

INTERVIEW WITH SR. SARAH GARCIA FMA, DIRECTOR OF THE IIMA HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE IN GENEVA



*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon in collaboration with Sr. Martha Séide and Sr. Runita Borja
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EXCERPTS:

- “If we are to build a new humanism, Catholic schools need to incorporate in their curriculum and programs, at all levels, Human Rights Education and the core values of Catholic Social Teaching.”
- “There is another side to poverty that made me see in a new light why the truly poor in spirit are blessed. Being with them, I learned what it is to be genuinely human, truly wise, and deeply divine. They showed me how misery can be wealth, emptiness as fullness, small as great, precariousness as creativity, struggle as hope, and sorrow as joy.”

Could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in supporting the education and development of girls?

I am Sarah B. Garcia, a Filipino religious educator. I belong to the Institute of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians (also known as Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco). Currently, I am the IIMA's Main Representative to the United Nations and the Director of IIMA Human Rights Office in Geneva, Switzerland. IIMA, which stands for Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice delle Salesiane di Don Bosco, is a religious association with a Special Consultative Status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2008.

The IIMA, true to the vision of its founders, St. John Bosco and St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello, is committed to promoting the right to education for all. We are convinced that the Salesian Method of education (which we call the Preventive System of Don Bosco) allows all to realize their full potential to be free, responsible, honest and engaged citizens as well as persons true to their faith capable of upholding universal values and principles, and living in solidarity.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? This interview is with Sister Sarah B. Garcia, IIMA's Main Representative to the United Nations and the Director of the IIMA Human Rights Office in Geneva. She talks about the work of IIMA, and how it relates to the vision of education proposed by Pope Francis under the Global Compact for education.

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To address the challenges to the implementation of the right to education worldwide, IIMA focuses on the most vulnerable groups, in particular, children, youth, girls and women, migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, minorities, and those living in difficult situations. We believe when empowered, they can defend their human rights and promote those of others, exercise their right to participation in decision-making processes, be a voice of the voiceless in the national and international debates. We believe, with Pope Francis, that a new humanism is attainable. For these reasons, the IIMA Human Rights Office works to promote the right to education and Human Rights Education for all.

What do you believe are the strengths of the activities you are involved in?

IIMA's strength, I believe, lies in its faith in humanity and its members' commitment, determination, and persistence to translate its founders' dream, vision, and goals into concrete programs, projects, and initiatives in order to build societies that are more humane and humanizing, in solidarity, and inclusive, more just and sustainable. In religious parlance, we are working for a better world – the "Kingdom of God."

IIMA does this in accordance with its pillars of action: advocacy, training and capacity building, communication, and information. This is work carried out in close collaboration with IIMA's local members and in partnership and synergy with other NGOs and institutions in order to bring major issues to the attention of the international community and to identify top priorities for the human rights agenda.

With its advocacy work, IIMA's Human Rights Office provides the UN experts and Member States representatives with relevant and reliable information on how human rights are being implemented at the local level, including denunciation of violations. It submits reports on the situation of children, youth, women, and vulnerable groups, within the Universal Periodic Review. At the same time it enables and empowers its local members, including children, young people, and educators, through its training and capacity building programs to use the UN's international mechanisms and procedures so as to defend their human rights and those of others. The Office also disseminates information, advocacy tools, and human rights-based materials with local human rights defenders and international organizations.

To advance the realization of the right to education for all, the Office works closely with VIDES International and all of IIMA's educational institutions present in 96 countries. Furthermore, IIMA partners with other organizations, such as the International Forum of the Catholic-inspired NGOs (CINGO) - Rome, the Geneva-based Forum Genève

CINGO, the NGO Platform on the Right to Education, the Platform on the Right to Development, and the Centre Catholique International de Genève (CCIG).

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how, especially with regards to the activities that you are personally engaged in?

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019), 258 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school. In many countries, girls of all ages have lesser opportunities to receive formal education (see the UIS global education database). If only Catholic schools worldwide could pool resources so as to make the right to education accessible, affordable, acceptable, and available to these millions of children and young people deprived of education, this, I believe would be prophetic solidarity in action.

If we are to build a new humanism, Catholic schools need to incorporate in their curriculum and programs, at all levels, Human Rights Education and the core values of Catholic Social Teaching. A human rights-based approach to education is important. However, for education to be holistic and inclusive, it has to be grounded on universal values and principles of the Catholic Church's Social Teaching and translated into the language of human rights.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you and the FMA sisters could contribute to the Pope's vision?

Pope Francis in launching the appeal for a new Global Compact on Education (GCE) highlighted the Church's priority commitment to education as a vital means to address the complex issues of contemporary social and political life. He saw it as "a step forward, which can train for peace and justice, the acceptance of peoples and universal solidarity, while also taking into account the care of our "common home" (Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Forum of Catholic-Inspired NGOs, 7 December 2019).

The GCE aims to build a new humanism by generating a change of mentality on a global scale through education. This is a renewed challenge to us, FMA Sisters, who have at heart the education of young people, the center of our educational mission. We are aware that for young people to be initiators of positive change in society, and assume their responsibilities and role of leadership, their youth rights must be recognized and implemented. Our concrete contribution is to continue reminding governments and civil society actors to engage in a constructive dialogue to move the youth rights agenda forward at the UN by:

- a) taking concrete action at local and international level to empower young people and promote their human

rights, through youth participation and leadership initiatives;

- b) systematically mainstreaming the implementation of youth human rights into the existing UN mechanism for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, including Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR);
- c) submitting reports on the situation of children, youth, and women within the UPR and delivering oral statements during the Human Rights Council sessions; and
- d) organizing side events to share best practices on how young people are empowered in the field. In the past few years, IIMA with VIDES International have been instrumental in an awareness raising campaign within the United Nations to ensure that the rights of youth are placed high on the list of its priorities.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

Suggestions to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level (for more information, see www.iimageneva.org):

- A large number of Congregations participated in the online seminar organized by the UISG on Rebuilding the Global Compact on Education held on 12-14 November 2020. I would like to suggest some possible joint activities or projects already identified in the Declarations concerning our aspirations and action plans :
 - Involving educators, students, managers, families, executive committees, etc., in the educational project and the most urgent matters, concerning: human dignity, human rights and responsibilities (e.g. the care for creation and integral ecology, the empowerment of vulnerable people, economic justice and the promotion of peace in our fragmented world) (p.10, e)
 - Creating an international network for educators/teachers' formation in the strategic guidelines of the GCE (p. 13, c)
 - Keeping up-to-date about the education systems of other countries. Sharing what others have been doing, always ensuring equal access to education (p.16, n)
- The year 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training. We are in the fourth phase (2020-2024) of the World Program for Human Rights Education prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This

fourth phase focuses on Human Right Education for Youth. It would be a significant step if Catholic Schools could organize a youth event focusing on Catholic Youth, Human Rights, and Global Citizenship. It could be a venue of dialogue and interaction among young people and their role to responsible citizenship and leadership in the contemporary world.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

The Institute's General Youth Ministry Sector (of which the IIMA Human Rights Office is one of the components), in this time of the pandemic continued to carry out training and capacity building for school principals, educators, alumni, parents and other groups online, at the national, regional, and international levels. The training and capacity building priorities focused on the following themes:

- Laudato Si' and integral ecology: Relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si;
- The Global Compact on Education, its Instrumentum Laboris, and related themes on human dignity and human rights : integral ecology; justice, peace and citizenship; and solidarity and development;
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and the FMA Educating Communities' educational responses;
- Implications of media and information technology on integral education; Online presence: risks/threats, and good practices;
- Other issues such as human trafficking, migration, and mental health in the time of the pandemic.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I grew up in a Salesian ambient that molded by way of being and doing: the school, the Oratory Youth Center, and the outreach programs of the Salesian Sisters. I was educated from Kindergarten to High School in a Catholic School in the Philippines administered by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Here, I imbibed the spirit of the Preventive System: an educative methodology and spirituality combined. In a family-like environment, I learned discipline, caring, and serving. It was easy to remember Don Bosco's and Mother Maria Domenica Mazzarello's educative ideals because they were incarnated by those Sisters and educators: "sanctity consists in doing the ordinary things in an extraordinary way", "true prayer is to do the right thing, at the right time, and only for the love of God", "joy is a sign of a heart that loves God very much", and "serve the Lord with gladness".

Though, I was just in the 4th Grade, the Sisters involved me in their barrio outreach program. Then later, they prepared me to animate a group of little children. The Sisters' way of being with people inspired me. It just grew on me, I felt I was part of their mission. So at 16 years of age, I decided to join the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and professed in 1979.

Jesus Christ and his sense of mission, gave my life and religious vocation greater meaning and purpose. I learned to value the richness of the Institute's internationality during the years of my studies at the Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione – Auxilium, Rome. This was confirmed when I became the Director of novices of an international novitiate for 8 years. Then, in 1997 I joined the newly constituted South East Asia Pre-Province. I embraced it as the fulfillment of my dream to be a missionary. I stepped on the unknown land of Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, East Timor and Indonesia.

There I discovered a world so rich, beautiful, complex, and diverse in terms of peoples, religions, beliefs, traditions, cultures, and language. But one thing could not escape you, the stark contrast between the lifestyle of the rich and the plight of the poor – the opulence of the rich and the misery of the poor. The cry of the poor was so deafening and heartbreaking. Hunger, inequality, injustice, sickness, deprivation, discrimination, homelessness, conflicts, family breakdown, indifference, devastation, abuses, disasters, and tragedies, were common sights. So many of them have no access even to the most basic services.

The precarious situations of these countries, particularly of Myanmar and Cambodia, made me come to terms with something more grounding in life - the plan of God for a better humanity. Immersed in their world, my horizon broadened. I understood in a new light God's compassion and his passion for justice for his people. I discovered a new call within a call – to care for our poor sisters and brothers, educate and empower them so as to live with dignity and purpose. In 2016, Mother Yvonne Reungoat, our Mother General, called me to collaborate at the IIMA Human Rights Office in Geneva. Here, I am learning to see life and the world in a universal perspective. I am simply grateful and humbled to have this privilege to serve the poor, the most vulnerable, the neglected people in this capacity.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about life and people, but it is when I am serving the poor and working with them that I experienced stronger connectedness to God and others. It makes me glimpse life's deeper meaning and purpose. There is another side to poverty that made me see in a new light why the truly poor in spirit are blessed. Being with them, I learned what it is to be genuinely human, truly wise, and deeply divine. They showed me how misery can be wealth, emptiness as fullness, small as great, precariousness as creativity, struggle as hope, and sorrow as joy. I tasted with "gusto" the good things that are real and essential. There was delight in appreciating the small gestures of kindness. It is liberating to be content with little and to be grateful when there is something more. Having come to terms with my own weakness and helplessness, I understood the deeper meaning of why Christ came in weakness and proclaimed "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God". I am just grateful to God and to the Institute's gift of trust.



Photo: Panelists at the June 2018 Side event "Girls with No Name" organized by IIMA in Geneva.