

Eurobosco 2017 – 14 October 2017 – Contribution of Laurent Grégoire

Dear friends,

Many thanks to the organizers of Eurobosco 2017 for inviting me to speak this morning before you! I am speaking on behalf of the alumni organizations of Catholic education, of which the former students of Don Bosco are of course part. After recalling the structures and goals of these organizations, I will explain our work with the Public Institutions, including the defence of the family.

1 / Which organizations at national, European and international level ?

At the French level, as is also the case in other countries, COFAEC, the French Confederation of Alumni Associations of Catholic Education, is federating more than a thousand of associations for more than 110 years. They are congregational associations, grouped into national federations, but also alumni associations of schools depending of the dioceses and sometimes grouped together in diocesan unions, in total a network of more than 3 million alumni ! The objective of COFAEC is twofold : to promote exchanges of good practices between the heads of associations or federations and, on the other hand, to ensure their representation : this is the case in particular with the National Committee for Catholic Education, I am a member as President of COFAEC.

At the European level, UNAEC-Europe, the European Union of Former Students of Catholic Education, created in 1980, brings together national organizations, such as COFAEC, and European congregational confederations. As for COFAEC, the objective of UNAEC-Europe is twofold : to encourage exchanges between the leaders of federations in Europe and to ensure their representation within two organizations :

- The first one is the CEEC, the Catholic Education European Committee, which groups together the heads of Catholic education from all over Europe, UNAEC-Europe is an associate member of CEEC. Thus, as General Secretary of UNAEC-Europe, I will represent you at the semi-annual CEEC assembly to be held in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 3 weeks.
- The second one is the Council of Europe, where UNAEC-Europe has a participatory status as INGO, International Non-Governmental Organization. As a reminder, the Council of Europe is not linked to the European Union but brings together the 47 countries of the greater Europe, including Russia and Turkey. The Council of Europe is particularly competent in the fields of Human Rights and Education. For example, the freedom of education in Europe is one of our main demands. As the UNAEC-Europe representative to the Council of Europe, I was this week in Strasbourg where a parliamentary session and INGO meetings were held.

At the world level, OMAEC, the World Organization of Catholic Education Alumni, was founded in 1967. We will celebrate its 50th anniversary in Rome next week and should be received in audience by the Holy Father. OMAEC also has a dual role : to coordinate all our structures at the global level, including the World Confederation of Past Pupils of Don Bosco, and to represent us : representation on the one hand with OIEC, the International Organization of Catholic Education, in which OMAEC is an associate member, and the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, and on the other hand with UNESCO, the United Nations agency for education. As INGO, the OMAEC has a consultative status; as OMAEC representative to UNESCO, I take part in actions taken with other INGOs to defend the freedom of education and promote the family ; this is done in particular within the CCIC, the Center which coordinates the Catholic-inspired INGOs represented at UNESCO.

2 / What actions are we taking with the national, European and global Institutions ?

Due to lack of time, I just list several areas where we intervene :

- The development and role of **civil society** in a democracy : we are associations, therefore one of the "intermediate bodies" of society, like families, companies, churches, as explained by the Christian social doctrine. For example, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, to which UNAEC-Europe belongs, has recently become one of the "4 pillars" of this institution, the other 3 being the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.
- The defence of **the freedom of education**. In Europe, it is not fully respected, even questioned, in some countries, in particular where a non-Catholic religion is very largely a majority. At the international level, more and more voices, including those coming from the United Nations, call into question private education to replace by a system exclusively assumed by the States. The reason is that in some countries we see a strong development of private education with very lucrative purpose. Catholic education is not profit and ensures a mission of education by delegation of the public authorities : it must therefore not only be maintained but financed by the State !
- In accordance with the Christian social doctrine, **the education of the children is ensured by the parents**, who can delegate a part of this education to educational establishments. It should be, as Pope Francis said, within the framework of a pact between the State, the family and the school. And in this pact, parents must remain decision-makers: "Integral education of children is both a grave duty and a primary right of parents ... The State provides an educational service in a subsidiary way by accompanying the responsibility that parents cannot delegate "(*Amoris Laetitia*, Ch. 3).
- For this reason, we support **the defence of the family** as promoted by the social doctrine, in connection with associations of parents of pupils of Catholic education as well as with the Catholic family associations.
- Catholic schools are open to all children, regardless of their religious beliefs. As a result, our associations include members of all beliefs. We are therefore participating in the work of the International Institutions to develop **intercultural dialogue**, especially **interfaith** dialogue, and to implement **an inclusive and peaceful society**. It is unnecessary to stress the importance of such action in the current context of Islamic terrorism. I just mention an initiative of an alumni association in Lebanon, taken up by the Maltese, French and Senegalese alumni federations, to promote Islamic-Christian dialogue through the common celebration of the Annunciation, on March 25th (became now a non-working day in Lebanon!).
- **Migrants** : as Pope Francis constantly reminds us, and in particular by receiving the European Confederation of Jesuit alumni in May, the fate of migrants cannot leave us indifferent. On the one hand, by helping for their reception, especially families and children whose schooling is to be ensured ; but also by addressing the reasons for migration, including global warming and, above all, the enormous unemployment of young people in some countries, particularly in Africa. Even before the encyclical letter *Laudato'Si*, OMAEC decided to promote the development of "fair trade", notably by signing an agreement with the Spanish NGO PROYDE. And COFAEC and the Senegalese Federation of Former Students of Catholic Schools, are currently building a project to revive companies and create training in the wood sector in Casamance (The South region of Senegal) after nearly 35 years of war.

In these and many other areas, your leaders of alumni federal organizations and your representatives in national, European and international public institutions are trying to implement the Gospel principles that we have learned in Catholic schools. Is that not one of the main reasons for our associations ?