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IN THE SHADOW OF CAIRO

SIXTH WORLD CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
FOR FAMILY LIFE PROMOTION, SEPTEMBER 1994

The Sixth World Congress of the International Federation for Family Life Promotion was held at the Catholic University of Lublin on 16-24 September 1994, in which almost 300 participants from 77 countries participated. They came to talk about natural family planning in its bio-medical, psychological and social aspects, present the latest scientific achievements in this area and share experiences in field work. The timing of the Congress was also important – it began the day after the Population Conference in Cairo and some participants arrived in Lublin directly from Egypt.

Local organizers of the Congress were: the University Medical School in Lublin (whose representative, and at the same time an IFFLP member, Radziszław Sikorski, was the head of the Local Coordinating Committee of the Congress), the Catholic University of Lublin, the National Institute of Mother and Child in Warsaw, and the National Natural Family Planning Teachers' Association.

The Lublin World Congress took place on the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the IFFLP. This organization was created in order to give support – scientific, moral, managerial, and financial – to all those who deal with scientific research related to natural family planning and its popularization. The IFFLP members – over 100 organizations and private persons from almost 80 countries – meet every few years (recently, once every five years) at congresses

which are working sessions with intensive information exchanges and training. Previous congresses were held in Columbia, Ireland, Hong Kong, Canada and Kenya, and each choice of country was connected with some practical advantage. This time, by organizing the Congress in Poland, the IFFLP made it easier for people from Central Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union to attend.

The first three days of the Congress were devoted to workshops, the last two days to scientific sessions; the participants also worked two days on organizational problems. (There was a so-called cultural day too, devoted to excursions and a celebration of the IFFLP anniversary.) This structure of the programme corresponded to the two levels of the IFFLP activity, for the sake of convenience called practical and theoretical.

The workshops concentrated on practical matters: the participants presented their experiences in founding organizations for the promotion of natural methods of family planning, in making those methods known in different countries and societies, and in teacher training. They also talked about the motives for accepting or rejecting natural family planning, its efficacy, difficulties and advantages. New training methods, didactic aids, as well as new technological means for assisting natural family planning were presented. For some participants – especially for those coming from the former Soviet

Union – the Congress was also an occasion to take examinations with specialists from Poland and Great Britain for the natural family planning teacher's certificate.

In the scientific sessions, numerous communications about recent scientific developments related to the IFFLP field of interest extended to the following topics: efficacy of natural family planning (NFP), breastfeeding and lactational infertility, training and teaching of NFP, technical monitoring of fertility, pregnancy outcome, NFP programme monitoring and evaluation, innovations in NFP, psychosexual aspects and characteristics of NFP users, post-pill NFP.

WITHOUT PUBLICITY

The Lublin Congress was an important event for specialists in natural family planning. It might also have attracted more of the general public and have had a greater impact, if only the mass media had spoken about it as much as it deserved. Despite the fact that the journalists reporting from the Congress eagerly described it as an "alternative to Cairo," it was given little publicity.

What was said at the Lublin Congress called into question the current general opinion about natural family planning. Firstly, the image of natural family planning methods was attractive – which is quite rare in the Polish non-Catholic mass media. It was enough to meet the participants in order to get this positive impression: people of every age, married couples – also accompanied by their children – single persons, religious and lay people – in one word – everybody who may be a member of a multi-generation family, came to the Congress. The majority, however, were those most concerned:

married people in the so-called "reproductive age." The energy, cheerfulness and beauty of all those people were striking, and it seems that they themselves were the best publicity for natural family planning.

Natural family planning proved to be a dynamic field, making use of advanced scientific research and modern technologies. This has very little to do with the so-called "rhythm method" which is still often presented by the mass media if not as the only natural family planning method, then at least as a symbol of the shortcomings of natural family planning. The organizers of the press conference which took place during the Congress thought it necessary to finally make journalists aware that the rhythm method is "meritorious but historical," and is no longer taught today. There is no way of telling to what degree this information was accepted. Some of the articles published in the local press showed that the readers' attention was drawn rather to the vicissitudes of the participants arriving from the farthest parts of the world, while the journalists were absorbed in gossip that the Polish President, who stood as a patron of the Congress, would appear personally in Lublin.

THE FIRST THIRD WORLD

The Congress presented the opportunity to survey and compare the motives of natural family planning users, and the acceptability of these methods in developed countries and in the so-called Third World. The participants from the developed and rich countries stated that natural family planning was becoming ever more popular as the expression of growing ecological awareness, or even fashionable for ecology. People are becoming aware that

the slogans which call for respect for natural environment and for the "return to nature" also refer to human reproduction.

In particular, the testimony of the participants from the Third World was important, especially against the background of the Demographic Conference which ended on the eve of the Congress. Research shows that in the Third World countries natural family planning is readily accepted and considered a competitor to artificial contraceptives. The fact that natural birth control methods do not conflict with the users' religion and culture (and do not antagonize neighbouring Christian and Muslim communities), avoid an artificial – and therefore disliked by many – intervention into the body, and are cheap – they do not strain the users' finances because their costs are mainly restricted to the costs of teacher training – these were the most frequently quoted reasons for the choice of natural family planning. In addition – contrary to the opinion that these methods are difficult and easily liable to failure – they proved viable for uneducated, often illiterate people. One of the Congress participants, an Indian woman, who has developed and successfully implemented the natural family planning training programmes for rural communities, said that in the field of birth control, the division of the world was today different from that in the field of economy. The Third World – especially in respect to the development of training methods, their adaptation to various cultures and communities, and making use of local customs and institutions – definitely takes the lead.

We should not think, however, that the Congress propounded natural family planning as a wonder-working cure for the demographic problems of the world

or for the family, and marital problems of individuals. Although the role of technological assistance to natural family planning is growing, the natural methods are not technological devices themselves and their efficacy depends in great measure on the commitment of the user. Precisely for this reason, the Congress gave so much attention to the problems of teaching natural family planning to people from different cultures; it was discussed how to reach them with the information, awake the proper motivation and assure continual assistance. It was clearly seen that in order to use natural family planning, more knowledge and effort is required than, for example, when one takes a contraceptive pill.

EITHER – OR

"Life style" was a frequently recurring phrase during the Congress. It was stressed that the choice of natural family planning is connected with the choice of a particular life style. This also means acceptance of a certain vision of man, which is then realized in the understanding of oneself, of one's own goals, of the mechanisms of one's development and one's bonds with other people. It became explicit on the background of the slogans repeated in the context of the Cairo Conference: the slogans about overpopulation, about the necessity to limit population growth because soon there will be too many of us, and that the Earth will not be able either to hold or to feed all of us. Both meetings, the one in Cairo and the one in Lublin, despite the big difference in scale and publicity, at least in part had the same topic, namely how to "control" the birth rate. Yet, it seems that the Conference in Cairo was organized to

discuss strategies of defence against new people, to decide what to do in order to prevent them from coming into the world, and if they, unwanted, are by chance conceived – how to get rid of them. In Lublin, in turn, people were concerned about how to live so that a new human being could be suitably welcomed, as an awaited guest, despite the scarcity of resources.

The Lublin Congress, especially as an alternative, or rather an “antithesis” to Cairo, confronted us with the question of to what measure the choice of natural family planning – the choice made by individuals and communities, states and international organizations, and manifested in supporting one method and ignoring or fighting the other – is, on the one hand, an expression of the state of mind of contemporary society, while on

the other hand, a choice decisive for the future. Do we live now – and will continue to live – in a society of solidarity, with a sense of communion with others, or – isolated from one another – will we fight against each other?

In the opening speech, Alfredo Perez, President of the IFFLP, formulated this more acutely: the choice is not between one or another life style, or a little better or worse society; the choice is: God or nothingness.

When meetings like the Sixth World IFFLP Congress are successful, one remembers them not only as scientific events, but also as an important human experience: an experience of communication and community. This Congress merits such a memory – as an expression of solidarity with every human being.