

OCIC/Unda: the first international activities

SIGNIS is a completely new organization, born from the union of OCIC (International Catholic Organization for Cinema) and UNDA (International Catholic Association for Radio and Television). These two different organizations were created separately 75 years ago. It is one thing to create an organization but another to implement its activities on an international level. During the 1930s the two organizations began to define themselves through their international work.

In the '30s and early '40s perceptions of the influence of the media gradually developed: radio rapidly established itself across the globe, the advent of sound transformed the film industry to the advantage of a few important cultures. The emerging totalitarian regimes turned the new media into instruments of propaganda and values such as tolerance and respect for others were openly ridiculed. In 1934, Hitler declared that radio was a propaganda weapon. A year later, the Japanese Empire, at war with China and criticized throughout the world, began international radio broadcasts. Strangely, their broadcasts included religious programmes, including Catholic Masses! At that time the international broadcasting of Radio Moscow was considered by Catholics as satanic and anti-religious. Around 1938, democratic countries such as Great Britain began to see the need to transmit radio programmes internationally in languages other than English and the BBC began transmissions in foreign languages. A world war of ideas and opinions was taking place over the airwaves.

The Church saw the mass media as promoting secularization. The mass media entered every home. For the Church, radio, and later the fledgling medium of television, whether used by commercial interests or totalitarian regimes, were equally suspect. Catholics too would express their views and opinions on life and the world through the new media. In 1931 the BICR, (the International Bureau for Catholic Radio which became UNDA in 1945) representing Catholic broadcasters in Europe and North and South America, had an optimistic view of the development of radio. For the BICR, radio was important because it could transcend frontiers and bring peoples and cultures together. It could be a means of exchanging cultural values, a way of fostering mutual understanding. Radio was thought of as the means par excellence for reconciling peoples, fostering brotherhood among nations and promoting peace. These were ideas, which also could be found in the Vatican. A decade after the birth of radio, Pope Pius XI inaugurated Vatican Radio on February 12 1931. The primary purpose of Vatican Radio was to announce the Christian message freely and effectively and to bring the centre of the Catholic Church to the different parts of the world. In 1933, the President of OCIC, Abbé Brohée, remarked that in this case, unlike cinema, the Vatican hadn't waited 30 years to press the new technology into its service.

In 1935 the BICR noted with satisfaction that the new medium of radio was being used for spreading the Gospel. Helped by the Office for the Propagation of the Faith it wanted to use radio to reach missionaries in far off places. KRO (Catholic Radio Broadcasting) in the Netherlands, led by the Dominican John Dito, succeeded in transmitting programmes to missionaries and other listeners around the world. Their cultural programmes were so successful that one was even re-broadcast by the officially anti-religious Mexican state radio! A good number of the members of BICR, especially in Britain, produced educational

programmes. In the United States the talks and sermons broadcast by private Catholic radio stations (they were supported by the National Council of Catholic Men, affiliated to the National Catholic Welfare Conference) were very popular. In Latin America, the Nuncio in Venezuela started the first religious broadcast on Radio Caracas in 1935. In the second half of the 1930s many Catholic radio stations were broadcasting (by means of relays) their religious programmes across continents (e.g. Radio Cooperativa Vitalizia in Chile) or, in the case of KRO, across the world. In 1936 the Pope suggested to BCIR that they should extend their activities to television as this would become both a normal and splendid field for Catholic lay action. BCIR changed their name this year to BCIRT to reflect the addition of television. A year later, in 1937, television made its debut for a broad public at the Paris International Exhibition. It was the International Exposition of Arts and Techniques Applied to Modern Life." International political events also had their impact on BCIRT. In 1938, its German President, Mgr Marschall was forced to resign because of pressure from the Nazi regime. Two years later the Germans occupied Holland and the new President of BCIRT, John Dito, had to flee to London where he opened a temporary office.

With the arrival of sound in the movies (the "talkies"), certain Catholics believed that the moment was right to gain some control over the film world. One means of doing so was to acquire rights in the new patents for sound films. In 1932 the Eidophone Company was established in the Netherlands and supported by OCIC in order to produce films in accordance to Christian morality. But because of insufficient capital and a lack of management expertise the venture collapsed. Another venture of OCIC to produce European fiction films in order to influence the international market also failed. The organization eventually came to realize that the best way of influencing both believers and non-believers to appreciate morally acceptable films was not by developing its own productions or distribution networks, but by educating the public. This approach meant an engagement with the development of film criticism. It was an approach that was also in line with that expressed in the Encyclical *Vigilante Cura*, which, while warning against the dangers of film, had also spoken of its qualities and advantages. *Vigilante Cura* encouraged OCIC to bring together professionals in each country to share experiences and to extend the work of national Catholic film organizations.

In 1937 the leaders of OCIC (the president abbé Brohée and the secretary general Jean Bernard) travelled to Central Europe to take stock of the situation. They noted that in most countries there was a Catholic film commission and that its information about films was published in newspapers. However, the start of the Second World War brought these efforts to an end. Proposed international congresses of OCIC in Vienna (1938) and Warsaw (1939) were made impossible by the Anschluss (the union of Austria and Germany) and the German invasion of Poland.

In spite of these difficulties, OCIC had won the recognition of the international professional world. In 1934 it officially participated in the international congress of educational cinema in Rome and that year the Vatican officially recognized the work of the organization. A good number of its critics were also members of the International Federation of the Film Press (FIPRESCI). Then in 1935 the German Film Office invited OCIC for its international cinema congress in Berlin, where the OCIC Secretary General met the German minister of propaganda, Goebbels. However, in May 1940 the Nazis took over the office of OCIC in

Brussels. A year later the General Secretary, Jean Bernard, was sent as a prisoner to Dachau for several months. The Belgian Dominican priest Felix Morlion, a well known film critic, and associated with the general secretariat of OCIC, also had to flee Brussels. He arrived in the USA in 1941 where he made contacts with Catholics working in the field of cinema in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chili, Ecuador, Peru, Columbia and Canada. Working with them Morlion was one of the men who prepared the future of OCIC after the war.

Guido Convents