

A VOYAGE TO ASIA WITH MGR CARDIJN IN 1958

Study Session on YCW History in Asia Pacific, Notre Dame de Chant d'Oiseau Retreat House, Brussels, Belgium on Monday 6 April 1998.

Maria Meersman, IYCW Vice-President 1956-61, gave a presentation on her voyage to Asia in 1958 with Mgr Cardijn. In fact, Maria had been placed in charge of the region "Asia and the Far East". Before the Rome World Council, she visited Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Israel.

We had divided the world into continents and I was in charge of the continent of Asia which we called the "Far East". One priest in India asked me "Why do you call it the Far East? Where is it far from?"

In the 1950s we considered Egypt and the Middle East as part of the Asian region. Before the World Council I visited this region.

In Egypt, there was a YCW started by French priests with Catholics and also with members from Eastern churches, the Coptic Church and the Greek Catholic Church. In Jordan, there were also 2 local groups in Zakra started by Belgian YCW leader from Brussels who entered AFI (Auxiliaires Féminines Internationales). There were 2 girls sections. The men had left for Iraq to work in the oil industry.

In Syria, there was a YCW in Alep where the Catholics are concentrated. In Lebanon, the YCW was already established throughout the country. In Israel, there was no YCW but that was another problem. I visited these countries 2-3-4 times during my mandate, including the first time with Mgr Cardijn. These countries (except Israel) all sent delegations to Rome in 1957.

In 1958, I also visited Iraq, where contacts were made through the nuncio, etc.

I made my first trip to Asia in 1958 with Cardijn. I began by visiting India for 3 weeks, going to Bombay (Fr Cordeira), Calcutta and Madras (Fr Thomas). A visit was also made to the Jesuit seminary at Pune. Efforts were made to find a chaplain for Bombay (Fr Rupert D'Silva). Local sections spoke both English and Hindi.

In Sri Lanka, there was also a YCW under the chaplaincy of Fr Schram.

In Singapore, there was also an existing YCW. In Malaysia, there was a Chinese-English speaking YCW. René Délecluse later went as extension worker in both countries.

I then visited Australia with Cardijn, touring the whole country, including a number of rural centres. At that time, the YCW was only for the boys and the NCGM was for the girls. Girls president was Betty King, later an extension worker in India, where it was necessary to have a Commonwealth passport to enter. The aboriginal issue was an issue at that time and also the 'White Australia' policy. The YCW had organised meetings with government ministers on these issues. We then went to New Zealand. (Australia and NZ were the countries of the 'rallies'.)

In Indonesia, there was still no YCW. During the visit, discussions could still be held in Dutch.

A visit of 3 weeks was made to the Philippines. The YCW girls was stronger than that of the boys.

Visits were also made to Taiwan, Vietnam (stopover), Japan (3 weeks), Korea. In Japan, the YCW was already structured but the country was still very poor and under American domination. In Korea, the first local girls YCW group was started by a young Belgian former YCW from AFI.

One of the important points to make is that it takes some time to inculturate the YCW in the local situation.

We also went to Hong Kong. They started using the novel, Fishers of Men by Maxence Van Der Meersch, which was also translated in Chinese. The YCW started with textile workers. The chaplain wanted to know if his YCW was a real YCW.

In Vietnam, there was a boys and girls YCW. But there were many problems with leaders. North-South Vietnam. It was the time of President Diem, who was a Catholic. He was also a dictator. When we arrived in Saigon there were all the school children with little flags and President Diem. I asked who is arriving? We were arriving! The president received us. One problem was that we were followed everywhere.



We went to Thailand but at that time there was nothing. We had contact with the Buddhists because we wanted to know how the culture has been built up and to see how we could collaborate. Everything we could we had contact with non-Catholic authorities. We also saw the Salesians and MEP.

Then we went to Burma. This was rather difficult. There was a guerilla movement. There was no YCW. We then went to Pakistan.

We then went to Iraq. We had contacts with priests but at time there was nothing there. We also went to Lebanon to see the local groups there.

In 1960, we went to Kuala Lumpur for the Asian meeting. This was already more Asian with translation into several Asian languages. We had nothing to say there. The Asians were also organising the meeting. René Délecluse had also helped organise the meeting.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Fr Mathias: How did the extension workers help the local movements to understand the YCW better?

Maria Meersman: To see if the YCW principles were implemented, e.g. the human and divine value of every young person. E.g. need to show that food sellers also had value. Enquiry: What's the name of your cat? What's the name of your food seller? People did not know, so the object was to help them become aware.

Frans Van Camp: It is necessary to distinguish a) international visitors and b) extension workers. Need for a certain kind of 'control' to make sure that the local movement was still based on YCW principles, e.g. visit by Betty Villa to Karachi emphasising need to start YCW Girls. Big advantage of visits over letters.

Maria Meerman: A big question was how to work with non-Catholics? We did not have the answer. We had to find out. This was the beginning in 1958. Perhaps today it is easier to discuss this kind of problem but at that time it was very difficult.

Local people also asked me my own personal experience.

In India, a local leader brought me to a luxury coffee house. I said why do you bring me here? I could not face taking a trip in a rickshaw being pulled around so we took a taxi, which cost about the same as a tram in Brussels. I offered to pay, but the local leader, Grace, refused. She said to me: 'Listen to me. It is also good for you that you have to receive something and not always giving.' She paid for my visit from her savings. I learnt a lot from this experience. You educate people in doing and not just in telling. We learnt from them and they learnt from us.

It was always difficult to get the young workers to take their own responsibility, in Belgium and elsewhere. Seeing, judging and acting according to local experiences.

Fr Mathias: What was the dominant thinking concerning working with people of other faiths? Was it seen as positive? Did bishops and priests feel free to reach out?

Maria Meersman: It varied from country to country but in general people were more or less afraid of that kind of work. We tried to explain that we began with Catholic young worker leaders but that you can see, judge and act together with others. At that time in the Church, you understand it was difficult... Not all bishops and priests were the same.

David Mahony: It seems some bishops, priests and YCWs wanted to and tried to involve non-Christians but in other places it was forbidden.

Maria Meersman: Yes, but in Bombay, for example, most young Catholics were educated in English and as Catholics, Western style, and therefore distant from their own people. It you cannot get people to understand all this in a 3 weeks visit or even in 4 years.

Joyce Fernandez: Normally the Catholics were educated in missionary schools and were not allowed by their parents to have contact with non-Christians. The extension workers and visitors challenged us to go out and integrate with the non-Christians. That's how we came to begin to reach out.

Even the Catholic community was divided at that time between English speaking and Urdu speaking community. People started to accept the Urdu speaking.

Fr Seither: The first principle of Catholic social teaching is respect for the person. But in India, in my experience everything was done by the priest, a kind of clericalism? What was your experience of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity?

Maria Meersman: One problem in India and Sri Lanka was the ethnic (caste?) structure. This was a difficulty. The priest in fact often dominated the YCW work. You have to show people that they can do something. It takes some time to get people to become aware of that. If you don't respect others, you can't respect yourself. So it is true that priests were sometimes dominating, but you have to start somewhere...

Maria Salen: I am concerned that you cannot do anything unless the YCW members are open. You have to see, judge, act with the whole group, not just the Christians.

Maria Meersman: You need some time to get into a new culture. You have to leave everything and start again.