been all my life?” Ignorance is a stumbling block for vocational development. Our sisters in Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil express the additional problem that their societies and economies have little or no place for single women. They not only lack means of support but also lack respect, even being viewed with either pity or suspicion. Furthermore, in Africa consecrated life is synonymous with religious life. Its public presence, veil, and corporate ministries are viewed as essential. Perhaps this situation is not far from that of St. Angela herself and of her first followers. Can we all support these sisters in developing the means to educate others, especially Church leaders, about the vocation of secular consecration?

Yes, there are challenges. Even more importantly, there are treasures to share.

Everywhere, our sisters find their center of unity in Christ, our Spouse. Saint Angela teaches and models this basic life-orientation and demonstrates that our vocational path is a journey of holiness lived and shared in our world. Daughters of the same Madre, we recognize the family resemblance. How encouraging it is to walk this path together, even at great distances!

We are united in the same charism, with its universal relevance. Each culture offers a fresh perspective on its beauty, a new facet of the radiant diamond. The more we share experiences and insights, the more we are all enriched.

I will mention only three very specific opportunities that our different situations offer.

We all know that migration worldwide is higher than at any time since the Second World War, too often resulting in cultural clashes. Our multi-cultural Companies in Toronto, France, and

Brazil are already a microcosm of this new global reality. The same might be said of African Groups and Companies whose members have different tribal origins and of Italian Companies welcoming immigrant members. Perhaps these sisters have a prophetic mission. Angela spoke urgently of the need for unity – "even with my blood," she said. Can our multi-cultural Companies demonstrate ways to "pursue it, embrace it, hold onto it with all your strength"?

Companies in ecumenical and interreligious contexts have a prophetic role within the Federation. I think of the German Company's history of dialogue with evangelical Protestants. Our Indonesian sisters have lifelong friendships with Muslims. Meity speaks fondly of the Muslim neighbor she grew up calling "Mama" and of the Muslim children who call her "Auntie." The Indonesian Directress, Lydia, hears her Muslim former schoolmates worrying that their children may become radicalized on the Internet. These sisters of ours can provide perspective for Westerners just encountering Islam.

Our sisters offer us all the gift of putting a beloved face on vulnerability before global forces.... Such as climate change, when their homes in the Philippines were flooded by Typhoon Haiyan Such as political violence, when they dare not travel in Kenya or Congo or Burundi.... Such as the degradation of women in the USA.... Such as unemployment in Italy.... Such as fires in Indonesia. However we respond – by public action, by contribution, by prayer, by volunteer activity, or by messages of support – respond we must in solidarity, for these catastrophes are now part of our family's life.

In conclusion, if St. Angela has seen fit to fly around the globe, she has not left the place of her birth. Rather, she extends our family circle from here across vast distances, bringing us together in love.