

ECHOES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY YEAR

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2016 has been marked by many intertwined relevant events for both religious life and the UISG: the closure of the Year of Consecrated Life, the Holy Year of Mercy, the Jubilee for the 50th Anniversary of UISG, the celebration of the XXth Plenary Assembly (Rome May 9-13, 2016) on the topic “*Weaving Global Solidarity for Life: That they may have life and have it to the full*”

In this issue of the Bulletin, the last for 2016, we wanted to gather some echoes of such events to allow the gift of grace we received to be consolidated in our lives and accompany us along the path of faith which will be pursued in the coming years.

We open the Bulletin with the testimony that six young sisters presented at the UISG Plenary Assembly. The religious, coming from different countries, cultures and congregations, answered to the following question: “*What do I enjoy of my religious life today and thinking at the future ?*” It is interesting to extract from their answers, the motivations, expectations and hopes of young consecrated women for the present and future of consecrated life.

A unique moment in the Plenary was the Audience with Pope Francis in the Hall Paul VI, at the Vatican. A joyful and constructive dialogue. The text is herein published and our hearts are still filled with gratitude for the presence of the Holy Father among us.

It is once more Pope Francis, the central theme of the article by *Father Bruno Secondin* who masterly describes and refers to “*the Francis effect*”; the style, language, ecclesial project of this Pope “*with the outskirts in his heart*” is a constant source of surprise and opens up new horizons and frontiers to orient our mission as consecrated women.

At our Plenary Assembly we, as consecrated women, have jointly committed ourselves to weave a Global Solidarity for Life. Global solidarity implies also inter-congregational solidarity. It is what *Brother Paulo Dullius* describes in his enlightened article. The intercongregationality, concretely, is the alliance established between different congregations (which started since a few years), but also between congregations and lay people. The common mission is at the core of such alliance. The intercongregational dimension is primarily solidarity flowing into the mission.

Our life is a life given to follow Christ, to allow God's Kingdom to become our daily reality. But God's Kingdom is a hidden treasure, a seed that sprouts in the darkness of the earth... which can be seen with the eyes of the heart. In order to see God's Kingdom we need to educate our heart to prayer and silence. This is the theme of the article by *Father Carlos del Valle* who, wisely guides us into the depths of silence and of prayer, which together, create an *inhabited silence* in us, the deep interiority that allow us to enjoy a stronger communication with other human beings and with God.



TESTIMONY OF THE YOUNG SISTERS AT THE UISG PLENARY ASSEMBLY

This Bulletin issue contains the testimony that some young sisters have presented at the UISG Plenary Assembly (Rome, May 9-13, 2016).

The six young sisters, coming from different countries, cultures and congregations, answered to the following question: "What do I enjoy of my religious life today and thinking at the future ?"

It is interesting to grasp through their answers, the motivations, expectations and hopes of the young sisters for their current and future consecrated life.

What do I enjoy of my religious life today and thinking at the future?

Sr. Eulogia Quiruchi Negretty, MSCS

Sr. Eulogia is born in Bolivia and she is a Religious of the Catechist Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart founded on May 1, 1908 by Father Eustachio Montemurro. After completing her Postulancy and Novitiate in Brazil, she took her initial vows in 2010.

Original in Italian

It is with simplicity and gratitude that I would like to share with you a few aspects of my experience as consecrated woman. I would start by briefly describing my background; the beginning of my life as religious woman, as well as my motivations and expectations. Daily I ask the Lord to grant me the perseverance and ability to look at the future with hope, as the Pope is asking us.

I come from Bolivia, a multicultural country of South America. My home town boasts very special cultural features, among which a deep respect for our traditions and beliefs.

As religious, I must say, I have not yet had the grace to serve in my country. However, by answering to the call of God and traveling to another country such as Brazil, I acquired some experience which thanks to God's grace, taught me to look with faith at the reality of my country, where I started my religious life and at my current situation. The way in which God has oriented my life, made me aware of the mission of Congregations in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil and also Italy.

To start my religious experience in a country with a different culture from

mine was far from easy, but it taught me to understand, tackle, assess and be aware of a reality calling on us daily. For instance, it makes me think at our current struggles, crisis, suffering of people, the situation of refugees, people living in war theatres, the influence of mass media, technological developments... etc. All these factors affect every environment, because as St. Paul correctly asserts, we are the mystical body of Christ, therefore when a part of the body suffers, the entire body is affected.

In Bolivia the consequences of this situation are under everybody's eyes. On the one hand, there is a slow but steady loss and abandonment of Christian values. In addition, the governance system, does not encourage the mission of consecrated men and women. People living in rural areas, are more protected by these influences, and due to their culture – at least in Bolivia, a reality I am familiar with- they are often unable to imagine a different lifestyle other than marriage.

Notwithstanding, I understand that it is precisely due to these difficulties that our existence and essence are meaningful; since God bless us, we remained faithful to the mission that our all merciful and benevolent God entrusted us. On the contrary, such difficulties represent for us a challenge, an encouragement to identify new ways, more fit to meet any need.

The community of my religious family, located in one of the poorest small villages in Bolivia, succeeds in pursuing their mission with great faith and trust in God's Providence, trying to raise awareness about Christ's presence with many children, young people and families. It is with great patience and slowly, that my community welcomes all of them by sowing in their hearts the presence of God. Although, our work has implied and implies big sacrifices, it is precisely there that we were able to find a way to live our charism of love and reparation, as Catechist Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

I am aware that God is leading our history and He prepares us to cope in any situation. In Brazil, I had the grace to start my formation. During my stay there, many are the situations I could tell you about but I would like to share the grace I had to live with children and teenagers in a social community; it has been a very enriching and all-round practical experience

Sharing their pains, due to drugs, broken families and much more, forces us (like it or not) to open up and welcome them. I do not want to give the impression that our ministry comes before all the other aspects of our life as consecrated women, but I am convinced it is an important aspect, particularly for active religious communities. We are consecrated to God in order to be part of His mission, each one of us according to our own charism. Indeed, our missions survive underpinned by a life of prayer, otherwise our ministry would soon reveal the absence of God in our actions.

Thanks to my experiences with teenagers and young people, I understood that we are all searching for a meaning in our lives; we, religious women are

aware that following Jesus Christ is the true meaning of our lives. Young people too feel the need to find something true, genuine and consistent which gives sense to their life.

In conclusion, I found the courage and faith to answer to the Call through the concrete experiences both in my community and in my ministry. Being close to other people made me become more responsible, strengthened my feeling of belonging to my religious family and as I said earlier, at the core of all this lies a life of prayer, a dynamic of mutual prayer and trust. All this makes me think at the beginning of my path, still unaware, when I was attracted by the presence and witness of sisters who did not pretend to be perfect, but who were sincerely committed to be sincere, be very human and with a spiritual life.

Sr. Alberte Kabunda Lupisuku, Passionist

Sr. Alberte Kabunda Lupisuku of Mother Mary of Divine Hope, is a Passionist Sister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Africa). She is currently in Italy for her studies.

Original in French

Introduction: Good morning Reverend Mothers! I am Sister Alberte Kabunda Lupisuku of the Mother Mary of Divine Hope, a Passionist. I feel unworthy to address such a prominent Assembly. Indeed, my witness has nothing special and it will not teach you something new; on the contrary, I would enjoy listening at you and learning from your rich experiences. All I will try to tell you, is about my experience of loving Christ. My first encounters with Christ during my childhood left in my heart some fragmented and vague thoughts; later, during my teenage, I started to have a more personal relationship with Jesus and in my prayers I asked God to meet a sincere man, who would love me with all his heart and that I would love all my life. God heard my prayer and made me encounter Who is love, faithfulness and eternal life.

My religious vocation is a holy grace, it is a true mystery for me too and I could hardly say something in such a short time. However, the Scriptures speak the truth: « *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart* » (Jeremy 1, 4-5); in reading his Word I too was able to understand that the Lord had conceived and wanted me as I am today, « *a Passionist religious* ».

My crisis: after my vows in 2009, during my summer holidays at my parents' house, I came across my best friend from my childhood, Moseka. She invited me to her place, introduced me to her husband and their two lovely children, a boy and a girl. In seeing the plot well fenced, in order and secured, the level of well-being, the furniture in the house, the caring affection between the spouses; I suddenly felt poor and miserable; the happiness of my vows had

vanished. *I realized the seriousness of my vocation, the «yes» I had just pronounced to the Lord.* At lunch time, I managed to have the daughter eat her meal, while her mother was unable. The husband who had seen that happen, told me « you are so gifted to take care of other people's children! Which grace? But why did you make that choice? Wouldn't it be better to have your own family and to be happy? In addition, with your vow of obedience you are forced to follow the will of someone else. How will you manage? Are you satisfied with your life, are you happy?». When I returned home, my heart was in great pain; all those unsettling questions were roaming in my head; I was thinking to myself: «well, you too could have a girl like that one, a luxurious house, a wonderful man, so what lead you to make your choice, what were you missing?» Oh! I can tell you for sure, I had never felt such a deep pain before, the only thing left was to cry bitterly.

When holidays were over, I went back to my Community, but things were no longer going well, everything seemed negative; a true crisis. One day, I locked myself in my bedroom, I spoke to the Lord as if He were physically in front of me «Jesus, my Lord and Saviour; yes, I believe it and declare it; You are that boy who attracted me, charmed me and carried me away! And now, far from everything, like in a desert, You wish to abandon me? Tell me that You are not the Prince of all Princes, tell me that You are not the object of my love, tell me that You are not more faithful than fidelity itself! I beg You, help me, make me feel your strong presence and that nothing can apart me from You». I promiss, this is precisely where my struggle started; my faith steadily grew.

What attracts me, gives me joy and enthousiasm in our life is that our world is full of challenges. It is a world of seducing feelings, a material world promoting only material well-being, a world of technological progress influenced by media; a world clearly against vows. My *secret* is Christ. In earnest, I deeply believe in this biblical verse: *Gal 2, 20 «It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me».* Therefore, my joy and my enthousiasm are due to the fact that I know that a Prince loves me gratuitously; that I belong only and exclusively to Him; that I received from Him a missionary vocation which grants me a universal freedom; everything for Christ, at the complete service of my brothers and sisters in this world; I share my faith, my life with people of different countries and cultures I never thought of.

I am also happy of my religious life because it allows me to discover the presence of God, His help and will through his mediators i.e. my Superiors, sisters, friends and acquaintances.

Moreover, the daily renewal of my love, of my yes, my fidelity, my gratitude for the gift of life, of my vocation, of all He achieves in my life, nurture my happiness in this life.

How do I view the future of religious life: Jesus tells us «nobody comes to

the Father, except through me». Being a simple religious woman, I am not very concerned with the future since it belongs to the Lord! Consecrated life, the gift of charism, vocation, it is all decided by the Lord; the work of God is neverending, it has started with time and it will continue after the end of our time. I simply try to be available, to accept what is new, since God always chooses the right moment, to inspire his servants worthy of pursuing his mission and his divine will in the world, in the Church and above all in our Congregations. Personally, the future of religious life is and will remain being faithful to our vocation, to the call of Christ and to remain available to the Holy Spirit; because He will guide us and show us the Holy will.

For you leaders with your responsibilities, I can see that the question about the future can be one of your concerns in the light of the crisis of vocations, the decreasing demographics, aging of members, the need to close some communities, ect. However, be reassured, the work of God is endless! Trust in Him, He will act.

Conclusion: I am happy with my life, I believe in it. This is why my prayer for all consecrated women and servants of the Lord is always: *«My Lord don't allow anything to apart us from your merciful love, neither joy, nor suffering, neither service, nor humiliations, neither misunderstandings nor indifference, nor ingratitude, nor poverty or the wealth of this world»*. Thank you.

Sr. Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ

Sr. Juliet Mousseau is a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She studied the History of Theology at the University Saint Louis, specializing in the History of the Medieval Church. She received a doctorate in 2006 and taught at the University of St. Louis and the University of Dallas. She is Associate Professor of Church History at the Theological Aquinas Institute in St. Louis, Missouri.

Original in English

I am so honored to be here, and so happy to be witness to my hope and excitement in the present and future of religious life. Thank you for the opportunity!

I entered my congregation just seven years ago, at age 30. I never dreamed of becoming a sister, but after completing a doctoral program in theology, I began to feel myself pulled in that direction. My story is unique, like everyone else's, but the stories of younger sisters share some common elements. In the United States (and I suspect, elsewhere), many younger sisters come to religious life after being on their own and starting a career. Many of us did not know many (or even any) Sisters growing up. I knew two sisters who taught in my graduate school, but most of the religious I knew were men. Our culture has changed so much since the highest numbers of women religious entered congregations in the 1950s that it's hard to fathom how the stories of different generations differ.

Yet we all come with the desire for something more, and we all come knowing God has called us to be sisters and to live in a particular way. Most of the young sisters I know are drawn to community living, to common prayer, and many are on fire for social justice. It is this common core reality that gives me hope for the future: God calls us, and we answer with all our hearts. Though our numbers are decreasing, we are here, called by God to love and serve God's people.

When I was asked to speak as part of this panel, the topic of "global solidarity" and hope for the future of religious life spoke to me first of the areas where I have found companionship in religious life, both in my own congregation and among members of other religious orders. A second area where I find hope is in the nimble-ness or flexibility of smaller numbers, and in the freedom that comes from reducing our sponsorship of large institutions. And, finally, Pope Francis offers me a vision of what religious life should always be: a joyful and prophetic witness to the Spirit of God in the world. I will speak to each of these areas separately: companionship and collaboration; the flexibility of smaller congregations; and the vision of Pope Francis for religious life.

First, I find hope, excitement, and support in my companions on this journey. Because there was a gap between me and the last sister who entered before me, many of my peer relationships have come from other religious orders. One source of those friendships is "Giving Voice", an organization of younger women religious (under age 50) from a variety of apostolic congregations. "Giving Voice" began in the 1990s, from the grassroots, when younger sisters started to realize they needed a forum to share their thoughts on religious life. One of the difficulties of having fewer younger voices is that sometimes it feels like our voices are drowned out by the voices of our older sisters, which are so much more numerous. So a few sisters got together to share their experiences, and Giving Voice grew out of their gatherings.

Being part of "Giving Voice" has led me to some of my closest friendships in religious life, with women near my age who have had similar experiences of formation and intergenerational living. As a whole, "Giving Voice" represents the great diversity among young U.S. Catholics and sisters, including some sisters from Canada and Latin America. Though different, we are united in our common desire to live as God calls each of us and to minister in a way that contributes to the Kingdom of God, for which we long. We recognize in one another a common call, and yet we each hold our own charism so lovingly that we are able to value the charisms of one another as each contributes uniquely to the common whole.

In this context of young women religious, we collaborate and develop leadership skills together. On several occasions, I have worked with other sisters to design a retreat weekend. I am currently in the process of working with a Franciscan sister to bring together 14 women of different congregations,

ethnicities, and visions of religious life to collaborate on a book. Together, and with the financial support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, we will explore contemporary language for the life of apostolic women religious.

In addition to the companionship of "Giving Voice", I find hope in collaboration with other religious men and women and lay ministers. In my current ministry, I, a Sacred Heart sister, minister at a theology school run by Dominican friars, where the other faculty members, both men and women, are religious, diocesan clergy, and lay. Our students reflect the same diversity, united in the desire to serve the church. I have learned to adopt a Sacred Heart form of Dominican spirituality in order to teach here! This collaboration among charisms helps me understand who I am as a Religious of the Sacred Heart while at the same time offering opportunities to express Dominican gifts. I find myself combining the Sacred Heart focus on personal relationships with the Dominican view of contemplative study in the search for truth.

A second area where I find hope for the future of religious life is in the flexibility of smaller numbers and increasing detachment from large institutions. This is perhaps the hardest reality to articulate, because it is a hope mixed with deep sadness and grief. We are increasingly free of our institutions, which is both painful for the membership and also frees us from a material and financial burden that is no longer sustainable. In religious life, we are aging rapidly, the sisters who are vibrantly living in their 70s will all be retired. As our numbers decrease, I believe we will become more nimble, more able to let go of some of the properties that hold us and the institutions we can no longer staff. It will encourage us to seek out the gifts of the laity and of sisters of other congregations even more than we already do. It will mean we grieve a lot over the next years, as the sisters we love make their way to God's home. We need to take care of one another in this grief, especially our younger members who may not have the internal resources to face a level of grief that is not common among their lay peers.

This smaller size will mean we have to make deliberate decisions to live in community, and to come together in particular ways. I have such mixed feelings about this rapidly changing picture, as the "bubble" of sisters who entered in the 1950s and 60s comes to and beyond retirement age (even sister-retirement age!). We have the gift of their wisdom and the enthusiasm of their call to religious life. We benefit from the changes they lived through that enabled religious life to look different for a modern world. And as they leave us behind, we have the opportunity to stand on our own feet, supported by our traditions and our saints in heaven, engaging and shifting in the world as it constantly changes around us. I have no idea what the future will look like, but I have great hope that we will be both flexible enough and grounded enough in our tradition to answer the calls of the world faithfully.

Finally, I find hope in the person of Pope Francis. He calls us to be joyful,

to be on the peripheries, to be prophetic in how we live. This is the present and the future of religious life. Our world desperately needs the prophetic witness that religious life offers. As our world holds onto individualism, we live in communities of deep abiding connection. As the world around us succumbs to the commercialism that promotes unprecedented levels of consumption, we commit ourselves to voluntary poverty in solidarity with those who are genuinely poor. In a world that fears commitment and permanence, we make vows to God that place us in perpetual relationship with one another. As our world ignores the needs of people who are poor and of our environment in order to cater to the wealthy and powerful, we witness and advocate for a just relationship with the earth and with all peoples who live on it. Our world is increasingly secular, and we offer a different way of being we are out in the world, in touch with its needs, and yet also we share our faith in Jesus Christ and a deep relationship with God. We have something the world craves right now: purpose, connection, and unconditional love. While others may only feel emptiness, we offer depth of meaning and a life of integrity.

I do not see a crisis in vocations to religious life, and I don't view smaller numbers as a "problem." Yes, there are fewer women coming in our doors, but at the same time, we are here. We have chosen a path that is different from most of our peers, and we come to our congregations ready to pray together, to work hard and to minister in challenging situations. I admire the women who stand beside me in religious life today, and I love being able to collaborate with them in ministry, prayer, and conversation. The present is the future! We are here and we witness to the love that God has for the world.

Sr. Magdalena Winghofer, CJ

Sr. Magdalena Winghofer comes from Germany. In 2007 she entered the Congregation of Jesus, an Ignatian congregation with the Constitutions of Saint Ignatius, founded by Mary Ward in the early 17th century. Last year in September she could celebrate her final vows. She studied Theology and she is doing pastoral work on a parish level. There she is working especially with young people.

Original in German

Dear Sisters,

First of all a big thank for this generous invitation to come and address you. Thank you for your interest in the thoughts of a young Sister from Germany. *What attracts me to religious life, now and in the future?* My personal answer in just one sentence: what attracts me is *"The radical freedom to rely totally on God."*

I would like to answer the question by presenting three aspects, in view of what they can mean for our communities.

A first aspect: The liberation from circling around oneself.

What attracts me to the religious life is not something but someone. In the final analysis, I did not become a religious because I found religious life to be something attractive, but because I was attracted *by God*.

That may sound pious or self-evident, but I think it is not at all harmless, if we take it really seriously.

Then that means: God is the beginning and the enduring justification of religious life. It is up to God, whether and how religious life will be in the future, and we need not worry unduly about it.

Declining numbers of persons, who enter altering social contexts, shifting tasks can lead to the question regarding one's personal identity and future, or to also seek causes and culprits: oneself, today's society, and the young people of today.

In some places this kind of questioning may also be appropriate, but I believe it can also become a temptation. The temptation to be either pessimistically-depressive and give up, or to get desperately active. And in the process not to notice how our view has slowly changed direction and has become focused on ourselves: what matters then in *our* future, *our* survival, *our* identity, *our* actions, we revolve around ourselves.

But God is the Lord of our lives, that means we can be free from circling around ourselves and walk into the future very upright, confident and relaxed, even if we are no longer there.

A second aspect: The freedom to take risks.

I did not become a religious to have a comfortable and secure life. That I could have had. But it was not enough for me. It was not enough for me to live only for myself. In religious life it is absolutely essential for me to make myself available for a major project for the greatest project that there is: God's project.

Sometimes I hear people say when looking at an older Sister: we can longer expect this from her. I hope that such sentences are not once said about me as well. Because I want to be taken seriously in what I have promised, until the end of my life. For, I was indeed serious.

There are perhaps bold phrases, especially considering the fact that my Superior General hears them as well. But for me it belongs essentially to what attracts me to religious life: this enormous freedom, because I have handed over my whole life to God. Ultimately, I have nothing but Him, and that's why I cannot lose anything. This freedom, I think, is not only for me or us as individuals. It applies equally to our communities.

I dream that we, as Religious will in view of the future be braver, crazier, more willing to take risks. That we will place at risk our securities, also our financial ones, and our standing, also in the Church. It is not my intention to specifically destroy all this; but I do not want to see us being attached to it. What can happen to us? Perhaps we will lose our financial and other protections and

security. Maybe we will become really poor. Maybe we lose our social influence and status. Maybe we will come into conflict with the Church hierarchy. Maybe... Yes, and so what?

Who, if not we should have this freedom to really give up everything to serve God and God's people?

A third aspect: The freedom to be.

I am convinced that we, as women religious, have a lot to give to people and to the world. And indeed much more than all the countless services and the work we do. Otherwise we deprive the people of the most important thing: ourselves, our being and what we live as consecrated persons.

Maybe we ourselves do not appreciate it enough. Especially young people have taught me this: they do not need my doing, but my being, my being a Religious. This being has the message for them, that a meaningful and fulfilling life is possible. It shows that among all the myriad possibilities and uncertainties there is a life model, which has been tested and successfully lived for many centuries. It offers them the opportunity to address the questions about the meaning of life, of values and priorities. Above all, my being gives them a message about freedom: the value and the happiness of live do not depend on achievement, power, money, success, etc.

I believe: religious life *must* not be alternative; it is an alternative way of life. In different times and in different places, there are different aspects that interest and attract people. They mirror the situation and the plight of the people who live around us. In this way, the people "tell" us what they need from us.

In Germany, at the moment, for example, I am being asked a lot about community life. And I think it reflects the need and the yearning of our society. The question is whether it really exists and whether true community or communion can be achieved: to live together in a binding relationship. To truly share life and faith and to remain together though there are certain difficulties. We bear each other with mercy instead of allowing our relationships, to be determined by the pressure of perfectionism, too. I think it is our mandate to give an answer to this and to live the answer.

I dream that in view of the future, we ourselves find the freedom to believe: our being Religious is the most important service we can give. Therefore, we must not be attached to our works or certain activities. All we need is ourselves.

What attracts me to religious life, now and in the future?

It is the vision of walking into the future with light baggage:

- Free of all concerns for ourselves and our future.
- Bold and unperturbed and wholeheartedly committed.
- Witnessing through our being to the radical freedom, coming from relying entirely on God.

Sr. Marie Désirée Carvalho, SMR

Sr. Marie Désirée, from the Ivory Coast, is a religious of the Servants of Mary Reparatrix Congregation. She performs her ministry in Ivory Coast. At present, she is in Italy to attend formation in preparation for her final vows.

Original in French

I thank all those in charge of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) who invited me and encouraged me to share my simple opinion about my short experience of religious life

First of all, I would like to start with the concept of women and their role in our different African societies. Generally speaking, African women rank second after men, but in reality, they play a fundamental role which places them at a higher level. Women give life and accompany life till the end. From a religious standpoint (both traditional and Christian), we can affirm that women take part in the work of creation, associated with and chosen by traditional deities. Likewise, women were chosen by God to be the mother of human beings (as we read in the book of the Genesis) as well as the mother of God and of the entire humanity (as written in the Gospels).

Having said that, I am happy to be a woman and to be African. The meaning of my consecrated life derives from such a context where I am called to strengthen my role of woman for God, for my brothers and sisters, to give more generously the life I received and that I receive with increasing abundance.

Today, I am truly happy to belong to a greater family, the family of religious life, not only for my Congregation or for my own family, but for all the people I meet along my path, in the course of my life, people expecting to receive from me a sign of life.

I feel that the joy of religious life for me today, is like a two-sided word: *opening*, on the one side, to receive and to give while on the other side, to give and to receive. I received from God the gift of my Congregation and I am willing to give all I am and I have. In this same exercise, I continue to draw life I can give to others and to open up to others to receive from them.

I am happy today to consider my religious life as a «*gift*».

An ever more renewed and consolidated gift that I receive and offer just like the jug of the widow of Sarepta (1 Kings 17, 14). I view consecrated life as a well that never goes dry since it draws at the Source which will never dry.

Yes, religious life is a gift that we, African women, have received from our elderly Western Missionary sisters that I want to thank in this Meeting. During my vocational path, I received this gift from my elderly African sisters who

accompany my formation. I would like to sincerely thank my Congregation that has allowed me to rediscover and to embody the fundamental values of my culture through service, the consecration to the Holy Virgin, reparation and fraternal communion.

Religious life today, is going through a moment of crisis because it is part of a world in crisis. The crisis of our families in Africa is no longer due to an economic crisis but to the crisis of the same family as a value, increasingly fading in the education of our children, particularly in urban areas. In our youth ministry, we meet young people and children with living parents but who are not active in their children's life. Consequently, our religious life is called to become a new presence in the life of our families.

Religious life is a Word of God; it is the expression of the heart of God for humanity and my dream for Africa, where vocations flourish, is that we religious women should be formed to go beyond this lifestyle which has led to set up barriers in consecrated life. My desire is to have religious women approached by young people, by families in crisis, by those searching for God, by those desperate, but also by those convinced they are fulfilled and believe they don't need anyone.

At times, I am upset by the religious jargon «it has always been that way! It has always been done that way!» I feel it is like a barrier in contradiction with our consecration called to adapt to our ever changing world and used only as a show of strength.

For the future, I dream of a religious life open, available to be disturbed by men and women, in the image of God.

God calls religious women – today and tomorrow – to give life but we are unable to give life if we close our “womb” (allow me the expression) to others, if we refuse to multiply our talents God gave us to serve each other.

Our maternity and our fertility need to be open to a caring future for all the men and women, young people and children around us...

We normally enter religious life as adults, we are all able to give life, to grow a family but sometimes, our formation centres, our communities, seem to encourage us to return to be young girls! In the future, our evangelization should promote a greater sense of co-responsibility. We are women! We are mothers! Not children!

I would like to add, my dream is for a stronger inculturation of our charisms which need to be rooted in our African lifestyle, to make God better known to Africans, to become more *prophetic*. Although we must preserve the essence of our religious families, we should not be afraid to disrupt our routines, our daily lives and our community programs.

Thank you.

Growing Chinese Female Religious Congregations Now and in the Future

Sr. Teresa YU, MSCJ

Sr. Teresa YU is a Religious of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in the Diocese of Wenzhou, China. Her congregation, of diocesan right, has been established in 1991. Today they have 50 sisters, 4 novices and 2 postulantes. Sr. Teresa is vice superior general and responsible for the formation of the novices.

Original in Chinese

1. Fruits of growth

From sleeping to reviving, from sprouting to forming

In early 1980s, the Church in China had suffered a lot from religious persecution for about 30 years. Chinese Church began on top of a mount of miserable ruins and the difficult and hard work of reconstruction. As large number of evangelizers were urgent needed, a great number of female religious Congregations could be observed rising and rapidly growing. According to preliminary statistics, China has around 60 upground women religious Congregations with about 3000 sisters, and 30 underground Congregations with 2000 sisters. Almost half of the Congregations were founded before the liberation of China (1949), reviving between 1980s and 1990s. The rest of the Congregations was also established in this period. Now, almost every Diocese in China has woman religious Congregations. The largest number of Congregation members is about 300 sisters, and least one is less than 10 sisters. The largest Congregations are formed by about 300 Sisters. Some congregations have less than 10 sisters.

Gradually starting a way of wholeness formation

The formation of a congregation will safeguard a congregation's growth to maturity. Over the past decade, formation has undergone a great change: from ignorance of human nature and excessive devotion to spirituality, to understanding human nature and focusing on physical, psychological and spiritual integration. Sisters learned a lot from their valuable experience which is gained from their being hurt and healed, and they perceived the true meaning of growth. They began to pay more attention to human nature, realized the importance of mature personality, and have learned that formation should be based on human nature, which should be supported and protected, step by step, growing in an integrated manner, so as to achieve the goal of internalization of the values of the Gospel. Nowadays, almost every religious congregation is rising a physical-psychological-spiritual integration movement, participating in spiritual direction, integrating

courses, Tai Chi spiritual workshop, retreat, and training for formators etc. Religious sisters are aware of the importance of formation, and have already begun revising the formation programs and improving the constitutions of congregations.

Diversity in evangelization

Everyone knows that China today is not any more the same as before. Its economy has dramatically developed (has had an enormous development) which led to an excessive consumerist life style, with many side-effects, lack of the spiritual dimension, empty and lonely hearts, distorted values. To meet the needs of the present and discern the signs of the times, the Sisters adopted different types of evangelization and applied the traditional Church's approaches: Catechumenate, Sunday school, church music, Bible sharing, the teaching of catechism, etc. Some sisters take care for social services, going out of the Church to the society and helping the society to know the Church. Sisters are at the forefront of social charity service, setting up orphanages, nursing homes, hospice for mentally handicapped children, leprosy service station and centers for AIDS, etc. In addition, special services are designed for the needs of the today's society, such as marriage counseling, spiritual accompaniment, pastoral ministry in hospitals, family visits, etc. To listen and follow up the people who have suffered physically and spiritually is a very popular service and well received. When in this apostolate a smile appears and people regain the power of life, the Sisters feel like the Good Samaritan, instruments for healing people who suffer pain and pressure. Today more than half of sisters in China took part in a course of spiritual accompaniment. In recent years, the spirituality of Tai Chi is very common among the sisters. It is a method of prayer which combines psychology, spirituality of Catholic Church and the Chinese culture Tai Chi and Yin Yang. Thousands of sisters and priests have attended the training seminars, and they all have received great benefit. Retreat centers, spiritual centers, pastoral centers, youth training centers are particularly appreciated by priests, sisters and lay people. Many centers are searching for competent and qualified workers and they also provide training for them. They strongly expect that all of us contribute with our personal and material support, and give generously to help the Chinese Church in need.

Greater Awareness of Communion

In recent years, people's minds have gradually open, experiencing the importance of communion and development. Upground and underground communities in Chinese Church are in good harmony. Since the contacts between the Church in China and the Church abroad have become more frequent, sisters from both communities have often participated in various training courses and activities and their friendship is gradually increasing. Furthermore, both communities have their own Conference of Major Superiors, which organizes the activities each

year, provides a platform for communication, sharing resources, learning from each other. The harmonious development between them is evident to all of us. In addition, when priests and sisters finish their studies overseas and return home, their contacts also help to increase the understanding and communication between the priests and sisters of the two Chinese Churches. Also as the network media nowadays has developed rapidly spreading more and more information, interactive communication between people is no longer a difficult task. Therefore, as communications have increased, people have come to know each other better, misunderstandings have been gradually eliminated, trust has been gained, a bright future is just ahead. In addition the main issues, human communication, mutual respect, communion and love are improving day by day.

Increasing numbers in teachers and training institutions

Thanks to the support from overseas Church, when priests the sisters who have studied abroad return home, Chinese Church becomes more vital. Returned priests and sisters mostly serve in some important fields, like management, formation, teaching philosophy and theology in seminaries, setting up formation centers. Fortunately, Sisters have managed to break the stereotype that only priests and bishops are working, and they begin to teach, to set up formation centers, and they also go among people to gain a wider acceptance of the society.

2. Future Expectations

Vigorously strengthening formation

Formation is the key to the development of Church. People-oriented education is the essential work and mission of church, aiming to cultivate holistic, spiritual, intellectual, philosophy, theology and professional talents. Faced with the complexity and challenges of this era in China, formation remains a long and arduous task. Besides, our formation have many limitations, such as an improper use and distribution of talents and the loss of talents, which is indeed distressful and regretful. I think that the main direction of education in the future is how to effectively use the talents with the contribution of all. We know that Church in China is going through a particular time: the inefficiency of the leaders in exercising the power, the impact of globalization and secularization and the contemporary problem of “New Culture” in China. Formation is a crucial step to address these problems, because when the quality of people increases, problems will gradually be relieved and solved. Although we have already realized the importance of initial formation, formation of formators is the crux of the matter. As the Chinese proverb says: “A journey of thousand miles begins with single step”. In every field, the formation of a team of mature personalities, solid spirituality, excellent professional knowledge and competent formators should be the priority in the future.

Cooperation home and abroad

We should promote communication among religious congregations, enrich human resources, expand areas of cooperation, like formation, evangelization, charities, management, etc. Since the religious vocation is not ideal now, it would be good if different congregations join to start some formation courses together, so that they can gather resources and save teachers. If charity is done together, it's not only a benefit for the evangelization, but also a way to increase the influence in society. In some places where there are good conditions (in fact we find it hard to get good conditions), we can also send some sisters abroad to experience religious life in communities that have a similar charisma and experience the friendship and mutual help. Religious Congregations in China are very numerous but they are formed by a small number of sisters, all young and with a weak foundation; they are widely distributed and have a great potential for development. While religious congregations overseas have a long history, they are rich in resources, have a strong charisma and a great strength, but the members are older and have less vocations. If congregations home and abroad complement each other, it will not only benefit the work of evangelization, but it would be a great help for the universal Church.

The need for affirmation of religious congregations

Catholic religious congregations are a gift from Holy Spirit, aiming to serve universal Church. In China, most of the congregations are of diocesan right congregations, and there is a vague relationship between dioceses and communities, without a clear identity, which affects the normal management and financial operation of religious congregation. In addition, more than half of the congregations were erected after the liberation of China. Some have approved by their bishops in writing, while some have not, of course, and they did not receive the approval of the Holy See. They seem to be an unidentified group of cheap labor. When the relationship with diocese becomes tense, religious can also be dismissed. We are eager to affirm our identity as religious, sincerely hoping to be able to live the essence of consecrated life, in fidelity to Christ and faithfully serve the universal Church.

Our expectations are in need of the efforts of the Chinese Church. We have a strong need for the encouragement and support of the universal Church, which always worries the Chinese Church. Let us build and realize the “dream of Christ” and the “dream of China” together.



AUDIENCE OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS TO THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL

On Thursday, May 12, 2016, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, met in the Aula Paolo VI the participants to the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), held in Rome on the theme: “Weaving global solidarity for life” and planned at the closing of the Jubilee celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the UISG.

The Holy Father’s meeting with the Superior General - more than eight hundred, from all over the world - took place in the form of dialogue. Following is the transcript of the dialogue, published in the original version in Italian and in the English translation by the Bulletin of the Press Office of the Holy See, on May 13, 2016.

Original in Italian

Dialogue of the Holy Father

First question

For a better integration of women in the life of the Church

Pope Francis, you said that “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society... and in the Church”, and yet women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church, especially at the highest levels, and from preaching at the Eucharist. An important obstacle to the Church’s full embrace of “feminine genius” is the bond that decision-making processes and preaching both have with priestly ordination. Do you see a way of separating leadership roles and preaching at the Eucharist from ordination, so that our Church can be more open to receiving the genius of women in the very near future?

Pope Francis

We must distinguish between various things here. The question is linked to functionality, it is closely linked to functionality, while the role of women goes beyond this. But I will answer the question now, then let us speak... I have seen that there are other questions that go beyond this.

It is true that women are excluded from decision-making processes in

the Church: not excluded, but the presence of women is very weak there, in decision-making processes. We must move forward. For example – truly I see no difficulty – I believe that in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace the secretariat is managed by a woman religious. Another was proposed and I appointed her but she preferred not to accept as she had to go elsewhere to do other work in her congregation. We must move forward, because for many aspects of decision-making processes ordination is not necessary. It is not necessary. In the reform of the Apostolic Constitution Pastor Bonus, speaking of Dicasteries, when there is no jurisdiction deriving from ordination – that is, pastoral jurisdiction – it is not written that it can be a woman, I don't know about a head of a Dicastery, but... For example, for migrants: a woman could go to the Dicastery for Migrants. And when it is necessary – now that migrants fall under the jurisdiction of a Dicastery, it will be for the Prefect to give this permission. But ordinarily, in the execution of a decision-making process, this can be done. For me the process leading to decisions is very important: not only the execution, but also the development, and therefore that women, whether consecrated or lay, become part of the reflection process and part of the discussion. Because women look at life through their own eyes and we men are not able to look at life in this way. The way of viewing a problem, of seeing anything, is different for a woman compared to a man. They must be complementary, and in consultations it is important that there are women.

I experienced a problem in Buenos Aires: looking at it with the priests' council – therefore all men – it was well handled, but then looking at the matter with a group of religious and lay women brought great benefit, and this helped the decision by offering a complementary view. This is really necessary! And I think we must move forward on this; then the decision-making process can be examined.

There is also the problem of preaching at the Eucharistic Celebration. There is no problem for a woman – religious or lay – to preach in the Liturgy of the Word. There is no problem. But at the Eucharistic Celebration there is a liturgical-dogmatic problem, because it is one celebration – the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy, there is unity between them – and the one who presides over it is Jesus Christ. The priest or bishop who presides does so in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a theological-liturgical reality. In that situation, there being no women's ordination, they cannot preside. But it is possible to study and explain further what I have just said very quickly and rather simply.

With leadership, on the other hand, there is no problem: we must go forward in that area, prudently, but seeking solutions...

Now there are two temptations here, against which we must guard.

The first is feminism: the woman's role in the Church is not one of feminism; it is a right! It is a right as a baptised person, with the charisms and the gifts that the Spirit has given. We must not fall into feminism, because this would reduce a woman's importance. I do not see, at this moment, a great danger of this among women religious. I do not see that. Perhaps in the past, but in general it is not present.

The other danger, a very strong temptation I have spoken of several times, is clericalism. And this is very strong. Let us consider that today more than sixty percent of parishes – of dioceses I don't know, but only a little fewer – do not have a finance or a pastoral council. What does this mean? It means that the parish or diocese is led with a clerical spirit, by the priest alone, and that it does not implement synodality in the parish, in the diocese, which is not a novelty under this Pope. No! It is a matter of Canon Law: the parish priest is obliged to have a council of laypeople, for and with lay men, women and women religious for pastoral ministry and financial affairs. And they do not do this. This is the danger of clericalism in the Church today. We must go ahead and remove this danger, because the priest is a servant of the community, the bishop is a servant of the community, but he is not the head of a firm. No! This is important. In Latin America, for example, clericalism is very strong and pronounced. Laypeople do not know what to do, if they do not ask the priest. It is very strong. And for this reason, awareness of the laity's role has been very delayed. This is saved just a little through popular piety, since the protagonist here is the people, and the people have done things as they thought best. Priests have not taken much interest in this regard; some have not viewed this phenomenon of popular piety favourably. But clericalism is a negative attitude. And it requires complicity: it is something done by two parties, just as it takes two to dance the tango... That is: the priest wants to clericalize the layman, the laywoman, the man or woman religious, and the layperson asks to be clericalized, because it is easier that way. And this is odd. In Buenos Aires I experienced this on three or four occasions: a good priest came to me and said, "I have an excellent layman in my parish: he does this and that, he knows how to organise things, he gets things done; he is a man of real integrity... Shall we make him a deacon?" Or rather, shall we "clericalize" him? "No! Let him remain a layman. Don't make him a deacon". This is important. You have this experience that clericalism often hampers things from developing correctly.

I will ask – and perhaps I will get this to the President – the Congregation for Divine Worship to explain properly and in depth what I said rather briefly on preaching in the Eucharistic Celebration, as I do not have sufficient theology or clarity to explain it now. But we must distinguish clearly: preaching at a Liturgy of the Word is one thing, and this can be done; but the

Eucharistic Celebration is something else: here there is a different mystery. It is the mystery of Christ's presence, and the priest or the bishop celebrates in persona Christi.

For leadership it is clear... Yes, I think this could be my general answer to the first question. Let us have a look at the second question.

Second question

The role of consecrated women in the Church

Consecrated women already do much work with the poor and the marginalized, they teach catechism, they accompany the sick and the dying, they distribute Communion; in many countries they lead the communal prayers in the absence of a priest and in those circumstances they give a homily. In the Church there is the office of the permanent diaconate, but it is open only to men, married or not. What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons, as was the case in the primitive Church? Why not constitute an official commission to study the matter? Can you give us an example of where you see the possibility of better integration of women and consecrated women in the life of the Church?

Pope Francis

This question goes in the direction of “doing”: consecrated women already do much work with the poor, they do many things ... “doing”. And it touches on the problem of the permanent diaconate. Some might say that the “permanent deaconesses” in the life of the Church are mothers-in-law [laughter]. Indeed this existed in early times: there was a beginning... I remember that it was a theme which interested me considerably when I came to Rome for meetings, and I stayed at the Domus Paolo VI; there was a good Syrian theologian there, who had produced a critical edition and translation of the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian. One day I asked him about this, and he explained to me that in the early times of the Church there were some deaconesses. But what were these deaconesses? Were they ordained or not? The Council of Chalcedon (in 451) speaks about this, but it is somewhat unclear. What was the role of deaconesses in those times? It seems – I was told by this man, who is now dead but who was a good professor, wise and erudite – it seems that the role of the deaconesses was to help in the baptism of women, with their immersion; for the sake of decorum they baptized them; and also anointed the body of women, in baptism. And another curious fact: when there was a judgement on a marriage because a husband beat his wife and she went to the bishop to lay a complaint, deaconesses were responsible for inspecting the bruises left on the woman's body from her husband's blows, and for informing the bishop. This I remember. There are various publications on the diaconate in the Church, but it is not clear how it was in the past. I think I will ask the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to

refer me to some studies on this theme, because I have answered you only on the basis of what I heard from this priest, who was a learned and good researcher, on the permanent diaconate. In addition, I would like to constitute an official commission to study the question: I think it will be good for the Church to clarify this point; I agree, and I will speak [to the Congregation] in order to do something of this nature.

Then you say: “We agree with you, Holy Father, that you have on several occasions raised the issue of the need for a more incisive role for women in decision-making roles in the Church”. This is clear. “Can you give me an example of where you see the possibility of better integration of women and of consecrated women in the life of the Church?” I will say something afterwards, because I have seen that there is a general question. In the consultations of the Congregation for Religious, in the assemblies, women religious must be present: this is true. In consultations on so many problems which get presented, consecrated women must be present.

Another thing: improved integration. At the moment specific examples do not come to mind, but there is still what I said earlier: seeking out the judgement of consecrated women, because women see things with an originality different to that of men; and this is enriching, in consultation, and decision-making, and in practice.

This work that you carry out with the poor, the marginalized, teaching catechism, accompanying the sick and the dying, this is very “maternal” work, where the maternity of the Church is expressed the most. But there are men who do the same, and that’s fine: consecrated men, hospitaller orders... and that is important.

So then, with regard to the diaconate, yes, I think that it is useful to have a commission that clarifies this area properly, especially with regard to the early times of the Church.

With regard to improved integration, I repeat what I said earlier.

If there is something to needs to be explained in more detail, please ask me now: are there any further questions on what I have said, that may help me to think? Let’s go on.

Third Question

The role of the International Union of Superiors General

What role could the International Union of Superiors General play, in order to have a say in the thinking of the Church, a word that is listened to, given that it conveys the voices of 2,000 institutes of women religious? How is it possible that we are quite often forgotten and not included as participants, for example in the General Assembly of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and

*Societies of Apostolic Life [CICLSAL], where consecrated life is discussed?
Can the Church afford to continue speaking about us, instead of speaking with us?*

Pope Francis

Sister Teresina, have a little patience because it just came to mind what had escaped me regarding the other question, on “what women’s consecrated life can do”. It is a point which you must take up again, which the Church too must look at again. Your work, my work and the work of all of us, is one of service. Very often I find consecrated women who perform a labour of servitude and not of service. It is somewhat difficult to explain, because I would not like to consider concrete cases, which would not be good, since no one really knows the circumstances. Let us consider a parish priest, a priest who we could almost certainly imagine saying: “No, no, my presbytery is in the hands of two sisters” – “Are they the ones who run it?” – “Yes, yes!” – “What apostolate do they have: catechesis?” – “No, no, only that [running the house]!” No! This is servitude! Tell me, dear Parish Priest, are there no good women in the city, who need work? Take on one or two and let them do that service. Let these two sisters go to the schools, into the neighbourhoods, with the sick, with the poor. This is the criterion: a work that involves service and not servitude! When you Superiors are asked for something that is more servitude than service, have the courage to say ‘no’. This is a rather helpful point, because when a consecrated woman is asked to perform a work of servitude, the life and dignity of that woman are demeaned. Her vocation is service: service to the Church. But not servitude!

Now I’ll respond to Teresina: “What, in your opinion, is the place of women’s apostolic religious life within the Church? What would the Church be lacking if there were no longer women religious?” Mary would be missing on the day of Pentecost! There is no Church without Mary! There is no Pentecost without Mary! But Mary was there, even though she may not have spoken... I have said this, but I like to repeat it. The consecrated woman is an icon of the Church, an icon of Mary. The priest is not an icon of the Church; he is not an icon of Mary; he is an icon of the Apostles, of the disciples who were sent out to preach. But not of the Church or of Mary. When I say this I want to make you reflect on the fact that “she” the Church is feminine; the Church is woman: it is not “he” the Church, it is “she” the Church. But she is a woman married to Jesus Christ; she has her Bridegroom, who is Jesus Christ. And when a bishop is chosen for a diocese, the Bishop – in the name of Christ – marries that local Church. The Church is woman! And a woman’s consecration makes her the very icon of the Church and the icon of Our Lady. And this we men cannot do. This will help you to deepen, from this theological foundation, a great role in the Church. I hope this does

not elude you.

I find myself in complete agreement with the conclusion of the third question. The Church: the Church is you, is all of us. The hierarchy – let us say – of the Church must speak about you, but firstly and presently she must speak with you. This is certain. You must be present in the CICALSAL. Yes, yes! I will communicate this to the Prefect: you must be present in the Assembly! It is clear, because to speak about someone who is absent is not even evangelical: one must be able to hear, to listen to what is being thought, and then act together. I agree. I did not imagine such separation, honestly. Thank you for having said it so courageously and with that smile.

A light-hearted thought comes to mind: you said this with that smile, which in Piedmont is called the *mugna quacia* [with the smile of the miller's façade: an innocent expression]. Well done! Yes, you are right about this; I think it is easy to change. I shall speak about it with the Prefect. "But this General Assembly will not be speaking about sisters; it will be speaking about something else..." – "We need to hear the sisters because they have another way of looking at things". That is what I was saying before: it is important that you always be included... Thank you for the question.

Do I need to clarify this? Is something further needed? Is it clear?

Remember this carefully: what would the Church lack if women religious did not exist? Mary would be missing on the day of Pentecost. Women religious are the icon of the Church and of Mary.

The Church is feminine, the bride of Jesus Christ.

Fourth Question

The obstacles we encounter within the Church as consecrated women

Beloved Holy Father, many institutes are facing the challenge of innovating their way of life and their structures by revising their Constitutions. This is proving to be difficult as we find ourselves obstructed by Canon Law. Do you foresee any changes to Canon Law in order facilitate this process?

Moreover, young people today have difficulty thinking about a permanent commitment, be it in marriage or religious life. Can we be open somehow to temporary commitments?

And another aspect: in carrying out our ministry in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, we are often mistaken for being social activists or as if we were taking political positions. Some ecclesial authorities would prefer that we rather be mystics and less apostolic. What value ought certain sectors of the Church hierarchy give to the apostolic consecrated life and to women in particular?

Pope Francis

Firstly, the changes that need to happen in order to take on new challenges: you spoke about innovation, innovation in the positive sense if I understood correctly, new things to come. In this the Church is an expert, for she has had to change so very, very much throughout history. Yet in every change discernment is needed, and discernment cannot be accomplished without prayer. How does discernment happen? Prayer, dialogue, then shared discernment. One must ask for the gift of discernment, to know how to discern. For example, a businessman has to make changes in his business: he makes concrete assessments and what his conscience tells him to do, he does. In our lives another person plays a role: the Holy Spirit. In order to make a change we must evaluate all concrete circumstances; this is true. But in order to engage in discernment with the Holy Spirit what is needed is prayer, dialogue and shared discernment. In this area I believe that we – and by this I mean priests as well – are not well formed in the discernment of situations, and so we must try to experience those things and those people who can explain well to us how to discern: a good spiritual father who knows these things well and can explain them to us, which is not a simple “for or against”, or making a summary, and then progressing. No, it is something more than this. Every change which has to be done requires entering into this process of discernment. And this will give you greater freedom, more freedom! As for Canon Law, there is no problem. Canon Law in the last century was changed – if I am not mistaken – twice: in 1917 and then under Saint John Paul II. Small changes can be made, and are made. But these two changes were of the entire Code. The Code provides a disciplinary aid, an aid for the salvation of souls in all of this: it is the juridical aid of the Church in all processes, in so many things, but last century it was totally changed, re-done, twice.

And so, parts of it can be changed. Two months ago a request arrived asking for a canon to be changed; I don't remember the details. I studied it and the Secretary of State carried out the proper consultations and everyone was in agreement that yes, this must be changed for the greater good, and so it was changed. The Code is an instrument; this is very important. But I must insist: never make a change without a process of discernment – personal and communal. And this will give you freedom, for you place the Holy Spirit there in the midst of the change. This is what Saint Paul did, Saint Peter too, when he felt the Lord urging him to baptize the pagans. When we read the book of the Acts of the Apostles we wonder at so much change, so much change... it is the Spirit! This is striking: in the book of the Acts of the Apostles the protagonists are not just the Apostles, but also the Spirit. “The Spirit moved him to do that”; the Spirit said to Philip: “go here and there, find the minister

in charge of the treasury and baptize him”; “the Spirit acts”, the Spirit says: “no, do not come here” it is the Spirit. It is the Spirit who gave the Apostles the courage to make this revolutionary change to baptize the pagans without following Jewish catechesis or Jewish practice.

Of interest too is the fact that in the first chapters we find the letter which the Apostles sent to the pagan converts after the Council of Jerusalem. It tells of all that they did: “The Holy Spirit and us, we have decided this”. This is an example of their discernment. Every change, do it like this, with the Holy Spirit. That is: discernment, prayer and also concrete evaluation of situations.

And for the Code there is no problem; for it is an instrument.

Regarding the permanent commitment of young people: we live in a “culture of the ephemeral”. A bishop told me that some time ago a young university student came to him – he had finished university, 23 or 24 years old – and said to him: “I would like to become a priest, but only for ten years”. That is the culture of the ephemeral. With marriage cases it is the same thing. “I will marry you as long as love lasts, and then it’s ‘good-bye’”. But that is love taken in the hedonistic sense, in the sense of today’s culture. Obviously, these marriages are null; they are not valid. They have no awareness of the permanence of a commitment. Marriage is not like that. Read about the problem in the first chapters of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, and read about how to prepare for marriage. Someone said to me: “I don’t understand this: to become a priest you have to study, to prepare for eight years or so. And then, if it doesn’t go well, or if you fall in love with a pretty girl, the Church gives you a pass: go, get married, begin a new life. To get married – which is for life, which is “for” life – the preparation in many dioceses consists of three or four meetings... But this is not adequate! How can a parish priest attest that these two are prepared for marriage, in this culture of the provisional, with just four conversations? This is a very serious problem. In consecrated life, what has always struck me, in a positive way, is the intuition of Saint Vincent de Paul: he saw that the Sisters of Charity had such heavy work, so “dangerous”, on the front lines, that every year they had to renew their vows. Just for one year. But he did this not as an expression of the culture of the ephemeral, but of a charism: in order to give freedom. I think that temporary vows facilitate this in consecrated life. And, I don’t know, you can be the judges, but I would be in favour of prolonging temporary vows a little, because of this culture of the provisional that young people experience these days: it is a kind of prolonging the engagement before marriage! This is important.

[Now the Pope answers a part of the question that was written but not read]

Requests for money in our local Churches. The problem of money is a very serious problem, both in consecrated life and in the diocesan Church. We must never forget that the devil enters “through our pockets”: the pockets of the bishop and the pockets of the congregation. This touches on the problem of poverty, which I will speak about later. But greed for money is the first step towards corruption in a parish, in a diocese, in a congregation of consecrated life: it is the first step. I think that in this regard payment for the sacraments has taken place. Look, if someone asks you for this [payment], then report the incident. Salvation is free. God sent us this freely; salvation is like an “overflowing of gratuitousness”. Salvation doesn’t cost anything; sacraments don’t cost anything. Is this clear? I know, I have seen this kind of corruption in my life. I remember one case, when I had just been appointed bishop. I had the poorest area of Buenos Aires, divided into four vicariates. There were many migrants from American countries there, and often when they came to get married the parish priests would say, “These people have no baptism certificate”. And when they asked for them from their countries they were told – and I remember one case – “Yes, but first send a hundred dollars and then I will send it to you”.

I spoke with the Cardinal, and the Cardinal spoke with the Bishop of the place... But in the meantime people were able to marry without their baptism certificate, with an oath from their parents or godparents. This is paying, not only for the sacrament but also for certificates. I recall one time in Buenos Aires a young man came to ask for a nihil obstat to marry in another parish, a simple thing. The secretary told him: “Yes, if you come by tomorrow it will be here, and it will cost a certain price”, quite a sum. But that should be a service: it is a question of certifying and compiling data. And this man – he was a lawyer, young, good, very devout, a very good Catholic – he came to me and said, “Now what must I do?”. “Go tomorrow and say that you have sent the cheque to the Archbishop, and that the Archbishop will give her the cheque”. The trade in money.

But here we touch upon a serious problem, which is the problem of poverty. Let me say something to you: when a religious institute – and this applies in other situations too – when a religious institute feels that it is dying, feels that it no longer has the ability to attract new members, feels that perhaps the time for which the Lord had chosen that congregation has passed, there is the temptation to greed. Why? Because they think, “At least we have money for our old age”. This is serious. And what is the solution which the Church gives? To unite various institutes with similar charisms, and to carry on. But money is never, never a solution to spiritual problems. It is a necessary aid, but just that. Saint Ignatius said that poverty is the “mother” and “wall” of religious life. It enables us to grow in religious life

like a mother, and protects it. Decadence begins when poverty is lacking. I remember, in the other diocese, when a very important college of sisters had to renovate their house because it was old; it had to be done, and they did a good job. But at that time – I am talking about the years '93, '94 more or less – they said, “Let’s have all the comforts, a room with a private bathroom, and everything, and even a television...” In that college, which was so important, from 2 to 4 in the afternoon you could never find a sister in the college: they were all in their rooms watching a soap opera! Because there was a lack of poverty, and this leads to the comfortable life, to dreams... It is an example, maybe the only one in the world, but it helps us understand the danger of too much comfort, of a lack of poverty or a certain austerity.

[Another part of the question, not read but written]

“Women religious do not receive a stipend for their services, as priests do. How can we show an attractive face to our way of life? How can we find the financial resources necessary to fulfil our mission?”

Pope Francis

I will say two things to you. First: see what your charism is, the content of your charism – everyone has their own – and what the role of poverty is, because there are congregations which call for a very, very strict life of poverty; others less so, and both types are approved by the Church. Live poverty according to your charism. And then: save! It is prudent to have savings; it is prudent to have good administration, perhaps with some investment, that is prudent: for the houses of formation, to continue works for the poor, to manage schools for the poor, to continue apostolic works... A foundation for one’s own congregation: this is what must be done. And just as wealth can harm and corrupt a vocation, so can destitution. If poverty becomes destitution, this too causes harm. There one sees the spiritual prudence of the community in common discernment: the bursar informs, everyone speaks about whether it is too much or not. That is motherly prudence. But please, do not let yourselves be fooled by friends of the congregation, who then fleece you and take everything from you. I have seen so many cases, or others have told me about cases in which nuns have lost everything because they trusted someone or other, a “great friend of the congregation”! There are many cunning people, so many. Prudence means never consulting only one person: when you need something, consult various people, different ones. The administration of assets is a very serious responsibility, very serious, in consecrated life. If you do not have the means to live, tell the Bishop. Tell God: “Give us this day our daily bread”, the true bread. But speak with the Bishop, with the Superior General, with the Congregation for Religious about what is needed, because religious life is a path of poverty, but

it is not suicide! And this is healthy prudence. Is this clear?

And then, where there are conflicts over what the local Churches ask of you, you need to pray, to discern and to have the courage, when necessary, to say “no”; and to have the generosity, when necessary, to say “yes”. But you see how discernment is necessary in every case!

Question (resumed)

“While we carry out our ministry, we are in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, and are often mistakenly considered as social activists, or as if we were assuming political stances. Some Church authorities look on our ministry negatively, emphasizing that we should concentrate more on a kind of mystical life. In these circumstances, how can we live our prophetic vocation...?”

Answer (resumed)

Yes. All women religious, all consecrated women should live mystically, because yours is a marriage: your is a vocation of maternity; it is a vocation of acting on behalf of Mother Church and of Mother Mary. But those who tell you this, they think that being a mystic is being a mummy, always praying like that... No, no. You have to pray and to work according to your own charism, and when the charism leads you to work with refugees, to work with the poor, you should do it, and they will call you “communist”; that’s the least of what they will say about you. But you should do it. Because the charism leads you to this. In Argentina, I remember a sister, she was provincial of her congregation. A good woman, and she’s still working... she’s nearly my age, yes. And she works against those who traffic youngsters, who traffic people. I remember, under the military government in Argentina, they wanted to put her in jail, putting pressure on the Archbishop, putting pressure on the Provincial Superior, before she became provincial, “because this woman is a communist.” And this woman saved so many girls, so many girls! And yes, that’s the Cross. What did they say about Jesus? That he was Beelzebub, that he had the power of Beelzebub. Calumny: be prepared for it. If you do good, with prayer, before God, taking on all the consequences of your charism and you go forward, prepare yourselves for defamation and calumny, because the Lord chose this way for himself!

And we bishops must protect these women who are an icon of the Church, when they do difficult things, and are slandered and persecuted. To be persecuted is the last of the Beatitudes. The Lord said: “Blessed are you when you are persecuted, insulted”, and all of these things. But here the danger can be: “I get on with my thing”; no, no, listen now: when they persecute you – speak. With your community, with your superior, speak with everyone, ask for advice, discern: once again this word. And this sister of

whom I was speaking now, one day I found her crying, and she said, “Look at the letter I received from Rome – I won’t say from where – what must I do?” – “Are you a daughter of the Church?” “Yes!” – “Do you want to obey the Church?” – “Yes!” – “Answer that you will be obedient to the Church, then go to your superior, go to your community, go to your bishop – that was me – and the Church will tell you what to do. But not a letter that comes from 12,000 kilometres away”. Because someone close to the sister’s enemies had written, and she had been slandered. Be courageous, but with humility, discernment, prayer, dialogue.

Conclusion

“A word of encouragement for us leaders, who carry the weight of the day”.

Pope Francis

Do take a rest! Rest, because so many sicknesses come from a lack of healthy rest, rest in the family... This is important in order to carry the weight of the day.

You also mention here old and sick sisters. But these ones are the memory of the institute, these sisters are those who have sowed, who have worked, and now are paralyzed, or very sick, or left to one side. These sisters pray for the institute. This is very important, that they feel involved in praying for the Institute. These sisters also have very extensive experience: some have more, some have less. Listen to them! Go to them: “Tell me, sister, what do you think about this, about that?” Let them feel consulted, and from their wisdom will come good advice. Be sure of it.

This is what I have to tell you. I know that I always repeat myself and say the same things, but life is like that... I like hearing questions, because they make me think and I feel like a goalkeeper who stands there, waiting for the ball from wherever it comes... This is good, and you also do this in dialogue.

The things I have promised to do, I will do. And you pray for me; I will pray for you. Let us go forward. Our life is for the Lord, for the Church and for the people, who suffer greatly and need the caress of the Father, through you! Thank you.

I would like to suggest something: let us finish with the Mother. Each one of you, in your own language, pray the Hail Mary. I will pray it in Spanish.

Hail Mary...

Blessing

And pray for me, so that I may serve the Church well.



AN ACTIVE LOVE
FOR LIVING NEW HORIZONS.
POPE FRANCIS' LANGUAGE,
STYLES AND PROJECTS
FOR THE CHURCH

Fr. Bruno Secondin, O.Carm

Father Bruno Secondin is a Carmelite, he studied in Rome, in Germany and in Jerusalem. He is professor emeritus of Modern Spirituality and Fundamentals of Spiritual Life at the Pontifical Gregorian University, in Rome. He is the author of several publications on various themes of Spirituality and Lectio Divina.

On July 16, 2014, the Holy Father Francis appointed him as a consultor of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. From 22 to 27 February 2015 Father Bruno preached the spiritual exercises to the Pope and the Curia at the Divine Master House in Ariccia, on the theme: "Servants and prophets of the living God."

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Original in Italian

It is very difficult to interpret Pope Francis: he keeps on changing the guidelines. It seems that he has both lots of imagination in altering the structure of a sacralised ecclesiastic system, and is rich with creative passion in rebuilding the ecclesial identity starting from the Gospel.

He does not do this with theory, rather with a practical wisdom, prophetic gestures, and original choices, even through neologisms: situations, habits, terminology, practices once considered eternal, places and the pace – he changes everything without any problems. We know this well and every day we receive signals. Perhaps this is at the origin of the enthusiasm of the common people, who do not follow precise theological schemes, rather a particular instinct. They feel that Pope Francis has touched upon certain concerns and speaks a language that the heart was waiting for¹. We may describe him with the words he himself used regarding the mission of the Church: "God's leaven in the midst of humanity" (EG, n. 114).

Two years from his election (March 13, 2013), many people have proposed an interpretation of the "Pope Francis Phenomenon"². Already last year some had made an attempt to "decipher him" or "domesticate him"

according to the usual parameters. However, everyone realises that as soon as they have deciphered his ways with a valid explanation, new themes and events that change the entire situation come up. On the same day celebrating the second anniversary of his election, through the bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, he rendered obsolete the biographies of those who believed to have given a clear definition of him. He relaunched even further his ecclesiology and his reform of the pastoral aspect and spirituality in the Church.

Here are some examples. Just think of the way he called the Synod on the Family, to the ecclesial geography he followed in choosing the Cardinals, to the Jubilee of Mercy which will certainly not be centred around Rome, rather on the local churches, to the original way he celebrates Mass at Santa Marta (that has become an original source of information for journalists). Let's not forget the almost offensive freedom of speech used in addressing the Roman Curia and the clergy, to his telephone calls to anticlerical people, to his strong-arm policy against sexual abuse, to the self-definition in his message to the Expo of Milan: "the voice of the poor", in an assembly of "the powerful". And so on... This is truly an identity that is in progress, an open thought and a creative skill that leave us all astonished.

I. The Francis Effect

1. Unsuitable approaches

1. Not much is understood about Francis if one compares him to his predecessors: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It seems as though we are forcing the situation, yet however this is frequent. Of course he inherited church problems and sensitive issues that have been faced time and time again under the earlier Popes. John Paul II had characterised his pontificate with the fight against an oppressive Communism in the beginning, then he later emphasised the globalisation of the Church and the continental Synods. In the end his prolonged illness exalted the image of a suffering servant. However when he passed way, he left a Church that was excessively marked by a Movementism together with an identity within globalisation that was very fragile. The Curia had also seized excessive power. Benedict XVI, given that his nature and personality were very different from his predecessor, concentrated more on doctrine and the liturgy. He was very astounded by the downfall of the Christian civilisation and disheartened by the church scandals that exploded like an infected bomb. We may say that these two popes were the apotheosis of the 1900s, in its tragedies and its genius. The resignation of Benedict XVI brought an end to the Church of the 1900s.

Francis did not continue the fight against the dissolution of the "Christian" system, in order to recuperate an identity lived and set in rigid figures and

certain definitions. He chose the ethos of welcoming and of mercy - promoting a new sense of belonging and participation: starting with the paradigm of mercy, and giving particular emphasis on the joy of the Gospel. For him the Church can not be a small besieged city, a compact system of dogmas and regulations. Instead it is a home that welcomes, a network of friends, a field hospital, a people on a journey who live the ethos of hospitality, trusting dialogue, of differences that are accepted and respected (see the famous symbol of the polyhedron).

2. Francis lives his identity without the obsession of being “different”, measuring himself with the characteristics of those who preceded him. He has no inferiority complex or of dissimilarity: he is simply himself. He enjoys meeting with Benedict XVI – almost a “wise grandfather”, as he defined him – and, as a matter of fact, he asks for his advice, goes to visit him and invites him to the more important Church events. Francis also likes to refer to the figure of Pope Paul VI, especially to *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, one of the sources for his model of evangelisation³. There are no signals that demonstrate that he is worried about being compared to others: it is we who make comparisons, with the risk of manipulating his person with categories that are not for him.

Not even his popular option can be attributed to the great theological and pastoral current of the theology of liberation, so famous in Latin America, although there may be reciprocal contamination. Instead it seems as if he has assimilated the Argentinean current of the theology of the people, this “people” being intended not sociologically speaking as Marxist or populist and not even clericalist, rather as a collective ethos imbued with religiousness, devotion and transcendence⁴. The religiousness of the people is owing to an elevated value, and the task of theologians is to listen to their wisdom and shuddering. And Francis demonstrates it continuously in his speeches, in his gestures and in his recommendations to stay “among the people”. In the programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* he explicitly speaks of “keeping his ear to the people” (n. 154), of feeling the “the spiritual savour of being a people” (n. 268-274).

3. It is difficult to understand Francis when trying to give an evaluation of him in light of the European Church and ecclesiastical categories. However much he is of Italian origin (his family), and however much his studies were related to some European theological and cultural currents, he expresses himself in a completely different manner. All reference made to Guardini or to Dostoevskij, to Manzoni or others is confronted with his own cultural synthesis, typically connected to the Latin American ethos and even more specifically the Argentinean one. His theological approach emphasises the specific Latin American basis (i.e. popular religiousness, the people’s mysticism, meeting, compassion, the outskirts, the poor, the multi-cultural aspect, the megalopoli, etc.), which are not always interpreted in a correct manner in Europe. We are

too convinced that our theology is “the theology” par excellence. However this is not the situation today, if looked at from a Latin American point of view.

Now we can truly speak of “post-Colonial” theologies, and not only for Latin America, but also for Asia and Africa⁵. Francis represents this new description, which is not a by-product that is not very academic. He has other prolegomena and other priorities: those connected to emerging cultures, to the masses of those impoverished, to global corruption, violated traditions, to women and the poor, tribal conflicts, all sorts of dictatorships and to ethnic differences.

4. It is difficult to understand Francis if one reduces his style as pope and his Church concerns to the priorities of the reform of the Curia. Many have this “litmus test” in their heads to take stock of and predict his next moves. I believe that this criterion is completely wrong. The reform of the Curia is not a “priority” for him, even if he is well-aware that it is one of the tasks he must tackle. In fact he openly states that for him it is a heavy burden to imagine himself seated at a table. Many are on the look-out to sense and intercept the signals of the “reform of the Curia”. So they make a distorted reading, European-style, that does not fit him. Just as back then in Buenos Aires where few people were employed in the office, so he continues to feel that there is no need for all this grand apparatus, and he encourages a Church made up of people and not structures...

It is evident that Francis does not tolerate such a sick ecclesiastic introversion, and that he wants a “Church that comes out” from its obsessions, from its art of “watering down one’s faith in Jesus Christ” (his phrase was: no licuen la fé en Jesucristo) to then offer it in bloodless documents that are harmless and encyclopaedic. His communication, so original and direct, is the first revolution that he brought to the Curia: from the choice of the name Francis, to the informal greeting good evening (buona sera), from his request to be blessed by the crowds in the square, to his return home on the little bus with the other cardinals, from his black and deformed shoes, to the cross that he wears, and the Casa Santa Marta where he lives and so on...

Looking at the ecclesiastical structures and the hierarchies, at times he truly seems “one man alone in charge”. This is so because there are a number of bishops and priests – even some of the more authoritative collaborators closest to him – who struggle to follow him in his anticipations. Also, as regards his off-the-cuff “comments”, his spontaneous language, his direct approach towards people and issues - there are few who follow him. All the more they struggle to naturally put into practice his style and freedom: and this is certainly a problem that is obvious and from which stem doubts concerning the “resistance” that holds back innovative incentives⁶.

2. *Seeing from a point of view almost “from the ends of the earth”*

1. There is the impression that many observers of ecclesiastic matters and the tendencies underway in the Church are still incapable of understanding the specific nature of Pope Francis’ style. Many think of his open and liberal personality, that is not so formal, or his professional background: he has lots of experience in both the educational fields as well as that of being a leader, often even in complicated circumstances, such as under the military dictatorship in Argentina. His very age allowed him to participate in many important events of the Church, both in Latin America (I recall above all Aparecida 2007), as well as in Rome (the Synods of Bishops).

Now that he has become Pope many of his writings, which before had remained at the margins, have been translated – and therefore have become known, and that are instead illuminating in understanding the mens of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, before he became Pope Francis. Even so, because he himself loves to repeat his words in concepts and similarities. Therefore, that which seems improvised reveals itself instead to be the usual mature style and typical language. It is not simply the normal editorial emphasis that always takes place: each time someone becomes a Pope all that which he has written enters the editorial market. In the texts written before becoming pope, we find a richness of sensitivity and perspectives that demonstrate a line of continuity and a specificity that developed in Argentina and Latin America. It is a cultural lucidity - the theological, spiritual and pastoral quality of which - was unknown up until two years ago.

2. Others put emphasis on his Jesuit⁷ origins. He certainly does not hide it: “I feel like a Jesuit and I think like a Jesuit”, he has affirmed many times, even if it is no secret that there was some distress on behalf of his Argentinean brothers. He lives this identity profoundly and naturally: in moral care, in exercising discernment, in generative restlessness, in the serenity in the midst of ambiguity and in the natural ability to open oneself to novelties, with the so-called “open-mindedness” that is knowledge of orientation in complicated situations. Certainly his Jesuit matrix – and his belonging to the religious life in general – have enriched him with an ability to adapt and with an intuition that those who come from the diocesan clerical groups do not often have.

He whole-heartedly affirms that he is Jesuit and a religious. He does so not as to create a shield or to strengthen his function, rather as a beloved specificity, however placed at the service of the universal Church. And he repeats this without pretence. Yet, he does not omit repeating that it is an identity that also needs to be re-read continuously, and that the charism must be called upon and discussed within the new situations, and not to be fixed upon a parchment. He does not want to make himself a model for anyone to follow,

rather a co-protagonist with each person in an adventure that involves all, and requests everyone's co-responsibility and imagination. It is not a resource to be able to stand out, rather to put oneself at the disposal of others in a diversity that is open to communion, such as, precisely speaking, a polyhedron does.

This image of the polyhedron is his favourite, and he uses it in many situations: both for the variety of charisms of religious life, both to ask the movements to accept the originality of others, and in general as a journey of diversities that dialogue for all. Until now this image has remained as his own way to explain himself. It has not yet become a part of the categories of reference. It has not made a breakthrough. We are used to a more abstract and conceptual language, and certain comparisons do not work well with our mentalities that are more of concepts and ideas.

3. There are not many people who know how to recognise and underline that he knows how to express the Latin American ethos of faith and Church experience very well: situations in which spontaneity, the joy of believing, the sense of being a "people", the warm and direct relationships, the multiple cultural and religious souls of the population, long colonial humiliation, as well as the wave of migrations from Africa (forced) and from Europe (favoured) all stand out. There are many other characteristics that we all know.

For some of those connected to the Roman or European schemes, his extemporaneous remarks are considered folkloristic expressions, factors that are unrelated to a solemn perpetuity of a sort of a style that is sacred, theatrical and of the court, considered essential to the nature of the Holy See. And they continue to categorise him as a person unrelated to the classical "scheme" of the figure of Pope. This interpretation is the fruit of a dangerous distortion, and perhaps also of a prejudice that is hostile to the variety of models of a Church and pastoral procedures that are not "European".

He is the first truly postmodern Pope. The spontaneity in his relations and his demythicisation of making "a good impression", with which he protects (in the Curia and its surroundings) the sacredness of living ecclesiastically, emerges in a bewildering way. He often repeats that he is a sinner; he admits the fragility of his health and age, and spontaneously asks for forgiveness and prayers. His direct communication by phone or in the square, and all the rest, break the eternal symbolic order, in other words the sentimental, cultural, linguistic, intellectual and narrative world of the Church. Doing so, he is producing a new sense of belonging and participation: the Church is a hospitable home, not a customs office or museum of obsolete traditions. His words and gestures prefigure the Church as a "hospitable and trustworthy community", where one can find brothers and sisters, but also the loving empathy and care (just as in a field hospital).

4. He is instinctively bothered by all the "formalities" and conventionalism

of the Roman Curia. In Rome – but not only in Rome – the organisational superfluous elements and Baroque rituals of the Catholic Church have ended up substituting the vital sense of faith, becoming sacred in an excessive manner. From a disenchanting point of view – let's say with Francis, “from the outskirts” – the entire Vatican apparatus is truly a “court”, a jumble of obsolete rules and styles, equipped with a plush and coded language. What's more, it is protected by a Baroque ritual that immobilises emotions in an eternal void. Therefore, faith as an experience of life is an ideological presupposition on the background, in a hazy fog, in the rhythmic formulas, expressed in Latin of the court. Perhaps Francis was thinking of this when he spoke of “God spray”, of “arm-chair Christians”, of “spiritual worldliness”⁸ and certain illnesses of the Curia...

This is the starting point of many marvels, surprises and also resistance – besides the irony and talk – towards his way of living as a Pope in Rome. The crowds of believers, and also many other non-believers or those who belong to other religious traditions, have come to like him. This is because he is a man who became Pope and not a “character” made of plastic or of the theatre, a clothes hanger mannequin, dressed up in an absurd and even ridiculous manner. Even less so is he an angel-like ghost, surrounded by bloodless servants without emotions, protected by bodyguards with marvellous coloured clothes and armed with inoffensive halberds. He is a normal man, and at times he wants to remain so, even in the way he lives, dresses, in his relationships and emotions.

3. He is a happy man

1. It is precisely this resurrection of “humanity” full of warmth and emotions that has aroused fondness and expectations in the people. Many believe that through him faith is not an abstract formula, a protective suit; it is not a bookshelf, nor a long list of vetoes and warnings. Rather faith is freedom and spontaneity, a clear sky, but it is also eyes searching for others eyes that search and beg. It is a kiss to a child, a caress for the sick, giving the thumbs up to express joy and the will to make some noise that all leave the dismayed bodyguards as if embalmed. I am so struck to see that sharp-eyed and sulky look of the gendarmerie accompanying him. I see no difference with the other politicians surrounded by similar faces. I am very sorry about this similarity, which greatly contrasts the spontaneity of Francis, his big smile, and his happy excitement.

That which perhaps not everyone grasps in Pope Francis' style, which is certainly unusual, is that it is not an end in itself. It is not a theatrical skill. It is not shrewd communication. It is not a well-managed forced action. It is a passion for the Gospel almost incandescent, in the conviction that Jesus Christ “is for ever young and a constant source of newness” (EG, n. 11). This is the evident source of spirituality lived by him and by the Church desired by Pope Francis.

It is no surprise that there are also various feelings revolving around him, and it is not a problem. This has happened with every Pope, even the recent ones, as we all know. This is logical: there are personalities and cultures, different experiences and sensitiveness in the heart of each government. This is even more so in a body so complicated as is the Holy See. It is just that in this case, often the cognitive dissonance and that of perspective are reflected in various theological and ecclesiological systems. Hence, a certain hint of “supernatural” and “dogmatic” thinking prevents one from recognising moods and obsessions that are very human, very debatable. Everything is (and I would say even better, was) organised from top to bottom, in excess. Pope Francis described it in a sarcastically, yet very pertinent manner, in his famous speech on the fifteen “curial diseases”. That speech ruined the Christmas holidays of 2014 for many in the Vatican: and still today some still feel scorched by the descriptions that were so brutal and strong... But in that same speech there were then proposals as a therapy, which however no one remembers.

2. In this context it is logical that Pope Francis feels a bit uncomfortable. Yet he goes along his way. He speaks straightforwardly and even simplifies, at times even exaggerating, with his remarks “from the streets” (as some say). This mentality “distilled” by a thousand quibbles and the habit of hypocrisy and poisoning talks – typical of the environment that surrounds him, and he calls it the “terrorism of gossip” – is perhaps the most unbearable problem for him. However he also tolerates very little the “theological narcissism” and above all that which he calls “spiritual worldliness”. This expression was not made up here in Rome. He had already used it other times, even in his Buenos Aires. This must mean that the world is the same wherever you go, and certain tendencies toward hypocrisy are transmitted easily. Or perhaps they are also pathologies essential to the clerical world?

Even more evident, in my opinion, is the difference of *Weltanschauung*, of the cultural and human ethos, of an approach towards life and the religious meaning. For this reason some hateful critics continue to say that perhaps he is an excellent Archbishop of Buenos Aires, what a shame however that he is in Rome, and this is not taken into consideration... With his way of acting, speaking, calling, living, meeting, etc., he demonstrates not only that the western (and Roman) tradition is not a divine absolute, but there is the risk of transforming it into a Pharisaic framework that is also pagan and even atheist. Hence, he voluntarily mocks certain illusions - veiled with sacredness, certain habits used in the past, privileges of princes, networks and lobbies, just like the mania for order, efficiency, and falseness. Among the 15 “curial diseases” there is an irony that is not so hidden, which however reveals its refusal of that way of being and acting and all together a void ecclesiastical scenario...

3. His obsession of an “outward bound Church” is famous: he repeats this concept in every way and on every occasion possible. It is not an obsession with being extrovert, his need to flee solitude, advice to avoid a neurosis or to pass the time and be at the centre of attention. He is convinced that only by going outward, searching, stumbling, risking, and dialoguing may the Church be faithful to its identity. Already Charles the Great at the end of 500 A.D. warned that “Roma in se ipsa marcescit”: in other words, closed in its fears and its past glories Rome was rotting away.

All the more so does the Church: it does not exist for itself, to preserve itself from evil and risks. It gets involved to work, lift up the injured, listen to the worries, to stay together outside comfortable securities. In a word, it is the ferment and sign of a different world, of a future of proximity and hope, solidarity, freedom and fruitfulness. The exact opposite of the “educated arm-chair Christians, who do not know how to be children to a Church through the announcement and apostolic fervour”⁹.

He made a strategic choice: the concerns of the Church must not be those within itself, its organisation, its documents, its ceremonies, its structures. This risks becoming a “house of cards” without the “fragrance of the Gospel” (EG, n. 39). The only reason why the Church exists is to bring God’s embrace to humanity, especially that which suffers the most because it is excluded and is considered “waste”. It is among those abandoned, the poorest of the poor, that God awaits the disciples of His Son the Redeemer. Going forth as a total paradigm is reflected by the same going forth of God towards us, within our weaknesses and nights of confusion. This relational ad extra tension is part of the nature of the believer and belonging to the Church.

He also used a beautiful image to say this: “But ask yourselves this question: how often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God. In this “stepping out” it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Encounter with others.”¹⁰

4. *With the outskirts in his heart*

1. Besides all this, I would also like to add: his Latin American identity as a Christian and man of the Church, and now also his style of being “Pope”, above all as “Bishop of Rome”, is an original contribution. It is a contribution to the true universal aspect of the Church. It is a providential corrective measure to shake “European” situations that are stiffened and unjustly sacralised. He carries within his heart the joyful pleasure of being the people of God, not a man of the Palace, rather it is natural for him to remain in medio Ecclesiae. And he does this starting from the Gospel, from the original

mould. For him the fundamental issue is the Gospel to be incarnated with transparency and totality. The very choice of the name Francis is emblematic: it is an inheritance of the evangelical spirit and passion for the world, to be seen through the eyes of mercy and brotherhood. We may say that the very name he chose is an indication of the evangelical revolution the feel of which we had lost during the last centuries. He has restored the Church of its more intimate identity: Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. "Nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy" (MV, n. 10).

2. He is the first Pope who did not directly experience the Council. He is, however, a mature fruit of Vatican II. He acquired the method and has its charismatic spirit and breath of wind. And he feels in no way obliged to justify his hermeneutic choice in this regard. All of the sudden with Francis the Church tensions on the correct hermeneutics applicable to the Council – so evident with Benedict XVI, and sources of problematic conflicts during his pontificate – disappeared. He puts into the practice the multiple expressions of the Church outlined by Vatican II, without enforcing anyone in particular.

At most, the variety continues, starting however from the guiding paradigm which is that of the people of God, and from the guiding image of Christ, in other words the messianic prophet of the poor, knowing that such perspectives during the last decades have been a bit mortified and devitalised for various reasons. He does not like to waste time with issues concerning a more appropriate and binding hermeneutics. He leads them all back – the millenary heritage of the West and the freshness of the Churches in the southern part of the world, the quest for theologians by profession and the different religious traditions – to the close analysis with the Gospel, to the incarnation of the needs there expressed by Jesus. This is so because in the end this was also the first intention of Vatican II: then the diatribe on the hermeneutics mixed everything up.

He is convinced that among the people of believers – but also in the hearts of all honest people – there is an opening towards transcendence, an openness to what is true and what is good, a *sensus Dei et fidei*, that often the professionals of faith and ecclesiastic structures do not demonstrate (or perhaps he suspects do not possess at all?). If anything, they demonstrate it by mixing everything up with the systems of thought and the forms of precepts and vetoes, drawing away from the life of the people and religious ethos. His frequent critical points toward the theologians by profession, who have many degrees but perhaps little faith and pastoral meaning, demonstrate that they are not afraid to shake illusions and bare vanity. We can say that doing so, he pushes himself much further: he reopens the issue of God, and in an unusual manner: he does not accept that he is seized in the clergymen's temple, professional storytellers of an impassive God, within a society that seems now

to do without everything¹¹.

For this reason his Christian proposal puts values such as mercy, nearness, care, meeting, companionship, the journey, temporariness and empathy, at the centre, to indicate that we are in the fragility of all the viatores, just as all the peccatores. This is not only an alternative terminology that is almost ignored by the classic tutors of academic theology. It is instead a *forma ecclesiae* that faithfully follows the *forma Christi*. It is a *reformatio* that re-elaborates the conformation, according to the evangelical profile, for a new *transfiguratio Ecclesiae*. In the background it is easy to sense the paradigm of the spirituality of the Exercises of St. Ignatius.

3. As for the existential categories, he prefers to put the poor in first place, those who in society are at the margins, those rejected, excluded, the last, those refused, the victims, the lonely, the useless. This option is purely evangelical, and not sociological. For those coming from Latin America this is a choice that includes a great majority of the population. It is also the field of preferential evangelising exploration of the last decades, cadenced within the large Conference of the Assemblies of the CELAM. Pope Francis is a witness and coherent heirs to this: and for the most part recently, in particular for Aparecida (2007), he is also a recognised protagonist.

For the Western world, around the supremacy of the poor in the life of the Church, there are splendid memories and bloody scars, raw nerves, perverse Messianisms and also historical responsibilities, mechanisms of justification and worship systems. For this reason Pope Francis' gestures and terminology concerning the "poor" are read and interpreted in a totally different manner in the western culture (with its memories and tragedies), as well as in other emerging cultures. Then there are the conflicts, suspicion and accusations of Communism, Populism and Anti-liberalism. However, Francis gathers inspiration directly from the Gospel: there is an intrinsic bond, according to the Gospel, between the mission of Jesus – and therefore of the Church – and the preferential choice of the poor, and all their existential problems.

The reason is that this does not only deal with the material shortage of foodstuffs, money, employment, health, etc. This deals with the constellation of their dignity, for a life "worthy" of being lived, just as he well-emphasised in the recent message for the opening of the universal Expo of Milan (May 1, 2015). In that message he invited everyone not to reflect on "hunger" in theory and abstractly, rather to imagine the humiliated faces of the hungry, the exploited, the new slaves, the unemployed, who are therefore without dignity. And he asked "to globalise solidarity" to contrast the "globalisation of indifference" (of which he had spoken at Lampedusa).

4. The hermeneutic and heuristic criteria: to therefore use the word "outskirts" – and all the implications that go along with it, from a geographical,

existential, cultural and anthropological point of view – does not mean only making an appeal to a sociology of marginalisation. It means introducing a true and proper hermeneutic criterion, and even to a heuristic process. It means interpreting, but also “discovering” values which we need – “The poor are a treasure”¹² – and to begin a process of evangelical discernment. However it is also a call to take responsibility in the face of mechanisms that are financial, cultural, social, anthropological, etc., which such outskirts produce, or corrupt or conceal or exploit. We may say that even for Pope Francis, Jesus was a “marginal Hebrew” – as He is defined in the famous work by J.P. Meier¹³ – and even the Church must have this characteristic: putting itself on the “margins”, becoming itself by living in the geographical and existential geographical outskirts, and living a state of evangelical re-foundation and reinvention.

In massive globalisation that risks conforming everything to the criteria connected to the dominion of a few “bullies” over the weak, overshadowing not only the negative facts, but also the conscious of one’s own responsibility in front of them, he asks the Church to be capable of dislocating itself towards those places that his Master and Founder was fond of. Therefore, it demands not only seeing reality and judging it from the outskirts, where, after all, he believes situations are even better understood. Rather it means rebuilding its very identity as a Church of the Lord, courageously from this point: that is why he wants an outwards bound Church. The reason is not to just do something for these people, showing kindness towards those who are there, looking at those who suffer and are excluded with compassion and empathy. On the contrary: he wants to explore from this point the sense and language, the style and works, the utopias and faithfulness: in a word, for a true and original re-elaboration of the Church’s very identity. This is his true Copernican revolution: not a Church that also goes out to the outskirts, rather one that re-interprets itself, its identity and prophecy, from that situation, well-rooted within the grief and concerns of the poorest of the poor. This is where one starts anew, with radicalness.

His apostolic trips – from Lampedusa (July 8, 2013) onwards, almost always to the outskirts, limiting himself the least possible to institutional obligations and formalities – are proof that he does go the outskirts. He feels at home in this context. He snubs the triumphant dramatising scenes and honorific privileges¹⁴. Even when he is at home he is very discreet, and almost avoids all triumphalism, while giving great attention, inventing initiatives and creatively taking action to solve situations of pain and humiliation. He pays great attention and is very committed to the existential “outskirts” near his home as well.

We all see that he fulfils courageous and audacious actions in favour of the poor and homeless, even near his home. Just think of the concert held in the Vatican Museums or in the Audience Hall, where the front rows are for the

poor. Keep in mind the showers and barbers right behind the colonnade. Think of how he “changes plans” when he visits Roman parishes. Think of all the work that the Almoner carries out in the field, etc. These are not only news stories; they are actions that inspire another style, other priorities, and other ways of being true disciples of the Lord. This is where another Church is born: from modesty, not following a pattern or system, one that is creative and serving, not rhetorical, rather calling all to cooperate, from the bottom level. Those who resist him the most are precisely those of the ecclesiastical apparatus, who have a fixed image and tasks of the Church that suit them and their needs...

II. Applying this to us consecrated

The report by the General Master, Fr. Bruno Cadoré, OP – a general outline of which I received beforehand – will put into light the many things that instead I must here consider implicit. It is in light of the considerations that I have made up until this point, and without intruding upon the Fr. Cadoré’s territory, that I would like to say something regarding the repercussions that this Pope Francis Phenomenon has had on consecrated life.

1. Just like the hunchbacked woman: I would like to begin by citing a small icon of the Bible: the healing of the hunchbacked woman, in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Lk 13:10-17). We all know this episode that provokes exultation among the crowd and irritates the leader of the synagogue, who considered it to be a disturbance of the sacredness of the Sabbath. Cardinal Bergoglio quoted this episode precisely during the preparatory assemblies before the Conclave: “When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referent and then she gets sick, just as the hunchbacked woman mentioned in the Gospel of Luke... The self-referent Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him come out”. He was speaking for the entire Church; however I perceived that it pertained to the consecrated life as well. It reminds me of the situation of consecrated life over the last few decades.

Consecrated life has been excluded from the continental Synods and those based on specific themes, already weighed down by its lack of strength and crisis in forming new projects. However, within this mechanism consecrated life has continued its service. It faced humiliation being almost completely ignored. It was made invisible and put *sub tutela*, in order to favour instead the leading role of other rampant groups, while being accused of allowing itself to become more bourgeois. It has also been gratuitously criticised as being superfluous and dying out. Instead, now with Francis it is called to take a new spot on the forefront, ripped from its marginal and invisible role, to participate in a new *forma Ecclesiae*, with prophetic courage. It is looked upon with joy and love, despite the efforts and concern for the uncertain future of many

initiatives. It is no longer a sort of historical find in a museum, rather it is invited to primerear, to take the initiative, to stand tall with all its originality, to “wake up the world”, to live the megalopoli with all their ambiguous aspects, complex situations and wide-ranging challenges.

We may say that winter has passed: but in order for the new spring to bloom fresh resources are needed, “spring rain that waters the earth.” (cf. Hos 6:3). Pope Francis’ demands for a new period at the centre of attention, imply a serious and purifying return to the centrality of the sequela Christi, to an ecclesial sense no longer based on efficiency and playing the field, but rather on the empathic listening of new demands, within the new contexts, so as not to give old answers to questions that no one asks (cf. EG, n. 155). “Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems... You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love”¹⁵.

2. On the specific theme of the identity and mission of consecrated life in his strategic project of the Church, until now Pope Francis has not supplied an authentic systematic explanation. Of course we have a multitude of very interesting as well as wise affirmations, but they are always in progress. Meetings, chapters, dialogues, messages, celebrations, interviews, informal contacts, etc. have all been proposed in contexts that are for the most part occasional, and are therefore somewhat fragmentary¹⁶. We may also create a silloge: in other words a collection of many fragments, thus creating a complete organic framework of his suggestions. However, this would be an almost useless effort, quite far from his method, that instead shuns omnicomprehensive schemes, that puts everything on the same level.

We may truly say that, being the good Jesuit he is, he has and puts forward an open mindset, which is continuously adapted. It is not that he does not have a clear global vision – in truth it is understood that in context he does¹⁷ - but that which interests him is to focalise at the moment on some aspects, to figuratively emphasise them, with images that are a bit sharp, in order to leave further explanations open. He is not interested in fixing these thoughts, rather focalising on a situation or problem, using his imagination, calling in his good common sense and not caring about hypocrisy. It is also important to mention this frequent exclamation: “Ah! ...”. This calls everyone’s attention and gives his words a tone of interrogation, almost as if expecting a nod of the head...

Using this method this allows him to not feel bound to a theoretical compact and exhaustive thematisation, with a rigid contour that is not liquid. We Westerners usually bear in mind this need of having clear and distinct theories that raise concerns even for some Roman Dicasteries, who feel the mission of “giving theological structure to the papacy...” He prefers to leave

many issues unresolved: sometimes he doesn't even finish his sentences. This is perfectly coherent with an elaboration that develops, absorbs new points of emphasis and tends to become established, yet without ever being concluded or completed.

3. He tends to repeat original expressions, images and comparisons. For this reason, if one is familiar with his writings and speeches – of the past and of the present – there are many repetitions, not idle rather intense, of images and provocations. He has no difficulty in recalling – even word for word - the expressions he has already used, sometimes even adding some original touch.

I would just like to recall a concrete example. Speaking of charism, to the religious he had said that “charism should not be preserved like a bottle of distilled water, it should be made to bear fruit, courageously comparing it with current reality, with cultures, with history”¹⁸. Speaking again on the same theme at the audience with the Communion and Liberation movement, he added: “Thus the charism is not preserved in a bottle of distilled water! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean “to petrify it” — the devil is the one who “petrifies”, do not forget! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean to write it on a parchment and frame it.” (7 March 2015).

We may say that he has his own typical lexicon, or better his own heuristic art of transforming an idea into an image, with the tendency of a *mise en scène* of hypocrisy and obsessions of the Church, and of the religious in particular. He frequently follows a Jesuit pedagogical outline that resorts to argumentation (verbs, words, concepts, etc.) supported by three focus points. He himself at times smiles at how he sets everything in groups of three. When, however, he must make quick reference to practice – both in the positive and negative sense – he tends to accumulate a greater number of examples. Let me make an example, when citing *Evangelii Gaudium* he said: “... This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of a historical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom” (EG, n. 231). This is his style, an example with a cascading effect, which indicates a sharp and creative mind.

4. A sort of introduction interpreting his reading of consecrated life may be found in the intervention to the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1994, which Archbishop Bergoglio participated in as Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires¹⁹. In that intervention he clearly presented the issue of the “multiform aspect” of consecrated life: not so much in the variety of charisms and ideals, rather in the problems it must face. He mentioned three. The first was that of staying among the people of God, in a specific local Church, contributing with its own charism, to building up together in faith. The second problem is found

among the urgencies of the present and conserving its own identity: not isolationism, not becoming uniform, rather the presence of a clear identity. Indeed direct responsibility must also be taken, avoiding “an attitude of spiritual worldliness that destroys consecrated life”. The third problem to solve is that of an eschatological reserve: to delve into the historical reality without hypocrisy, but also being capable of spoiling it all in view of a completeness that is realised beyond time. It is a “world to come” not only of words, but also demonstrated, lived, prophetically challenging with the ability to communicate.

His intervention of the identity and struggles of consecrated life pronounced at the famous meeting with the Superiors General (29 November 2013)²⁰ are much more articulated and pertinent. Yet if they are re-read, as was done in his Letter Rejoice! (2014), many other parts of the speech – on the occasions of chapters, assemblies, commemorations, celebrations, groups, travels, visits, even only rare actions – it is possible to note that the themes increase, touching on many other aspects of consecrated life. Perhaps the most consistent and well-thought text is his Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People (21 November 2014) at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life. However, in this letter – as is his style – he does not propose a general theory on consecrated life, rather the dynamic orientations for the special Year that was just beginning. Within his specific guidelines, of course there were also themes that he wanted to privilege: indeed as dynamic paths, not abstract and cold affirmations in principle. It is the solicitation for an orthopraxis that is not mummified.

5. The focal points of the Apostolic Letter: in a brief summary, we must not only reveal the usual and well-known, more or less harmonic sub-division into three parts: 1) The objectives; 2) The expectations; 3) The future goals. Nevertheless, most of all one must underline the dynamic and project reading of the past periods, the constant and distinctive centrality of the sequela Christi, as the supreme law, a bearing witness to communion and an invitation to “join in finding new ways of living the Gospel and responding more effectively to the need for witness and proclamation” (I,3). One must also insist on the joy that stems from generously following Christ, the challenge to “never abandon prophecy” and “create ‘other areas’, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive (II,1-2). Opening one’s heart to new paths of inter-cultural experiences, solidarity, closeness, new use for large religious houses for works which better respond to the new needs of taking in and answering to the call for help of the poor (II,3-4).

The third part of the letter opens to a dialogue with all the components of the Church: the new forms of “charismatic families” extended also to lay people and between institutes and being included among the people of God and

agreeing on the heated theme of the family in this “synodal” period. The horizons are also opening up to other forms of fraternities and communities present in the non-Catholic churches and in all the great religious traditions (III,1-4). In this manner, Pope Francis believes that religious life in its various forms represents a precious resource for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and “can open new paths to relationships between peoples and cultures” (III,4). Finally, in addressing the Bishops, he repeats the phrase expressed in the Synod of 1994: “Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church”.

Therefore we are offered a peaceful representation of consecrated life and of its charismatic, ecclesiastic and prophetic identity. Without denying that it has fragile and unclear aspects, mentioned with the request to overcome them, Pope Francis underlines the original and fruitful contribution of a style of life that is evangelical, planned and prophetic. He does not believe that this life style has reached the end of its line – as it seems over these past years the Synods (as well as certain Roman Dicasteries) have tended to believe – rather it honestly recalls the risk of rendering the given frameworks sacred. We may say that it requires constantly applying a clear identity and explorative prophecy, to brilliantly combine *lumen et numen*. In other words, it means giving form to a transfigured existence where the radicalism of the Gospel of an authentic and not a plasticised sequela Christi glows (*lumen*), without deception. It also implies offering an epiphany of the mystery of transcendence (*numen*) that lives history and leads it to its future goal. This recalling of the future – the traditional eschatological perspective – is perhaps one of the grave deficiencies that weaken the entire planning of the Church today. Here there is room for a creativity that no one knows how to render fruitful. However, even reclaiming mercy as the central characteristic of the revelation and the Gospel needs new inventive, creativity of paths and styles. This is a great opportunity for historical charisms that have already been capable of realising works and styles around this value. Nevertheless, today it is necessary to re-elaborate everything with a new *parrhesia* and explorative creativity.

Take courage; get up! He is calling you!

I would like to conclude with a second icon that I shall take from the Gospel of Mark. It is the healing of the blind man of Jericho, Bartimaeus. Mark makes a colourful description (Mk 10: 46-52), better than the other Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mt 20:29-34; Lk 18:35-43). In this scene first of all there is a sort of aggressive dialogue: Bartimaeus lives on the outskirts of the city, he screams and begs for “pity”, the large crowd with the disciples scold him and tell him to be quiet. Then the situation is overturned: Jesus stops and wants to meet the blind man saying: “Call him!”. So the crowd changes its attitude and encourages

him: “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” Bartimaeus responds with three actions: he throws aside his cloak, springs up, and goes to Jesus. In the end there is a dialogue between Jesus and Bartimaeus: he asks to “see again”, Jesus responds that his courageous faith saved him. Then Bartimaeus who was healed follows Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

To me this seems a summary of what religious life has suffered and implored during these past years. It has been forced to live on the outskirts, just like the blind man, scolded and obligated to keep quiet for a long time, or accused of disturbing the “communion” and the peaceful management of the system. Consecrated life has lived surely unhappy times in which it was invisible. Now Francis wanted to understand the suffering, meet with the consecrated people, and appreciate their desire of a new era of healing and of following Christ. It is as if, he himself, Pope Francis, through the Year of Consecrated Life, has said: “Take courage, get up!” to all consecrated people. He has invited them to get up, throw aside their cloaks and guards, idleness and resistance, alibis and worldliness, in order to reciprocally gain understanding of the truth. It is also for a new freedom in following Christ, within a Church that at times risks becoming rigid in its sacralised self-referentiality.

Pope Francis commented upon this episode at Santa Marta last November, and he did so in his style. In fact, he insisted on the risk that the Church runs of fencing itself within itself, closing itself to the cry of the poor and drawing away from God Himself. He spoke of an “ecclesiastical microclimate”, of “small worlds” within which to enclose oneself, within the privileges, refusing to hear the cry from the outskirts, of the children, the marginalised... (17 November 2014).

Like Bartimaeus, even we must implore pity, but we must also have the courage to not fence ourselves within our “ecclesiastical circles”, in which everyone “babbles”, to shut ourselves within a scared and selfish sacredness. What’s more we must throw aside our cloaks, spring up to meet with our friend Jesus who is compassionate, not His ghost, not a convenient simulacrum. We should allow ourselves to be lead towards a new vision, in a dialogue with Him: once again finding the freedom to follow Him in a trustful intimacy, the joy of belonging once again, the creativity of a new proximity with all those who cry out and ask for pity. We too must become capable of pronouncing words of encouragement, to throw cloaks aside and demolish sacred illusions, to get back up on our feet and help one another to get back up on our feet. We must also follow the Master, with a bright and redeemed gaze and a bold and prophetic heart.

¹ A.M. VALLI, *L’alfabeto di Papa Francesco. Parole e gesti di un pontificato*, Ancora, Milan 2015.

² Only a few publications are cited: W. KASPER, *Papa Francesco. La rivoluzione della tenerezza e dell’amore*, Queriniana,

- Brescia 2015; R. LA VALLE, *Chi sono io, Francesco? Cronache di cose mai viste*, Ponte alle Grazie, Florence 2015; G. F. SVIDERCOSCHI, *Un Papa solo al comando e una Chiesa che a fatica lo segue*, Tau Editrice, Todi 2015; A. IVEREIGH, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2014; R. LUISE, *Con le periferie nel cuore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2014; M. POLITI, *Francesco tra i lupi. Il segreto di una rivoluzione*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2014.
- 3 Cf. the course for spiritual exercises he preached to the Spanish bishops (2006): PAPA FRANCESCO, *In Lui solo la speranza*, Jaca Book-LEV, Milan-Rome 2013.
- 4 The now-renowned reference is to the thought of some theologians such as Lucio Gera, Rafael Tello and Juan Carlos Scannone, Carlos M. Galli and others. Cf. for an early approach: C. SCANNONE, *Papa Francesco e la teologia del Popolo*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2014/I) 571-590 and *Il soggetto comunitario della spiritualità e della mistica popolari*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2015/I) 126-141.
- 5 Just read the booklet *Concilium 2/2013* dedicated to the “*Teologie postcoloniali*” (Post-colonial theologies).
- 6 G.F. SVIDERCOSCHI, *Un papa solo al comando e una Chiesa che a fatica lo segue*, Tau Editrice, Todi 2015.
- 7 V. V. ALBERTI, *Il Papa gesuita. “Pensiero incompleto”, laicità, libertà in Papa Francesco*, Mondadori, Milan 2015.
- 8 A nice comment applied to consecrated life in: L. GUCCINI, *Vita consacrata e mondanità spirituale. La Parola di Papa Francesco*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2015.
- 9 *Homily*, at Santa Marta: 16 May 2013.
- 10 This is the speech to the Ecclesial Movements, New Communities and Lay Associations on the Vigil of Pentecost, 18 May 2013.
- 11 Cf. R. LA VALLE, *Chi sono io, Francesco? Cronache di cose mai viste*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milan 2015.
- 12 “You are not a burden for us. You are the treasure without which our attempts to discover the Lord’s face are in vain”: video message to the participants of the evening “*Se non fosse per te*” [If it weren’t for you], in a play at the Brancaccio Theatre organised by the Caritas of the Diocese of Rome (28 April 2015).
- 13 This brings to mind the more than 3,000 pages of the 4 volumes by J.P. MEIER, *Un ebreo marginale. Ripensare il Gesù storico*, Queriniana, Brescia.
- 14 Cf. R. LUISE, *Con le periferie nel cuore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2014.
- 15 POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 21 November 2014, III,4.
- 16 His thoughts on the theme in the period during which he was provincial have been gathered in the book: PAPA FRANCESCO, *Nel cuore di ogni padre. Alle radici della mia spiritualità*, Milan, Rizzoli 2014. Great importance is also given to the summary of the long conversation held with the Superiors General (USG) on 29 November 2013: A. SPADARO, “*Wake up the world!*”. *Conversation with Pope Francis about the religious life*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2014/I), 3-17. The proposal for a transversal reading of his thoughts on the theme, expressed on various occasions, may also be the Letter: *Rejoice!* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, LEV, Vatican City, 2014.
- 17 As a matter of fact the project of the *Jubilee of Mercy* is an explosive element that forces one to rethink many of the previous understandings already proposed. For many it still represents yet another of the many “Holy Years”, although “extraordinary”. In truth it is a strategic choice for a new ecclesiological season: in the original intention it is a true ecclesiological “refoundation”: the bull *Misericordiae Vultus* emphasises it (cf. Nos. 10-12), even if it is not explicitly expressed. Here consecrated life could find its new place in the spotlight: no longer in its own works, and in competition with society, rather through Church *animation*, with generosity, contemplation and creativity.
- 18 POPE FRANCIS, *Message to the National Assembly of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors (CISM)*, Tivoli, 7 November 2014.
- 19 A detailed description may be found in a recent article by A. SPADARO, “*Uomini e donne che illuminano il futuro*”. *Sette sfide della vita consacrata secondo Papa Francesco*, in *Civ. Catt.*, 2015 II 153-155 [153-169].
- 20 Later summarised and published in the article by A. SPADARO, “*Wake up the world!*”, cited above.



INTERCONGREGATIONALITY. INTERCONGREGATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Br. Paulo Dullius, FSC

Brother Paul Dullius, Lasallian, is graduated in Philosophy and Theology. He holds a License and a Masters in Psychology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and he is Professor of Philosophical Anthropology at the Pontifical Salesian University, in Rome.

Original in Portuguese

The future of religious life will be more humble, without large institutions; more centered in God, much more spiritual; with more inner work; more missionary and, therefore, better prepared for the mission; more simple and simplified from an institutional point of view; more organized with new forms of extended communities; welcoming, center of spirituality and mission; that struck the society with its compassionate, calm, bright faces. (José Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes)

1. Context

It might seem that the intercongregationality¹ is something totally new in the Church and in Religious Life. The dynamics of life itself tends to recover the truth, the goodness and love. This dynamism is at the root of all human being and in structures. Although you can get away from this, the forces of good tend to spark creativity in order to find the meaning of life and mission. The discomfort due to evil is counterbalanced by the welfare and peace that come from good.

We are all witnesses of the rise of people and groups who, in the story, try to recover or to promote good, truth and love. An institute that originates from a positive motivations can, over time, lose this characteristic because its objective is moved on urgent issues and a structure is established that gradually moves away from the original motivation. This happens in every society. It begins with a positive optimism, with a ‘nascent state’ and, little by little, in it enter some negative aspects that can jeopardize the institution itself. We have several examples of this dynamic in the history of Israel, in

the Church, in the history of religious institutions in particular and also in religious life understood as the choice of a state of life.

Francesco Alberoni², explaining one of Max Weber's scheme, says that the movements, especially religious ones, go through three phases. Somehow intercongregationality could be framed in this dynamic, especially in its first stage. This, as a 'nascent state' was already present in the early Church and, in many ways, at the commencement of the Religious Congregations. The first step is characterized by a great joy because we have found what we were looking for. This joy turns into a kind of euphoria and enthusiasm, ignoring the differences, believing in the salvation of those who participate and condemning those who do not participate. In general, the realization that we are privileged leads us to identify an enemy that must be fought. In the Bible and Christianity, this enemy is the devil, the sin ... Then, the enemy has become the government, the rich, the exploiters, those in power. Subtly most congregations emphasize the good that they want to realize and magnify the enemy, evil. The equality among members leads to neglect the differences. The past evil is rejected and all is projected toward a better future.

In a second stage we find the institutionalization process. Some rules and a hierarchy are established. The people who belong are called 'brothers' and 'sisters' and there is an ethical behavior to distinguish those who belong to those who do not belong to the institution. "See how they love one another!" This means that the focus is no longer an emotion but other aspects, some of them very rational.

The third moment is the everyday life. In the everyday life some social and personal dynamics begin that can gradually move away from the initial prospects. When this daily life is prolonged in time, it is possible that the quality of the members shows characteristics that are more similar to the initial cause, because of a healthy freedom, or it can also distance itself from the original cause, generating a dialectical process of mutual reinforcement.

I believe that this stages of the nascent state, of the institutionalization and of the everyday life is a good key for the understanding and the comprehension of what is happening currently in the Church and in Religious Life. It also helps to situate ourselves better before the intercongregationality. When an institution – during the stage of daily life - is very far from the original causes, it can degenerate, lose its meaning and even die. Or it can go back to the sources, purify itself from false aspects and use creativity to increase the fidelity to the original cause. It can also, as a third alternative, make other choices that correspond better today to the original intention. The intercongregationality, as we shall see, rather corresponds to this third alternative. But, we also know of some reforms of religious life in general

and of congregations in particular. It is very rare, within the human dynamics, that an institution dies, even if we know many cases of death due to the quality of the members or to social changes. What you see today is the importance of the everyday life in most congregations, some of which have little capacity for a creative renewal or for different choices as manifestations of the fidelity to the founding charism.

Younger Congregations, with less history, can still maintain strong traces of the nascent state. Other, existing from a longer time, may be already gone through 'reforms' or still need some reforms today. This depends on the vision of religious life and its mission in the world as an expression of the Church and also depends on the social reality that requires other forms of presence.

In all these different situations, the key variable is not the new social reality or the new doctrine, the new challenges and calls, but it depends on the quality of the persons concerned. No dreams die, but the quality of people and their relationships can destroy dreams and initiatives.

2. Intercongregationality and sharing of the charism

From what has been said before, I think that the intercongregationality stands a bit as a 'nascent state' and as the overcoming of the 'negativity' of the daily life. As a nascent state, we can see a certain euphoria for the choice made, even scarcely considering its negative consequences. The everyday life must move away from 'historical deviations' that characterize many existing institutions, being a response to the actual evangelical needs and also a form of creative life of religious institutions. Various religious institutions offer very little as an alternative of life and undertake very little in the process of humanization of their members and of those who are marginalized. Some also maintain regressive and infantile traits.

The intercongregationality, concretely, is the alliance established between different congregations. This alliance places the common mission as a reference center. The same mission that originates from similar charisms, but also a joint action together with people in need, leaving the expression of their charism in the background, to ensure a full humanization of people. Congregational differences are set aside and a new way of being religious life today is undertaken. The charisms are seen as complementary to the mission of evangelization. A common characteristic is that of being led by the Holy Spirit.

There are several expressions of the intercongregationality. One of them is the sharing of the charism with the laity. The richness of the charism must be shared and laity benefit of the charism and collaborate so that it can be a healthy alternative for many other people. Another form of

intercongregationality is the union of similar charisms for a common cause. A third form is to decentralize the charisma to focus on the mission. For a long time the congregations withdrew on their charisma in order to develop its specificity in the Church. And as such, we cannot suddenly renounce to it. When the charism, as an expression of identity, is not strong enough, it tends to withdraw into itself. But, in this way, it can also lose its importance. In the mission of the intercongregationality the charisma must be well cared for, but not highlighted. What matters is the mission for people in need. From this comes a great feature of the current intercongregationality: the solidarity with all those who suffer and the call for integral human salvation. Intercongregationalità is, first of all, solidarity flowing in the mission. The intercongregationality goes beyond the vision of the charisma to take on the common cause of the Kingdom of God.

Intercongregationality is not the alliance itself, but the alliance that has a specific target: the poor. Associations of middle-class workers of various congregations are not officially integrated into the understanding of the inter-congregationality, even if they are good and praiseworthy. The reality of intercongregationality is not something new. Perhaps has not been given the right emphasis to the experiences of institutional intercongregationality. The Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Religious (CLAR) makes general and global decisions for the poor and needy on the theme “Listening to the cry of life” and tries to be present where life is threatened. From this originates a great ‘solidarity’. When life calls is not about a single aspect such as hunger, but it also concerns education, health, love and relationships, family, violence, economic resources, etc. Thus, the complexity of this reality requires more preparation and interdisciplinarity. The question of the ‘cry of life’ has been considered during the General Assembly and has become a challenge for religious life in Latin America. It gave birth to various initiatives that are giving a new face to the religious life. It is rather new and therefore difficult to evaluate precisely because of its short duration.

Something similar was introduced in the last two General Assemblies of the Conference of Religious of Brazil (CRB) and has thus become one of the priorities for the coming years, so to encourage the inter-congregationality as a form of institutional lightness. Starting from this priorities reflections, dialogues, proposals and concrete actions have been organized.

“We want to deepen the intercongregationality not because we’re getting older, decreasing in number or because we live the reality of the decline in vocations, but because we feel that the new scenarios and new concrete subjects require from us new answers and new presences” (Vera Lúcia Palermo). This phrase sums up the way of understanding and developing the inter-congregationality. We are all aware of the great changes that we

are going through, a change of paradigms. There are big discussions on the structures of social, ecclesial and religious life. We are also experiencing a major change in the understanding of authority. The growing awareness of human dignity, a better knowledge of the reality in many countries for what concerns the abuses related to poverty, gender, religion, socio-cultural, ethnic, age... increases the sensitivity of many people. Religious life - from a historical point of view - has always been sensitive to this situation. There are also the exhortations that Pope Francis on several occasions addressed to the Church in general and to religious life in particular about going out from the institutions to be an evangelical presence with the marginalized and the suffering. The Year of the Consecrated Life is a reinforcement for this new way of being religious life in the three well known aspects: “To look at the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, to look to the future with hope”.

This sensitivity means that you go more to the heart of the mission of religious life that consists in the process of humanization and in the following of Jesus Christ. The expression ‘Church outgoing’ helps to come into contact with very delicate and poor realities. To go where these people live means solidarity and facilitates the rise of intercongregationality as an actual form of the presence of religious life. It means, therefore, to follow Jesus Christ and to be his presence with the poor of our time.

3. Experiences already realized and experiences in progress

For some time, in different places, have been implemented experiences of inter-congregationality in Formation. Congregations want to offer the best conditions for a good formation and this means entering an intercongregational process that facilitates self-knowledge, knowledge of other people, other cultures, other genders and other charisms and increases the understanding of the Church, the kingdom of God, of charity and of many other realities. We all know the importance of the inter-postulate, inter-novitiate, inter-juniorate and other intercongregational activities.

The vision of the intercongregationality, as it is used by the CLAR and the CRB, refers not only to the formation field but to the alliance between the various congregations for a common mission. This may happen between various congregations of men and/or women. There is a great unity with the Church. Everything is an expression of the Church and converges on the Church. The gender and the charisma issues are not a determining variable, but rather a mission to be carried along with the most needy. There are inter-congregational experiences in Africa and Asia and there is the desire to continue on this way. A project for Lebanon and Jordan (Project Brothers) is implemented by the Marist Brothers and the La Salle Brothers. The cause of the Kingdom is placed in the foreground and no longer the charismatic project of each

congregation which, in the past, in some cases, took on the characteristics of a destructive competition, with no tolerance and mutual admiration. Today it is becoming clear that the first virtue is love, and this is transformed in care for others, especially the neediest.

The characteristics or trends of these new paths have some reference points: the priority of life on structures; the awareness of the action of the Holy Spirit; the prayer; the praise; the mercy; the importance of the mission as a characteristic feature of religious life; the solidarity; the sensitivity for the poor, especially for the new poor and the excluded from our society; the overcoming of standardized forms of religious life; the search for more flexible structures; the collaboration with various congregations living in common the various charisms in one community; the hospitality and the warmth of those who want to share their life; the conscience of faith through works; flexibility and openness to the will of God; the belief that the work is God's, that the Kingdom is God's and that is up to us to promote it. In some places it is beginning the possibility of collaboration with the laity as volunteers.

In Brazil, this alliance was also made between the CRB and the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). As an example of collaboration between the CRB and the CNBB we can cite a missionary project that started in East Timor 11 years ago. This project continues today in Haiti with the presence of various congregations. In the Amazon there are various experiences in Manaquiri, along the Solimoes and Negro rivers, and in the island of Marajó. One of the most important expressions of intercongregationality has been realized in the Amazon with the PESA (Project of Solidarity and Evangelization in the Amazon). This is an initiative of the CRB with the Congregations and Institutes of Apostolic Life that aims to animate, create, send and accompany religious life in intercongregational - and international - initiatives on several fronts among the most marginalized and less assisted populations the Amazon and in other places of frontier, especially with those people living along the waterways. This mission is always accomplished in communion with the local Church and its pastors. It is characterized by itinerant communities inspired by the itinerancy of Jesus Christ and of the early church as a way of carrying out the mission: Jesus was going through towns and villages announcing the Good News of the Kingdom of God, with the disciples and the women who followed him.

Thank to the generous response of Religious Institutes, the National CRB in the last three years has established tre intercongregational communities in the Amazon and has also favored the insertion of some congregations. It also helps and supports the integration of the Sisters in the Itinerant and Interinstitutional Équipe. Several projects have been implemented in the Diocese of Humaita, AM (Uruapiara, Manicoré), Manaus, AM, Roraima / RR. Certainly there are many other initiatives and projects that are not so well known but that

express this new way of being of the Religious Life. Young religious leave for Santarém to participate in the ‘Mission of Young Religious Life in the Amazon’ (from 30 November to 15 December) and in the Diocese of Borba, Parintins, Coari and Boa Vista; and in Obidos and Itaituba (from March 25 to April 5).

4. Motivation

The motivation expresses a deep and sincere desire to be a healing presence where ‘life calls’. This motivation arises from the interior of individuals and institutions who undertake the project and encourage others to participate. Many religious are sensitive to their Christian and religious commitment in favor of the most needy. Many institutions, within their limits and possibilities, want to accomplish something for the good of others, and especially for those most in need. The appeal of the last two Popes, especially Pope Francis, is an important motivation. Many Congregations try to discern how to be faithful to the Spirit in our days.

In some texts, among the motivation to participate in these missionaries projects, are mentioned ‘determined persons’, ie, persons who do not commit themselves to solve personal or institutional problems, persons with a great inner freedom, satisfied of their following of Jesus Christ in their state of life and committed for this intercongregational mission. ‘Determined persons’ can use the best of their energies for the cause of the Kingdom. Certainly this energy can ensure an evangelical effectiveness in the mission.

This is the more conscious, spiritual and, therefore, more positive aspect of motivation. But until now the unconscious motivation have not been sufficiently analyzed, so they need to be taken into consideration. They are not necessarily negative. They may result from an unified and integrated inner self and therefore they will further strengthen and consolidate the personal and institutional conscious evangelical options. There isn’t an unique and pure motivation. We act with all our being as we have developed it up to the present moment. We have to take into consideration the personal story to date, in its cultural content, in all its realizations, in the expression of the anthropological and phenomenological desires, in its deficiencies in the research for various kind of compensation. We have to rely on the search for self-esteem and self-respect as a deep desire that has an influence on the choices we make. Thus, both in the inter-congregational experiences and in other experiences, this deep personal reality, connected with self-esteem and self-respect, becomes conscious and unconscious motivational forces, especially in the medium and long term. In the long term it will lead to a consistency of individuals and groups.

The options cannot be depreciated by ambiguous motivation. We must purify the motivation so that actions can express the genuineness of the Gospel. It is always useful to consider from time to time the many motivations that may be present in the religious person who participate in these projects as well as those of the institutions that send and support.

5. Elements that facilitate the process and possible obstacles

We all hope that the experiences of intercongregationality are a good response to current needs, especially those of the poorest, where 'life calls'. Not all of us have the courage to make these choices. Not all of us were brought up in this perspective and not all of us have had this opportunity. The tendency to recline in comfort, to remain in the areas of comfort, in the individualism is now quite strong and is supported by the current reality of this 'liquid society' in its various expressions. This pragmatic model, contaminated by power as prestige, as influence and as possession can promote an authentic solidarity.

But this same society quickly leads to dehumanization and dissatisfaction. Peace and joy spring from the truth, from a fulfilled life, from a life sharing in the group, from a meaning for us and for others. In this sense, in the most extreme situations the Gospel has its place and the people who live it are admired, are subject to identification, indication and imitation.

Very often we speak of dreams. In fact, even before these disappeared there were dreams and failures. But are not the dreams that cause problems and discouragement. We need to know where we are going to move on with enthusiasm and hope. Difficulties can be in people and in structures that hide deep concerns that must be addressed with objectivity, in a multifactorial perspective. When people are not sufficiently pacified it's good to go back to their own history, to understand it, to reconcile with it, with the people and the culture, detached from wounds, resentments and frustrations. Reconciliation produces peace and transforms memory into a happy memory. This makes possible a life of hope and courage in the face of reality. Unless we form religious who are 'more human than human', young people who come to our Congregation will not find the space for dreaming and living their consecration and the dream will be a dream of a few instead of being the project of the Kingdom of God to which all are called.

Among the possible difficulties we can mention the lack of institutional support, personal wounds, social difficulties, the fragility of the people, the lack of consideration of the limitations and the difficulties of change. To think that the presence, the gratuity and the 'good intentions' are sufficient to change the reality, even using evangelical arguments, looks like a dream

of omnipotence. We cannot do everything, but we must do it well, and simply love what we are called to do. There is no proportion between our efforts and their result. It is God who makes the seed grow. We can decrease the evil, we can be a saving presence wherever we are. And this effort can be converted into a collective project, a project of the institution, and can be a project of the Kingdom of God that comes before the charisms that express and explicit it. The importance of following Jesus Christ goes hand in hand with the intercongregationality.

6. Prospect

What can we say of this inter-congregational solidarity? Certainly it is a challenge and a call to conversion. There is much suffering and people search for healing. To withdraw on our own charism, because of declining membership, a certain rigidity in the works and a scarce creativity, all this, while it is true, may become a threat to our continuity. The intercongregationality comes from a better understanding of the Gospel and of the current needs, as had happened at the origins of the congregations. Today, religious life depends greatly on the quality of relationships and not just by what we do. It is expected from religious people to be experts of communion. We must love if we want to heal.

The intercongregationality is connected to new and better ways of building relationships among the religious. And these healthy and salvific relationships have an impact on all human beings, especially on the most fragile and vulnerable. To live according to Jesus' way of life, to his way of thinking, living and acting in relation to people, overcoming the gender, age, race, culture has this effect ... Every human heart wants to be loved and be cared of. In this way God is recognized and the Kingdom of God becomes an important reference.

The older generations have lived with enthusiasm, creativity and confidence the proposals of Vatican II. The strength of the intercongregationality lies in this enthusiasm based on a good human structure, a solid spirituality and mysticism, a good scientific training, an intense community life, a radiant goodness, the decision for the prophetic mission. In the intercongregationality religious life becomes a sign of the new humanity, in the itinerancy of the formation, mission and fidelity.

¹ To write this presentation I used texts and reflections that have been offered to me from CLAR and CRB Editors. Those interested can consult them in the websites of CLAR and CRB.

² Francesco Alberoni, in some of his books, like "Genesis", "Friendship", "The Envious".



SILENCE LEADING TO PRAYER AND PRAYER FLOWING FROM SILENCE

Fr. Carlos del Valle, SVD

Father Carlos del Valle is a Missionary of the Divine Word. He is Doctor in Moral Theology and since 1983 he worked in Chili and was Editor of the 'Testimonio' Magazine. In June 2013 he was appointed Rector of Saint Peter College in Rome.

Original in Spanish

*The fruit of **Silence** is **Prayer***

*The fruit of prayer is **Faith***

*The fruit of faith is **Love***

*The fruit of love is **Service***

*The fruit of service is **Peace**. (Teresa of Calcutta)*

1. “Still tongue makes a wise head”

It is risky to analyse words, but interpreting silences is even more delicate. There are words that wound and silences which kill, but also silences which redeem and words which give life. There are empty and eloquent silences; tensed silences and productive silences. An evangelical silence: covers the defects of a brother under the veil of silence. There are words surfacing from the solitude of silence and of pain. A mature person who suffers is admired, respected and demands silence. Silence is the most wise and reasonable reaction to suffering, in front of victims. Pope Francis, speaking in the Philippines, declared: “When we are asked why children suffer; our answer is either silence or words resulting from tears”.

Conversation improves when interloped with short moments of silence, stimulating our talk. At times, we need a discrete silence. It should be broken only to improve silence. To be silent and to listen is the art of avoiding to show with words that we have nothing to say. We are silent when words are too limited and it is better to hug a friend after a long absence.

Silence... together with a peaceful night, the secret of a new natural spring, the marvel of an eagle flying, the surprise of a plant blossoming, the worm wrapped in silk which turns into a butterfly... In contact with nature, the silence of mountains, the vastness of the sea, the beauty of a starry sky, the variety and harmony of a landscape... All of these generate moments of peace and calm, a healthy attraction towards the mystery of life.

Addicted to asphalt, we forgot the sound of silence. Lives are hooked on work, performance, what is ephemeral and superficial... Too many words and too few silences; many oases and few deserts; too much exteriority and little interiority. Overwhelmed by a frantic pace, forcing us to do with no time left to be, to plunge into our vocation and to discover the best part we cannot let go. Just like Marta, maybe tempted to escape from what is essential, from the enriching silence where we encounter God Who sends us to meet our brothers. We enjoy a moment of calm, but the noise and frantic activity penetrate our hearts and minds. It is an exterior not an interior silence. Caught in so much noise, life runs through our fingers like a handful of water.

Silence is like a peaceful melody. It is a vitamin for the soul, a staircase of depths and a stronghold of maturity. A mirror reflecting the nakedness of soul and facing the challenges of life. It gives us a new opportunity to be; it opens the door to an attractive mystery which leads to the depths. A human being without moments of silence is like a daisy on a road. Silence is the lung for the soul and it has always something to tell us. It gives serenity, peace, calm which transform us. Our influential ideas are not the result of reflection; they grow in silence. In silence we are able to listen to our deepest impulses. Silence grows inside and finds a way to be echoed externally. It converts life into a gift for who is open to receive it. The greatest gift you can give to someone you love is time to speak or to remain silent. Silence too can be sharp, it can force someone to look at the mirror of his own life and reveal one's emptiness.

We need an inner silence stemming the flow of thoughts, images and feelings. Contemplation is a way to achieve this kind of silence. It is not a mental exercise like meditation about God. It is a mind and heart soothing exercise, to remove thoughts and feelings. During contemplation, one can progress going beyond thoughts, images, reasoning and reaches a deeper level of attention or a more intense perception, characterized by silence" (Thomas Merton). Our world's reality can be understood only through the dynamic of silence. It allows us to learn to listen from the masters – i.e. the weakest – the gestures of welcome, solidarity, sharing celebrations, silent opposition. Those who live closer to the needy are more exposed to blessing. Silence and solitude help us live our present time; often we tend to live in the past or thinking at the future.

2. To be what we are

Being a religious person consists in praying and loving. What we say and do in our mission must be confirmed by prayer and kindness. The time and intensity we devote to our contemplative prayer reflect how seriously we take God. Silence is the meter measuring the quality of consecrated life in a person. The healing grace of silence highlights the deep meaning of our Religious Life. Our individual transformation begins when we follow Christ all the way to the desert. It leads us to use a different communication channel, listening to silence, nurturing the specificity of our being. A religious person is a man of God. This identity needs to be cultivated, because what is not grown dries. Educate the hearing of the heart to listen to the echo of silence, as a language of God: the kingdom's rise is hidden: silence and poverty are hidden treasures: God's world is known through the heart.

3. Enter the healing grace of silence

Language lifts man above animals; silence lifts man above himself. Silence and its fruit, prayer, make us live through history as men and women of God. At dawn, Jesus goes to rest with the Father; He goes to live in the solitude of prayer and recover His forces. The more our life is active, the more we need silence and prayer. It restores strength and renews enthusiasm and common sense.

Entering into spaces of silence implies disconnecting from oneself, from our character, to discover the world and human beings, to feel the presence of God in what we are and what we live. Solitude and silence are the doorways towards a more human and authentic human life. Silence is the absence of ego. It doesn't allow to hide behind our role, our masks... to appear in front of others with what we do, usually shown as golden-coated activities. We actually end up by believing that we are what we do, cultivating our desire of being protagonists and convinced we are the saviours.

Jesus, after the multiplication of the loaves (success), in the solitude of prayer searches the will of the Father (John 6: 15). He lets go his ego. He refrains from the temptation of being made king. We persist ruminating our successes, instead of departing and searching through silence the will of the Father who liberates us from our ego. Question yourself if your successful human experiences, consolation through prayer... depart you from yourself to serve others or are instead egocentric experiences. There are two forms of solitude in single people: the person who lives isolated, self-centred, maniac, sad, and unable to help others. A second type is that of a person who is self-sufficient, inclined to gain insight, reach an inner silence which leads to God and to listen at the cries of brothers. Without this kind of solitude, we

are unable to understand who we are, where we are heading, what we want.

Today spirituality enhances our ability to be connected, to learn the meaning of life: learn to relate with oneself, others, creation, God. Such a relationship is only possible if one goes in depth. It is the prospect of contemplation which allows to see in depth. Contemplation is also the source of meaning for our Religious Life. We can experience the presence of God in our life only if we practice contemplation. It is only through contemplation that we can be a religious presence in our society.

The Pre-Council Religious Life was focussed on long prayers and rites. The Post-Council era, highlights the mission and commitment: “work is prayer” “to believe is to be committed”. We enjoyed a generation of extremely generous religious men and women committed to justice and human rights. However, the excess of activities overshadowed the importance of ‘being’ in Religious Life. Some fundamental dimensions are neglected such as: silence, prayer, contemplation, celebration of faith, witness of the Absolute.... Evangelical motivations suffer in generous compromises. The charismatic identity and the specific mission of Religious Life are undermined. As a consequence, our life loses meaning and flavour. Today Religious Life tries to recover its charismatic identity and its prophetic mission.

Our activity is reduced to mere activism which makes us religious people but not mystics; people who live of ideas and not of experiences; who can speak of God but not from God; practitioners of sacred life but not witnesses. It is an addiction which does not tolerate silence and contemplation. Activism is the supreme distraction. It distracts us from the awareness of ourselves, of reality and of God. To awaken others, to be aware requires a certain level of silence and solitude.

A desire of spirituality, a breeding ground for contemplation... The danger is to explore the theory, without becoming men and women of prayer. Who wants to lose weight, investigates all possible diets but without trying any. Today there is more dialogue, but without sharing the experience of God. A lot of activities but which are mere activism. A lot of different forms of prayer, but fewer men and women of God. Our vocation lacks the joy, it is like a virus devouring the disc drive of our spiritual life.

The world does not need us to be a labour force, an NGO providing free services, but a voice of the Spirit, a sign challenging the values linked to profit. It needs witnesses conveying the vigour of the Gospel, the desire of God for life in abundance. It is easier to provide buildings rather than places of conviviality and of listening: it is easier to create organizations and services rather than moments of encounter and of joint prayer. Looking attentively at reality, listening silently at the Word can transform Religious

Life in blessing. Prayer is the place where I rest my life, my desires and where the Word of God forges me. Whereas, if we are dispersed in many places, busy with many tasks: anxious, stressed, and divided, like Marta... In such an inner condition, prayer becomes an additional chore. Our blessing derives from our mission but it can also be the source of our temptations: we are entangled by mundane spirituality.

Both charismatic experience and prophetic mission are typical of Religious Life. A charismatic experience implies silence, to listen to the Word, practice discernment, look at reality from God's stand, be contemplative living in our reality. Silence, prayer, set us in a humble and open attitude towards the Spirit. A religious must practice both interior and exterior silence. Inhabited solitude, being able to reach the inmost self, requires practicing contemplation. Religious Life cannot accomplish its prophetic mission without developing its charismatic identity: practice silence and listen at the voice of God in life. Contemplate, an invitation to look in depth and admire life with pleasure.

Silence, inhabited solitude, profound interiority, allow for a more intense communication with human beings, with God. The early hermits in Egypt and Syria search for God in the desert. The first step is hesychia: the silence of the heart, calm, solitude, peace. The ideal is not an efficient action but consistency in life. Religious men and women are called to live consistently and in harmony. Mary of Bethany leads us in a silent corner of life and of the heart to welcome the Word. Living in harmony will become the unifying element of our fragmentation.

4. Silence... Musical solitude

“And the seventh day God rested” ... God's rest gave origin to silence. It is not a bell that isolates. It is a musical solitude, inhabited. Jesus' solitude is animated by many human cries, suffering, hopes. When we decide to retreat in silence, we do it to be closer to the brothers in our heart. God talks, and raises the voice, when encountering special people, in the pain of others and inside you, where you are alone with yourself.

The prayer of Jesus, in solitude and silence. “Very early in the morning... He went off to a solitary place where He prayed” (Mk 1:35). On one side he listens at the Father and on the other, he listens at the weak ones. He looks up at the Father while attending people. He prays while serving others, but He also retreats in solitude to pray. A solitary prayer, in the desert climate. His spirituality searches for moments of intimacy and dialogue with the Father, an accompanied solitude. A relationship implies to search for moments of encounter, solitude to be inhabited, dialogue to be listened and a silence to say something but without words, like lovers do. Silence fills gaps that words

cannot bridge. The same Gospel conveys very few words but many silences of Mary. Mary listens in the fecundity of silence: “She kept all these things and reflecting on them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). Before giving birth to the Word in her womb, she conceives it in her heart.

Religious Life is called to follow Jesus even in the desert. The path of Jesus cannot be followed without moments of silence and solitude. Geniuses and wise people of our world always experience moments of solitude. Religious Life must be open to listening. There are too many words and not enough silence to be able to clearly hear the Word. Jesus’ prayer is consistent. We pray to remain being what we are and doing what we want but we feel reassured because we speak to the Lord. But we speak without listening to Him. We listen to ourselves. Our interests lie between God and us. What we hear is more important than what we say. We transform “Speak Lord for your servant is listening” in “Listen, Lord for your servant is speaking”. Praying invites us to live and journey in history as men and women of God. The richness of prayer lies in the abundance of ideals, joys, wishes it seeds in those who practice it. Who prays can experience that it becomes a musical solitude full of tenderness when populated with names.

5. Let us learn to pray being in silence

In Taizé singing creates a prayer which reaches the deepest part of a human being and connects the prayer to the person who is reciting it. It generates a space of inhabited silence and the awareness of a vital protection. It also repositions the person where she/he is escaping from, its true deepest self. If work is prayer, in Religious Life “the first activity is prayer”. Do not fill the prayer with words and then rush out to do other activities. Prayer needs due experience just like prayer needs time. Allow time for God to let Him act on me, invade, guide, comfort, reassure me. To that end, it is necessary to create the atmosphere just like before a date. To remain silent before Him, with our lively faith and love, to join His plans for us. His desire is to transform you and me in a person very similar to his Son.

Prayer is not a technique; it is a grace. It challenges us to establish a personal relationship with the Lord, of trust, friendship and fidelity. It gifts us with an approach of listening, as disciples. Not everything can be considered a prayer, but we should instead learn to transform everything into a prayer. Otherwise, the message is impoverished; like a routine, it is not convincing. Prayer challenges our languages, words, signs. No Word is stronger, more clear, complete than the Word of life. Prayer guides us to discover the wise... aspects of anonymous people who silently move the world towards the Kingdom. Prayer challenges us in what is the underlying

motivation. We can use it as a ritual to protect us from threatening divine decisions or to ask God to materialize our dreams and needs. It is an encounter of friendship with Who we know loves us. An expert in prayer is necessarily expert in humanity, someone who knows to see, hear, be silent, speak, listen...

The encounter which Jesus transforms our lives, criteria, options, preferences; it guides us towards the Kingdom. Prayer makes us welcoming, compassionate and helpful. If we let us be immersed in Jesus' values, behaviours and love, we will witness its fruits. Through prayer, we discover the desire for God. It challenges us to go beyond our deficiencies and needs, to structure prayer more from the standpoint of desire rather than that of need. It is oriented towards the Kingdom, where our desires coincide with God's desire. Prayer is also a workshop to educate desire. We hunt for our treasure far from our reality. We are reluctant to believe that it is hidden in our deepest self. It is necessary to discover the paths towards our heart, without being caught in our individualism. Prayer requires an assessment but not a justification. It is free love.

6. Our mission: Convert silence into words

The quality of Religious Life is given by both the mission and its meaning. Normally the two go together, but occasionally, there is a mission gap or a lack of meaning due to the lack of mission. A life without a mission is a meaningless life. Praying is not a prayer without a soul. Faith and life are the soul for praying and turn it into prayer. The goal of practicing prayer is to find a meaning and a mission: to guess what God is asking us. In Moises, we can discover our prophetic word: He goes up the mountain to encounter God and descends to encounter people. He spends his life to connect God with his people.

At times we use the Gospel in a religious way (liturgy, Eucharist, prayer, theology...) but it is not a text written for a religious framework. Its purpose is to build new relationships among people and groups, what Jesus calls the 'Kingdom of God'. In our relationships there is an extremely eloquent silence. We gradually unveil the hidden treasury of silence, which highlights the vacuity of any verbal proselytism. A contemplative silence generates a silence for contemplation. It illuminates the profound meaning of eloquent realities. Silence is bound to the word; which is both its grave but also its matrix. A word expressed with love requires practicing silence.

In Incarnation, Silence becomes the Word. The Word respects silence, during the nine months of pregnancy and the thirty years of secluded life. There is so much to be said, but it chooses silence. God's silence speaks of

humility, patience, understanding and acceptance, mercy and destruction. It invites us to present ourselves before the holy power which dwells in our reality, with antennas to capture the messages of false silence in our daily ordinariness.

The specific word of Religious Life is silence and the word generated by silence. Religious men or women are people, touched by God and who convert silence into words, the human dimension into the holy one. This is done when their sacred cloister is the world. Their prayer is intermingled with suffering and with the life of people. Their money is for the poor. Their vows are lived in the streets, with is puzzling for some. This is the word which characterizes the identity and mission of Religious Life.

The silent witness feeds prayer, the dynamism of who is object of that Love and acts always with love and peace in his/her heart. Love asks us the following question ... “where is your brother?” Prayer exposes one to that question; it influences people to the eagerness of God for humanity. After the encounter with God we end a prayer, with a new sensitivity, greater vulnerability and solidarity, more able to understand and excuse, more willing to establish bonds and proximity, attracted towards low-end places. It is our word, a language of powerful signs spoken only by men and women friends of God. (Teresa of Avila)



*LIFE AT UISG...
CREATING GLOBAL SISTERHOOD*

From the desk of the Executive Secretary

The UISG Strategic Plan 2016-2019 is clearly outward looking. The new mission statement says the following:

As an International body rooted in the Christ, and representing Congregations of Women Religious throughout the world, UISG seeks to witness to and proclaim the identity of apostolic religious life in all of its diversity. Through weaving global solidarity and opening new frontiers we animate, support and stimulate leadership of religious to be a prophetic voice and witness in the Church and the world.

Among its many different goals, the Strategic Plan commits the UISG to extend its international networks and relationships, to work with Conferences of Religious and Bishops worldwide and to explore new ways partnerships and different ways of collaborating and communication. The focus is outwards and therefore the Executive Secretary and members of the Executive respond to opportunities which arise where relationships can be established or deepened, especially those which help to build global collaboration and partnership.

Therefore in late May shortly after the Assembly, the Executive Secretary, Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM travelled to Zambia to speak at an international meeting for formators organized by the Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the BVM. While in Zambia she was invited to speak to the Conference of Religious on the topic of Global Trends in Religious; she also made this same presentation to the Conference of Religious of Zimbabwe.

In June and September members of the coordinating team - Srs. Elisabetta Flick, SA and Sr. Carmen Bandeo, S.Sp.S. and Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM-travelled to Sicily to meet with the sisters who are participants in the Migrants Project. After more than six months the project was beginning to take shape, progress was evaluated and as a result a third group has recently been established at Caltanissetta. These sisters together with those based in Agrigento and Ramacca form one community. Now that the needs of the project have been clarified, the co-ordinating team will be in touch with congregations shortly looking for additional volunteers.

In May Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA (President) and Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM, attended a conference on Impact Investing, organized by Catholic Relief Services (CRS – USA) in conjunction with the Pontifical Commission for

Justice and Peace. It is clear that in the future Foundations and Charities will expect grant recipients to monitor the impact of grants received.

In August Sr. Pat attended the annual LCWR Assembly with Sr. Sally Hodgdon, CSJ (Vice President of UISG) while Sr. Veronica Openibo, SHCJ (UISG Board Member) met with members of the Nigerian Conference of Religious while visiting Nigeria.

In September Sr. Pat attended a meeting in Zambia with Major Superiors to finalize the report of a research study which was designed to help congregations in Zambia reflect on the changing context of mission and the implications for formation, choice of ministries and education and training. The report, titled *Sowing Bountifully*, has valuable lessons to share. It is currently being translated and will be sent to UISG members worldwide in early 2017.

In October Sr. Gabriella Bottani, CMS (Co-ordinator of Talitha Kum) and the Executive Secretary attended the meeting of the Santa Martha Group – an initiative begun by the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales which is an international alliance of bishops and police chiefs working together with civil society against human trafficking. UISG/Talitha Kum represented the thousands of sisters and their collaborators working against human trafficking at many different levels, at this important meeting. During the first week of November Sr. Gabriella has been attending the Assembly of RENATE – the European Network of Sisters against human trafficking.

Other News...

UISG Website – Reserved Area

We remind the General Superiors that they can find the list of members and the names of the General Superiors, the acts of the meetings and the documents of the Canon Law Workshop on the Reserved Area on the www.uisg.org website.

To enter the Reserved Area of the UISG website just write the UISG Code numbers of your congregation both as your user name and as your password. No other data is needed, just your UISG Code number. The log-in to the reserved area is located at the bottom of the homepage.

Paying with Paypal

It is now possible to pay through Paypal from our website: www.uisg.org, for the various UISG services: annual membership dues, bulletin, contributions, fees for assemblies and courses.

Use your UISG code in all the payment descriptions you make.

Annual Assembly of the Constellation of Rome 2017

The 2017 annual assembly of the Constellation of Rome will take place in Rome January 11 and 12, 2017. The theme chosen is: *"Collaboration for the common good: moving to the margins"*.

The elections of Delegates and members of the coordinating group will take place in this assembly. In fact, the two current Delegates, Sr. Divina Garcia and Sr. Franca Zonta, were elected to the UISG Administration Committee. We remind you that the presence of the General Superior is necessary for the election. (www.uisg.org)

"Reconfiguration: Why? How?" Workshop

The first workshop on Canon Law for Major Superiors and Councils in Italian promoted by the UISG Canonical Consultation Project was held November 19 in Rome.

Utilizing the participative style of a workshop, the day dealt with the huge challenge of reconfiguration of our institutes by interpreting our experience, enlightening them with the canonical elements and spiritual elements of discernment.

Organizers for the day were:

Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA, already General Superior and Executive Vice Secretary of the UISG; Sr. Tiziana Merletti, SFP, already General Superior and member of the UISG Council of Canon Lawyers; Sr. Simona Paolini, FMGB, teacher at the Pontifical Antonianum University and the Pontifical Claretianum University in Rome and at the Pius X Faculty in Venice. (www.uisg.org)

Assembly of the "Communicators for Women Religious" Association

The UISG participated for the first time at the annual Assembly of the Communicators for Women Religious: laymen, laywomen and sisters in charge of communications in their Congregations. It was an important formation time to strengthen their skills in the field of internal and external Communications of Congregations of women religious and provided space for creating synergy among professionals working for Women Religious. (www.c4wr.org)

Workshop for General Governance Groups and Directors of Communications

A Workshop for General Governance groups and directors of Communications of the Congregations will be held in Rome on January 21 and 22, 2017. It will be entitled *"Communicating Beauty, being concerned with the words, images and digital sphere."*

Our Congregation “communicates” an image externally that says something about us: Does our way of communicating reach the desired objective? Is it effective? Does it develop communion and participation?

The interests of our Institutes for Communications as a place of mission has been increasing proportionally to the needs of learning how to best optimize the technologies of information and Communications. Communication is part of our mission and it is mission in itself. The UISG and USMI (Union of Major Superiors of Italy) are organizing the event.

For information: comunicazione@uisg.org - www.uisg.org

Canon Law Workshop in Kenya, February 20-24, 2017

The workshop is organized by the UISG and the Association of Consecrated Women of Central and Eastern Africa and sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. It will take place at the Mary Ward Center in Nairobi, Kenya for 55 participants (30 General Superiors and 25 Major Superiors who are members of ACWECA.) Expenses for travel, room and board are reimbursed by the Foundation.

For Information: ufficio.segreteria@uisg.org

Sister-to-All Campaign

What do Americans think about Sisters? How do they perceive them? How much do they know about them? Research done in the United States tried to answer these questions by interviewing a variety of citizens. The results were made known to us beginning September 6, 2016 with a promotion campaign in the media and on the website of the National Catholic Reporter. In the campaign there is a provision also for a gathering of stories and interviews about how Women Religious are working in the world today and how their mission has been changing in recent years.

For information: <http://nationalcatholicsistersweek.org/sister-to-all>

THE PROJECTS OF THE UISG... UPDATE AND NEWS

The Sicily Migrant Project

A year of living in Sicily: the dream has become a reality

The Sicily Migrant Project of the UISG, born from the Board of Directors desire to enact a symbolic gesture in response to Pope Francis' call and begun last December, is now a reality. A community of 10 sisters is involved in the three dioceses of Agrigento, Caltagirone and Caltanissetta with the commitment to **be a presence** among the migrants, and to **witness** in the local Church that it is possible to live together though being of different cultures, countries, congregations and charisms, and become a **bridge** between the local community and the migrant population.

For 9 long months the sisters have taken the time to build community within and be discretely involved, tiptoeing into the local reality, listening, taking time to observe, and study the problems of immigration and get to know the territory.

It was a wonderful but austere time that required patience, perseverance, continuous attention to the small signs of dialogue and openness by the people of the place and the institutions, while making initial contact with the migrants along the streets.

They themselves are migrants in a foreign land ... but this very lived experience was the first step toward real integration and a truer understanding of the reality lived by thousands of brothers and sisters searching for a more dignified and human life. In fact, they are more sensitive and attentive to the suffering and difficulties of those landing in a foreign country, having personally experienced, and in a certain sense lived in their own flesh and blood, what it means to feel like the foreigner who is not always wanted or who is barely tolerated by some of the services in which they thought they could be involved.

Little by little the sisters discretely involved themselves in the reality and are now affectionately called "the sisters of the world". They created relationships, setting up networks, walking the streets and meeting the migrants who do not have the right to be welcomed by the State structures.

Their speaking various languages facilitates contact and often allows the creation of gratuitous relationships, listening to the terrible stories in which the migrants landing along the coast of Sicily are victims.

The seed cast out in the phase of silent and hidden getting to know the situation is now beginning to bear fruit. Various doors are opening, even within some of the Institutions. In the three dioceses the sisters are being involved in **hospitals**, in **prisons**, and in the Caritas Listening Centers. They serve food at the soup kitchens for the poor, where work is being done for integration between the poor people of the place and the foreigners: people who have the need to be considered worthy of respect and consideration. Often the sisters are called to accompany times of prayer and reflection in some of the welcoming communities.

In Agrigento the doors to the Center of Welcome and identification were opened to the sisters to dialogue with the women and minors waiting to be relocated.

"The harvest is great and the workers few" Jesus said to his disciples *"pray that God send workers to the harvest"*. Two sisters left us during the summer, but another two new sisters arrived: an Italian and one coming from the United States. They are all brought together by the same passion for God and humanity. They all come with years of missionary experience, but there are only ten... It would be great if the number would become 12 like the 12 apostles...

We hope this project does not remain an isolated one, but a stimulus for other inter-congregational experiences so that together we may respond to the challenges that the globalized world is imposing on mission today.

Talitha Kum – World Network of Consecrated Life against human trafficking.

International Coordinating Committee of Talitha Kum

On July 13, 2016, the International Coordinating Committee of Talitha Kum met for the first time by use of videoconference. At the end of January during the 2nd meeting of the International Coordinating Committee of Talitha Kum the decision was made to promote greater participation of the territorial networks in the organization of the International Coordinating Office of Rome. The committee is made up of the world coordinator of Talitha Kum and a representative from each of the following geographic areas: Africa, Latin America, Asia, Canada, Europe and Oceania and the United States of America

The sister representatives were indicated by the networks and appointed after a local consultation with the grassroots, which the various networks organized on their own. Currently the committee members are: Sr. Gabriella Bottani, SMC (Talitha Kum Rome); Sr. Adeline Abamo, SDS (Asia); Sr. Patricia Nnenna Egbulem, SSL (Africa); Sr. Carmela Gibaja Esquerdo, HAG

(Latin America); Sr. Noelene Robyn Simmons, SM (Oceania); Sr. Nicole Rivard, OLA (Canada-NorthAmerica); Sr. Ann Oestreich, IHM (USA-North America); Sr. Imelda Poole, IBVM (Europe).

The committee's objective is to put into effect the commitments taken on together to fight human trafficking, to promote and implement networking, and foster internal dialogue through the various networks and with Talitha Kum International. Interconnections, exchange of news, information and best practices foster collaboration and are the foundation so that the network be set up in an effective form against human trafficking for the benefit of all those suffering the violence of this serious crime against humanity.

The creation of the Committee was an important step for the life and growth of Talitha Kum, the world network of consecrated life against human trafficking. The committee offers us a precious instrument to grow in collaborative leadership. The UISG thanks all the sisters and their congregations for sharing their charism and competent and prepared sisters for this our common project. Human trafficking continues to challenge and call us to be prophetic witnesses of life and freedom. In fact, the number of victims is growing at a worrisome rate in the world. God is listening and sees the great suffering and is continuing to call us!

New areas of intra-ecclesial collaboration

United States Bishops' Conference

In July Sr. Gabriella Bottani, cms, coordinator of Talitha Kum participated in the consulting group of the COMPASS project, a project of the United States Bishops' Conference, financed by the U.S. government. The purpose of the project is to work against human trafficking in the shipping industry, especially on fishing vessels. During the meeting, Sr. Gabriella Bottani was invited to talk about Talitha Kum as an effective model of networking against trafficking

Caritas Internationalis / COATNET

Caritas Internationalis together with the Pontifical Council of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples promoted the International Conference on trafficking in and from Africa.

Talitha Kum and the UISG were represented by: Sr. Agatha Osarenkhoe, President of the Conference of Religious of Nigeria and of COSUDOW; Sr. Gabriella Bottani, World Coordinator; Sr. Patricia Ebegbulem, Representative of Talitha Kum in Africa; Sr. Mercy Muthoni Wanguna (Cameroon); Sr. Yvonne Clemence Bambara (Burkina Faso); Sr. Clara Torres (CTIP South Africa); Sr. Annah Teresa Niadombo (CTIP Zimbabwe); Sr. Eugenia Bonetti (RENATE – Italy); Sr. Monica Chikwe (RENATE – Italy); Anne Kelleher (RENATE Ireland).

In the opening session, together with the ecclesial and civic authorities, Sr. Agatha Osarenkhoe represented the women religious involved in working against trafficking in Africa and in the world.

Talitha Kum, in addition to having contributed to the group work, was represented by Sr. Gabriella Bottani in two concluding round tables during which ideas were shared about how to improve collaboration among ecclesial organizations and make our actions against trafficking more effective.

Network Meetings of Talitha Kum International

August 8–14, 2016, Montreal, Canada, Participation at the World Social Forum and the Meeting with CATHII

On the occasion of the participation of Talitha Kum at the World Social Forum that was held in Montreal from August 9 to 14, 2016, Sr. Gabriella Bottani, CMS, met with the CATHII network (Comite d' action contre la traite humaine interne et internationale [Action Committee against domestic and international human trafficking]) that has been working in Quebec since 2011. CATHII has been a member of Talitha Kum since its beginning. CATHII, Talitha Kum and the Comboni Network collaborated for the implementation of the two activities carried out at the FSM on the topic of human trafficking, one organized by CATHII in French giving greater emphasis to the phenomenon of human trafficking in Quebec and the other promoted by Talitha Kum and the Comboni Network presenting the question of trafficking in the current international situation where there was sharing on the connection between trafficking and instability, violence, environmental destruction and migration.

September 2–8, 2016, Talitha Kum in Benin City, Nigeria - COSUDOW

Sr. Gabriella Bottani, CMS, visited the Nigerian network member of Talitha Kum and the hospitality house run by the network in Benin City. The house began after the Conference of Religious of Nigeria decided to be in solidarity with the Nigerian women and girls who were victims of human trafficking and for various reason are returning home. The house where the project is carried out was built with funds from the Italian Bishops' Conference and is run by different congregations who rotate the coordination of the house every 3 to 6 years, offering a community of sisters for the work. Currently the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul are coordinating the house. The President of COSUDOW is the president of the Conference of Religious of Nigeria. In recent years the women religious in Nigeria have been trying to increase preventive measures through the work of education, raising public awareness, informing and supporting.

September 18–24, 2016, Talitha Kum in Mexico

From September 14-24, 2016, in collaboration with the Mexican Conference of Religious (CIRM), Talitha Kum promoted the formation course for creation of a network of religious involved in working against trafficking in Mexico. The endeavor was held in Casa Villa Maria Immaculada, in Tepoztlán (Mexico City.)

The formation course was coordinated by Sr. Lourdes Medina, CIRM, Sr. Carmela Gibaja, representative of Talitha Kum for Latin America, Sr. Eurides Alves de Oliveira, coordinator of the Brazilian network *Um Grito pela Vida (A Cry for Life)*, and Stefano Volpicelli, formator. Thirty women religious from Mexico and various Central American countries, Ecuador and Colombia participated in the course. As a result of the course, the Rahamim Mexico Network was set up. The network is inserted into the “Proyección Profética” (Prophetic Protection) Department of the CIRM and the world network of consecrated life against trafficking, Talitha Kum.

The course fostered the strengthening of networking in the region and in the American continent by promoting contacts among South America, Central America and North America.



COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE SYNTHESIS

What do the General Superiors expect from the UISG Communications Office?

“Have an effective and efficient communications system both internally and with the outside.” (Objective number 3 of the UISG Strategic Plan, 2015-2020)

The UISG Communications Office was only begun in September 2015 and the entire first year’s work was dedicated to listening to the reality, and to setting up the human and instrumental resources of the Communications Office and the basic communications areas: website, periodic newsletter and social media. The main work of the Office is to nourish communion among the members and reinforce inter-congregational collaboration through communications.

During the last Plenary Assembly (Rome, May 9-13, 2016) we ask the General Superiors who were present (about 900): *“What do you expect to find on our site? What information do you desire to receive from the UISG?”*

Here is a brief synthesis of the most frequent responses.

What do you expect to find on our site?

The key words are: *leadership, formation, internationality, inter-congregationality.*

It was clear that it is expected that the UISG contribute to reflection on the service of authority (leadership), on a theology that is open to the signs of the times and a formation with global and inter-congregational horizons.

In detail:

- Stimuli for dealing with the challenges and reform of Consecrated Life
- Reflections on Religious Life and current topics
- Material for reading the signs of the times
- Documents from CICALSAL/*Magisterium* of the Church giving direction about new things in Religious Life
- Topics treated with international breadth
- Formation (articles and initiatives)
- Formation and Guidelines for the service of Leadership
- Presenters’ talks (UISG – meetings – constellations)

What kind of news/information would you like to receive regularly?

We indicate here the most frequent items:

- What helps Religious Life to the new and fosters inter-congregational aspects
- World dimension of Religious Life
- Experiences of other congregations
- Initiatives and life of the UISG (and the constellations)
- UISG Projects
- Announcements about formation initiatives meetings and events
- Information and news about the social-ecclesial context of mission where Religious Life is involved.

What kinds of information and documents would you like to find in the reserved area?

The most voted for items were:

1. Acts of the reunions/meetings
2. Forum for discussions and sharing.

The other two items, UISG Directory of members and Strategic Plan are already in the reserved area.

In the “other” box, other ideas were added: needs that can require our support, consultation with experts, decisions of the UISG Administrative Committee, UISG activity calendar.

I hope that you find what you said in this brief synthesis. Our communication can only be mutual and circular: we create the direction together in a dynamic of listening and communion. Thank you!

Patrizia Morgante

UISG Communications Officer

comunicazione@uisg.org - +39 0668400234

STAFF UISG

Name	Role	Email - Telephone
Sr. Patricia Murray, ibvm	Executive Secretary	<i>segretaria.esecutiva@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.236
Sr. Elisabetta Flick, sa	Associate Executive Secretary Migrants Project	<i>vice.segre.ese@uisg.org</i> <i>progetto.migranti@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.248
Rosalia Armillotta	Assistant to the Executive Secretary Sezione Italiana	<i>ufficio.segreteria@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.238
Svetlana Antonova	Financial Administrator	<i>economato@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.250
Patrizia Balzerani	Assistant Financial Administrator	<i>assistente.economato@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.249
Patrizia Morgante	Responsibile Comunication	<i>comunicazione@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.234
Antonietta Rauti	Responsibile UISG Bulletin	<i>bollettino@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.232
Sr. Gabriella Bottani, smc	Coordinator Talitha Kum	<i>uisg_talithakum@yahoo.it</i> <i>coordinator@talithakum.info</i> 0668.400.235
Sr. Cecilia Bayona, osa	Archivist	<i>archivio@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.242
Sr. Fabiola Gusmão, H.Carm	Coordinator Regina Mundi Portuguese Section	<i>regina.mundi@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.231
Sr. Anna Sanchez Boira, mhsfn	Spanish Section Graphic Designer	<i>spagnolo@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.233
Sr. Laurence Zaninka, sa	French Section	<i>francese@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.230
Sr. Florence de la Villeon, rscj	International Coordinator Migrants Project	<i>rete.migranti@uisg.org</i> 06 68400245 - 3512555618
Canon Law Council		<i>canoniste@uisg.org</i>
Solidarity South Sudan		<i>solidarityssudan@gmail.com</i>