

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE RICHARD, SECRETARY GENERAL OF OIEC

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “During my first term as Secretary General, I traveled around the world for four years to meet our members. I saw how fruitful Catholic education was, how much it contributed with all his might to the universal goal of achieving education for all.”
- “We must stress the universal scope of Pope Francis’ proposal and his concept of the education village. Participating in this educational village requires leaving our natural home and meeting other actors involved in the educational process, as done by *Scholas Occurrence*.”

You are OIEC’s Secretary General. Could you briefly explain the origin and goals of the organization?

The International Office for Catholic Education (OIEC in French) was created on September 20, 1952 in Lucerne, Switzerland, at the request of Bishops and representatives of different countries (Germany, England, Austria, Belgium, United States, France, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands). In the post-war and reconciliation context, a few years after the creation of the United Nations and later the Council of Europe, one of the aims was to give to the world a message that Catholic education was committed to the service of peace and dialogue among nations.

The members of the OIEC are the national organizations in charge of Catholic schools in countries as designated by the ecclesial authorities of each country. We also have congregations engaged in educational service as members. OIEC was quickly recognized by the Holy See as an international Catholic organization. We later obtained consultative status with international organizations to represent Catholic schools globally.

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? In this interview, Philippe Richard, the Secretary General of the International Office for Catholic Education (OIEC in French) explains the origins of OIEC, its mission, and its strategic orientations within the framework of the Global Compact on Education proposed by Pope Francis.

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OIEC's objectives are multiple according to its statutes. The aims are to promote research on the contribution of Catholic schools in the educational field and how the schools can adapt to the needs, realities and aspirations of their environment; to serve through the development of communication channels as a network for exchanges between its members for their mutual information and the information of other educators; to create and develop links of mutual aid and active solidarity between members; to collaborate with the organizations of the universal Church, including the Episcopal Conferences and other international Catholic educational organizations; to participate in the mission of the Church by promoting an educational project of Catholic inspiration; and to promote the creation, with schools and other educational institutions of "educational communities" in which all partners work in a united and responsible manner for educational and cultural progress and for the development of an evangelical spirit, with special attention to the most underprivileged and welcoming, with respect for freedom of conscience, all those who trust the school.

What are the main activities of the OIEC today?

Almost 70 years after its creation, OIEC remains true to the inspiration of its founders, and the goals they set for the organization. OIEC remains in close contact with the Congregation for Catholic Education (Vatican) with which it maintains regular relationships. OIEC today represents more than 120 members (national organizations, congregations, and collaborating members) from all five continents. The network represents more than 225,000 pre-primary, primary and secondary schools and nearly 62 million students. OIEC's income comes from contributions by its members and its budget remains low. We also have a team of volunteers of a dozen people who ensure the representation of Catholic schools globally with among others UNESCO (Paris), the UN (Geneva and New York), and the Council of Europe (Strasbourg). This has included in recent years an active participation in the World Education Forum organized by UNESCO in Incheon (South Korea) in 2015 as well as reports submitted on the situation of particular countries (Nicaragua, Albania, CAR, Sweden, etc.) under the Universal Periodic Review procedure (UN Human Rights Commission based in Geneva).

OIEC regularly organizes a World Congress in order to allow its members to meet, exchange, and deepen the meaning of the mission which has been entrusted to them by the Church. The last Congress was held in 2019 in New York. Between Congresses which take place every three or four years, OIEC participates in meetings organized by its various regional secretariats (CEEC for Europe, CIEC for America, OIEC-MENA for the Middle East, ARNECAO and OIEC-Central Africa for Africa). These regional meetings are a unique opportunity to get closer to the field, to get to know the members and the

work they carry out better, and above all to demonstrate, through the presence of OIEC, the universality of the Church. Indeed, Catholic education is an important aspect of the universality of the Church. OIEC also develops projects for its members such as the projects "I Can" "Planet OIEC". Finally, OIEC has strengthened the research component of its activity in recent years by publishing the first Global Catholic Education Report in 2020 and by joining the G.R.A.C.E. collaborative.



Visual: Children's Global Summit in Rome in November 2019 as part of the project « I Can ».

What do you think of the Global Compact on Education proposed by Pope Francis and how could OIEC contribute to it?

Since the arrival of Pope Francis, we have followed the intellectual and spiritual journey that led to the Global Compact on Education. We have therefore become familiar day after day with the thought that tirelessly guides Pope Francis to transform education into a means of humanizing the world, and also a question of love and responsibility in the spirit of the encyclicals *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli tutti*.

We are called by the Pope to shift our educational boundaries. The state of the world (poverties of all kinds, wars, racism, migration, political violence, climate change,

etc.) becomes an object of universal education that goes beyond any particular educational project, whatever its value. It is therefore necessary to seek the best educational strategies that can help transform and above all for humanize the world. The goal is to commit to building a "civilization of love". We must stress the universal scope of Pope Francis' proposal and his concept of the education village. Participating in this educational village requires leaving our natural home and meeting other actors involved in the educational process, as done by *Scholas Occurrence*. The Compact encourages us to set out with courage, at the risk of having to give up a certain comfort in our situation, in favor of a new commitment. It demands new postures and new choices for Catholic schools around the world. Through the presentation of this Compact, the Church asks Catholic schools to change their understanding of what it means to educate, and to enter into a vision of the world that goes beyond the classroom. That is to say, to move from a conception of the school confined to the classroom to that of a school that invites to build the village of education, beyond the protective walls of the classroom.

In his speech of October 15, 2020, Pope Francis mentioned seven commitments, which represent as many avenues offered to all actors concerned with education, and therefore also to Catholic schools. These commitments aim to promote education with respect for the person and for the creation. Formally, the OIEC has decided to commit to this Global Compact on Education alongside Pope Francis.

Your next World Congress will be in Marseille, France, in October 2022. What will be its themes?

The Congress represents a unique and rare moment to live and experience the universal Church around the issue of education. In New York in June 2019, we were more than 500 delegates from 87 countries, including 23 bishops from five continents. Bishop Zani, the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, represented the Holy Father. During this Congress, the delegates adopted nine commitments to be implemented after the Congress, stemming from the reflections of the Church and from a policy document published by the Congregation for Catholic Education.

The next Congress will take place in Marseille, France, in November 2022 (www.congresdeloiec2022.com). The theme will be "building the education village together". Marseille is a city that symbolizes the ideas set out in the framework of the Global Compact on Education. It is a cosmopolitan city turned towards the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. One can experience a culture of dialogue, migration, poverty, access to education for those in the peripheries, and the hope of an education village. Many Catholic schools in Marseille are already

experiencing this closely on the ground and are strongly committed to the vision proposed by Pope Francis. We will thus be able to benefit from their valuable educational expertise. In addition, this Congress will be prepared by all members of OIEC located around the Mediterranean. It will be a strong symbol of the education village that we want to promote through this Congress.



Picture: Participants listen to the Pope's message at the closing plenary session at the United Nations of the OIEC World Congress in New York in June 2019.

What are your hopes for Catholic education in the two years you have left as Secretary General of the OIEC?

Catholic education was born a long time ago, and for centuries it has continued its mission. It has always been supported by extraordinary people who were prophets of their time: José de Calasanz, Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, Anne-Marie Javouhey, Louise de Marillac, Don Bosco, Marcellin Champagnat, and so many others that we cannot mention here. Today, the Global Compact on Education highlights the commitment of these prophets of Catholic education, emphasizing the characteristics of our contemporary world and the educational emergencies arising from this world. The Compact is a gift given to us to continue the work accomplished, with an even greater proximity to the excluded and the poor of this world.

During my first term as Secretary General, I traveled around the world for four years to meet our members. I saw how fruitful Catholic education was, how much it contributed with all his might to the universal goal of achieving education for all, and how it served as a prophet, how engaged educational communities were, sometimes in conditions of extreme poverty. I remember a few visits that particularly moved me, including to schools for children with disabilities in the suburbs of Ouagadougou, or for young people from the streets in Medellin, as well as wonderful national meetings among others in Albania, Canada, Colombia, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, and Thailand. The Holy Spirit was blowing in those meetings and our bodies and souls felt it. To be part of this history and this commitment was an honor. It is a great joy to highlight this work and this

prophetic commitment, and to call on all of us to do more, in perfect harmony with the message of the Global Compact. This is a duty. I will end my mandate by organizing the Marseille Congress, during which I hope we will take a step further towards a culture of dialogue and the idea of the village of education for the glory of God and the salvation of men.

What is your personal journey? How did you get to this job?

I don't like to talk about myself. It is not too interesting for others. But my personal journey is first of all a journey dotted with calls to respond to missions that I had not planned. My education prepared me for a career in the international civil service, but it did not turn out the way I had imagined. I started as a Professor of economics and social sciences in a high school, then joined the Department of Human Rights at the Catholic University of Lyon, a Department that I later headed for a few years. I was an expert-consultant in human rights for the United Nations' Center for Human Rights, then took up management positions in schools before being called as Diocesan Director for Catholic education in the dioceses of Autun and Nevers, and finally became Director of the Catholic University Center of Burgundy in Dijon. I had been asked to represent OIEC with UNESCO and the

United Nations in Geneva, and therefore I was known by OIEC's members who came to me in 2015 to entrust me with an impossible task to carry out and for which no one else had volunteered. That was the task of getting OIEC out of a serious financial crisis which threatened its existence. I accepted to take up the challenge, carried by the faith and the confidence it gave me. I believe that we have been successful in stabilizing OIEC in recent years, and we are now stronger to help the organization carry out its mission in the years to come.

Could you share with our readers a more personal anecdote about your passions, your interests?

I have always loved photography because the image makes it possible to "immortalize" the expression of a feeling, a confidence, a look, a fleeting time. When I was Diocesan Director, I drove thousands of kilometers in the beautiful region of Burgundy, through all kinds of weathers and in all seasons. I always had my camera with me and I stopped frequently, even when I was late, to photograph a place, an atmosphere, a landscape... I kept thousands of photos, each one of which like the Shroud make me guess the face of God hidden in these landscapes, these lights, these colors, these faces, like so many confidences of God to man.



Visual: Two pictures by Philippe Richard during his travels.