

*COMMUNITY:
CHALLENGE AND MISSION*

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FOREWORD

Once again, the theme of community commands our attention. Community is the distinguishing feature of Religious Life, and constitutes at the same time its first mission. But its construction requires a solid foundation that can both bring it together and sustain it, accompanied by a caring and compassionate gaze directed towards today's world.

Sr. Simona Brambilla, psychologist and Superior General of the Consolata Missionary Sisters, will be presenting on the theme of “**Community: Challenge and Mission**”, drawing on the text of the episode of the Samaritan women. In a thought-provoking paper, she helps us to recognise the elements involved in the construction of a well-community: thirst, soil, different types of rock, the task of excavation, emergent water, and the care such a well requires. This process stimulates the desire for the Living Water which transports us to a renewed encounter with Christ who, in turn, will overflow in many human hearts thirsting for love.

In her paper “**Evangelizing and Evangelical Communities**”, *Sr. Beatriz Acosta*, Superior General of the Company of Mary, assigns to the local community a critical role in the mission of evangelization. A community, united around the Lord, which every day makes itself a locus of humanization, a place verifying the following of Christ and commitment to the Kingdom. The community is a miracle beyond all human logic, being as it is sustained by the Spirit; its construction demands quality time and space.

The Claretian *Gonzalo Fernández* presents “**Spirituality in the Service of Government**”, using a “Marian decalogue” consisting of ten significant words drawn from St Luke's Gospel. Beginning with the figure of Mary of Nazareth, he traces the outline of a spirituality for leaders of congregations, highlighting certain concrete aspects of his ministry of animation and rooting it in faith and the Word.

Of great interest in this our “planetary culture” is the presentation by *Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM*, “**Intercultural Leadership**”, which points to some ways in which the leaders of religious communities can cultivate the “luxury of diversity” and help sisters to respect and celebrate those cultural differences which increasingly characterize international congregations. In this way, they will be able to offer a credible witness to a divided and fragmented world.

A short interview with *Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA* allows us to get to know the current President of the UISG.

COMMUNITY: CHALLENGE AND MISSION

Sr. Simona Brambilla, MC

*Sister Simona Brambilla is the Superior General of the Consolata Missionary Sisters. She has a degree in psychology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, with a thesis titled *Evangelising the Heart: Evangelism inculturated among the Macua Scirima of Mozambique*. This scientific work is the fruit of lived experience in Mozambique, drawing together inculturation and deep listening, and showing empathy with respect to every person and missionary reality.*

Sr. Simona gave this conference at the Rome Constellation Assembly on 20 December 2012.

Original in Italian

1. Introduction

The Acts of our Xth General Chapter, held last year, open with a section entitled: “the community of the Consolata Missionary Sisters”. The General Chapter has felt the need to delineate the essential characteristics of our community before addressing other themes, placing the very identity of the MC community as a reference point for reflection in the various areas considered subsequently.

Now, when a General Chapter places particular emphasis on a certain aspect of our life, it is easy to perceive behind that emphasis both a desire and a challenge. In this case, the desire is to promote the community dimension of our calling; the challenge lies in difficulties experienced in living this dimension, as well as resistance to - and forms of escape from - it.

The fact that I was asked to address this question of “Community: Challenge and Mission”, leads me to suspect that we are not alone, we MCs, in needing to undergo some kind of conversion with respect to the dimension of community. And so, in this conversation I would like to explore with you two movements which coexist in the construction of life in community: that of desire, and that of resistance. I’ll do this by recourse to an image: Jacob’s well (Jn 4, 1-42).

2. At Jacob's well

We know the story well.

«So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there.

Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."» (Jn 4, 5-7)

A woman with her empty pitcher.

An empty woman.

Better, a woman emptied by life, by relationships that seemed perhaps to fill her momentarily, but leaving her thirstier than before, heart parched, sight extinguished, hope now worn out.

That pitcher, under the midday sun, is her life: forever in search of water and accustomed to obtaining it through a variety of means: a bucket, a rope, and the strength to draw it up. One pays for one's water supply. The well has its price. No-one gives you something for nothing. That is what the empty pitcher proclaims.

A voice.

It does not belong to the pitcher.

It is different.

It asks me for a drink.

To an empty pitcher, that voice asks for a drink.

It puts my dryness in doubt.

It sees this pitcher as a source.

They have never seen me like that.

This voice is water.

This voice flows over me, becomes great in me.

Is it Jewish... is it Lord... is it prophet... is it Messiah?

It is Water!

It expands in me and I am reborn.

It fills me.

The empty pitcher and I no longer have anything in common.

I leave it.

He is sufficient for me.

He has become great in me, my pitcher is full of Him.

“Come and see!”

And Life overflows.

Since the 2004 Congress for Consecrated Life the Samaritan woman has been our faithful travel companion¹. The Synod on the New Evangelisation, held recently, represents us with the figure of the Samaritan woman at the well in its Message to the People of God². Yes, there she is again, the Samaritan woman, awakening in those whom she encounters a thirst for living water, acting as shuttle between well and village, until she manages to render herself redundant: «We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world» (Jn 4, 42), her fellow villagers will declare.

It all started - or rather, re-started - for her around a well, under the midday sun. An empty pitcher, at the well, encounters a Jewish man who is tired on account of his journey: two fatigues thus compared. The fatigue of a pitcher parched by the vicissitudes of life, and the fatigue of a God freely emptied of Himself. The well represents for both a source of refreshment: for the thirsty Jewish man, who asks for a drink, and for the dry pitcher, which asks to be refilled, for the umpteenth time, after having been emptied for the umpteenth time. The well is there, silent, acting as testimony to the dialogue between Jesus and the woman. Jesus will not drink its water, the pitcher will not be filled with its water. The well offers itself simply as a place, an occasion, an opportunity for the development and expression of a desire, of a thirst which will gradually reveal its object. Nothing more and nothing less. The well does not seem to have so bad a lot. It has achieved its mission: indicating to the woman the true Source, and satisfying God's desire for self-communication.

The just-concluded Synod reminds us: «There is no man or woman who, in one's life, would not find oneself like the woman of Samaria beside a well with an empty bucket, with the hope of finding the fulfillment of the heart's most profound desire, that which alone could give full meaning to life».³

«We must form welcoming communities in which all outcasts find a home (...).It is up to us today to render experiences of the Church concretely accessible, to multiply the wells where thirsting men and women are invited to encounter Jesus, to offer oases in the deserts of life».⁴

How can we **multiply the wells**?

Are our communities, in reality, such wells at which the Journeying Christ finds rest and humanity encounters the living Water? Do our communities

intend to offer themselves as places of encounter between the Lord and the individual? And if our communities are not such wells, what are they? How can we set about building communities that are Jacob's wells?

3. Building wells

A well cannot be improvised. It is first and foremost the result of a gift - **water** that runs in the depths of the earth - and then of a patient process of seeking, and the demanding enterprise of digging. Let us consider some of the elements involved in the construction of a well-community.

Thirst: The construction of a well is a challenging affair. Nobody sets to digging a well if he is not motivated by the water that he intends to find. Before the digging is underway, there is *the thirst* that impels me to seek water. Water is a vital good, water is life, one digs in search of Life. The well is a tunnel towards life. The well is an empty channel destined to be filled with life. Life flowing, this is the fundamental desire that sets in motion the labour of constructing a well-community. When I perceive in some way the irresistible Presence of the living Water, all of my energies are directed towards it. The sum of our thirsts becomes a strength, the confession of our absolute dependence on Water becomes the energy which pushes us, motivating, digging, removing rocks, knowing how to find ways to reach life, knowing to listen for the sound of gurgling in the depths, knowing to retain all senses alert to the discovery of that underground passage of streaming life. One cannot build community without this **Life-tension**. Life which gurgles in the other, life which gurgles between us. I need my senses to be refined if they are to perceive this life: to hear it, see it, touch it, taste it, breathe in its perfume. Purifying the senses means precisely this: rendering them always more refined, always more sensitive to the detection of the slightest sign of life! How are my senses? What am I doing with them? What do I listen to? What do I see? What do I taste? What do I touch? What do I smell? The result of heightened senses is vigilance. Vigilance with respect to life. The ultimate awakening of the senses is advent: watching over life arriving, being born. The end-purpose of the well is not the creation of a hole in the ground, perhaps with a view to hiding there. It is the interception of life; the taking into oneself of life. It is to become full of life. Pregnant with Life. Giving light to life, both in myself in and in the other. A passionate desire for life, a burning thirst for Life: this is the beginning of the construction of a well-community - a lap, a crib, a nest of life.

Soil: This blessed soil that separates me from the water flowing below. This soil that lies between my desire and the water of life. This soil that holds the water. What is the nature of this soil? One must come to know it, to understand its composition in order to make use of tools and techniques

appropriate to the task of digging. The construction of a well-community calls for a bit of geology. Our human soil, that with which the Lord has moulded us, this human soil within which the breath of life flows (cf. Genesis 2,7)! This soil must be excavated, the fire of desire opening within the birth canal until Life can be brought to light. In me, in the other, between us, in our relationships. Pain. The pain of labour. The pain of the soil as it opens. It is necessary to respect the rhythms of the soil, stopping every now and then to let it firm up a bit before proceeding again to the depths. Sometimes the soil needs to be moistened again. Tears, the sweat of loyalty. The soil of our human relationships, which model themselves, which transform themselves as the fissure deepens. These relationships become support networks, aqueducts for emergent water, secure containers of life, paths to the light! Yes, our soil, having been worked over, becomes a path for life. The condition of a well is determined by the solidity of its walls, able to protect a space filled with water. Collapsing relationships, the collapse of the ties which sustain the walls - these signal the well's death. The solidity of the walls is a prelude to the gushing of life, to the cry of the water as it finally breathes in light.

Care for relationships, the evangelical transformation of the ties that bind us, the art of letting God's will model our human soil to the point of rendering it a channel of living water: these constitute the ascetic path of fraternity.

Rocks: Something hard and impermeable. A blockage. One cannot pass. There is no way through. Obstruction. The channel of life is impeded. Normal methods of excavation will no longer suffice. One must stop, in order to determine the dimensions, the consistency, the position of the rock. Perhaps the rock has been there for millennia. It made a lodging in the ground, the earth adapting itself to presence of this hard structure while developing particular geological formations. Doing so, it incorporated it. These formations must be investigated, known, and the existing history between the rock and the soil must be reconstructed. Then comes intervention. One digs around the rock, surrounds it, extracts it. Perhaps it will prove useful in the strengthening of the well's walls, or in the building of the edge of its mouth. Do not discard such rocks; only be sure that they do not become impediments. And beware: not all rocks warrant dynamiting. There is always the risk that the walls of the well will collapse. Do not wait on such rocks. Do not imagine that they can be eliminated with the wave of a magic wand! Work on them, use them! But first identify them, and do not fall into the trap of identifying with any of them!

Let us consider some of the rocks which may cause one to trip in the construction of a well-community:

- I. *The rock of self-sufficiency* says: «I don't need anyone else, I can handle myself. I won't reduce myself to asking others». Then, of course,

she falls sick, and so everyone must serve her. Obviously, it is not that she is in need; rather, it is that the Lord has sent her the sickness, and so it is not her fault if she needs special attention, a special heater in her room, a particular diet, an orthopaedic mattress, Angora wool jumpers, toothpaste for sensitive teeth...

- II. *The rock of self-adoration* says: «Unto me be glory, honour, and admiration, for ever and ever, Amen». This one needs a pedestal so that all might perceive her good works, dancing thereupon so that all might contemplate her grace... until one day in a moment of distraction she falls and is smashed to a thousand pieces.
- III. *The rock of depreciation* says: «I'll do it, I'll do it... because if someone else does it I'm not convinced they'll do it up to my standard». Then she complains that she ends up doing everything, while others do nothing. She speaks incessantly of the importance of trust - yes, that which others have a duty to place in her, but which she finds impossible to place in others.
- IV. *The rock of victimhood* says: «Poor little me, the worst always befalls me. Look at me, I'm the incarnation of Murphy's Law!» (Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong). She has stopped working on herself, because, after all, there's no hope... she feels humiliated, preaches humility, and seems to accept her own limits. But this is not the truth of the matter, since she never misses an opportunity to remind others of her dreadful situation, of all the evil she must endure, of the difficult experiences she has undergone. Above all, it is never her fault, because it is others who have placed her in all these difficult situations, and it is others who don't understand her. They don't realise her heroism, that they are living with a martyr who endures all of these persecutions...
- V. *The twinned rock* says: «Only you can understand me!» She has a strong tendency toward a special relationship with someone within or outside the community, an exclusive friendship. She wants a full-time friendship, and no-one else is granted admission to this friendship. She and her friend become twins, because only the twin can understand her profound spirituality and prophetic intuitions.
- VI. *The omnipotent rock* says: «Stick with me and I'll protect you!». Frequently she battles with authority, possesses a great deal of influence in the community, and can be openly aggressive or subtly manipulative. Sometimes she finds company, and in those situations there can develop groups of omnipotent rocks forming solid walls.
- VII. *The rock of gossip* says: «Come to me and I will reveal to you the secrets of the congregation!» Sometimes she follows the group of the

community's most powerful. In communal meetings she keeps quiet, but later in the corridor or the bedroom... she turns into an extremely effective social network for the transmission of first-hand news to sisters on other continents. Normally she seeks, and nearly always finds, others who are like her, and as a consequence she forms alliances with them - giving rise to a global transmission network that inevitably scoops even the most punctual congregation communications office. When the internal bulletin arrives, the news are nearly all already out-of-date, having already appeared on Facebook with insights and commentary attached.

- VIII. *The rock island* says: «Let nothing disturb or frighten you, for I suffice»: for her the community is shallow, immature, childish. As a result she decides to live in her own world, trying to find her own way to grow, improve, become a saint. This rock's approach can be seen in her study, her work, her pastoral activity, wherever she can express it fully, wherever she can use all the energies that she might otherwise have channeled into relationships with others. She exalts preparation, the academic culture, the professional role: the community is expected to respond to the needs of the individual. Often she closes herself in her own room and spends a lot of time in there. She's more a technician than an apostle.
- IX. *The rock of compliance* says: «It's always been done that way». She has made the decision to stand on the side of authority and tradition, always and everywhere. She feels the need for authority's approval, and she fights and strives to achieve it, even going to heroic lengths. She is proper, respectful, responsible, obedient. Ready even to give her life... for the approval of her superior and the community. She will not give any problem to her superior, but ends up doing precisely that by virtue of her rigidity. Hers is a perfectionism which allows no room for difference and novelty.
- X. *The rock of false gold* says: «Look unto me and you shall be radiant». It's understood that she is the superior's favourite: she is brilliant, intelligent, does many things well, and seems always to have a perfect relationship with those in authority. She is trustworthy, obedient, responsible, mature... and so it goes that she becomes the superior's counsellor, the superior's messenger, the superior's friend... and eventually the superior's superior. Yet beneath the beautiful exterior, there can be a profound conflict lurking, a secret belief that she belongs to a superior species and that when others misunderstand her it is on account of her elevated capacities, intelligence, intuition, spirituality, charisma. She is someone who does not really understand what love is, because she has never given herself permission to commit emotionally: in reality, she has never confronted emotions in a true and realistic fashion. She avoids all possibility of

failure: she cannot deal with it, and has come up with a bag of tricks which allow her to avoid any such collapse. Failure and falling short terrify her: she **MUST** remain the cornerstone.

Digging: By this is meant that passage through human soil to the depths which contain the water of life. When one is engaged in the task of excavation, one takes on the colour of the earth! One dives into the earth, is buried in its depths, and travels towards the darkness. One experiences the grave, the pit, death itself! Descent, an absolute descent into hell. My hell, the hells of those who are engaged in the task of digging with me, our hells. The path through hell is obligatory for those making their way on the road to water! The Samaritan woman knows it, brought to deal with the truth in herself, at that well. The descent is difficult. We would like to flee. The soil piled up on the surface begins to slip down on us, and there is a sense of collapse, of burial. I would like to leap from the well, I would like to return to my mother! I sought life, yet this is a tomb. An obligatory path, that of the tomb. The life that you seek is beyond the grave. Accept your mud and that of others: if you go digging it's inevitable that you'll end up moving it and sully your image - that image which you constructed with so much effort. That mud is nothing new: it's always been down there, but before you weren't aware of it and now you are. In the mud, you learn solidarity, you learn that you are poor, you learn that you are no better than the others. In the tomb, you begin to learn how to live. Yes, the mud reveals itself to be therapeutic. It's the logic of the grain of wheat. The logic of Easter. The construction of a well-community is a Paschal event. (cf. The history of *pirikixa*, his attitude towards that which is "dirty".)

Gushing: It finds you there, in the mud. Down there, in the depths of the pit. Just when you are at the very lowest point, something begins to rise, from the bottom, from the bottom of the pit. Unexpectedly, life gushes out and rises. It is not immediately clear and clean; it mixes with our soil, and turns it into mud. Keep digging, and the water of life will gush with more force, the dynamic of the descent will be fulfilled in the eruption of new jets of life. Behold that life was below, as well as mud. Behold how the earth gives light to that life which was hidden in its womb.

The well is the fruit of a gift - water - and of a labour, digging. It is the fruit of a patient and persistent search for the element of life. It is the fruit of hands that dig deep, guided by the water's gurgle. It is a journey through earth, it means touching it, and to immerse oneself in human soil certain of the life that gurgles within. It means dealing with the rocks which may block the route, and developing strategies for making best use of them - or blowing them up. It means, in the end, letting the Gospel penetrate and transform the deepest states of our hearts and transfiguring the ties that bind us together, making

them - in effect - Christian. The well-community is the fruit of a Gift and of a patient and tenacious process of labour intended to bring the gift to life and make possible that it be offered to the traveller. The well becomes a place where the downward motion of excavation meets the upward movement of water, to the patient emptying (*kenosis*) of the channel there comes a response of that gushing water which can regenerate the human heart.

A well-community, then, is a community of people who have been evangelised and are available to an ongoing process of evangelisation, who furthermore:

- * are thirsty
- * are attuned to the flow of the Water/Spirit
- * dig patiently and persistently downwards in order to reach the water
- * identify and work on the rocks they encounter
- * know how to get their hands - and those of others - dirty
- * come together around a sacred space, empty of themselves and filled with the flow of regenerative water (a process of decentering from themselves and committing to an evangelical transformation of relations)

Thus does the community become an opening which can bring the water to light, a place of regeneration, an oasis in the desert of life, a well at which Christ loves to seat Himself so as to give living water to the human heart that thirsts.

4. Looking after the well

A well must be looked after, kept in clean and in good condition, so as to continue to be the channel of contact between water and the light. Otherwise a well can become sick. There are many diseases which can afflict the well-community. I would like to point out a degenerative illness, that which amounts to a reduction of desire, of *pathological thirst*. This occurs when desire, thirst for the living Water becomes sick, and so the community - instead of seeking the living water where it flows - seeks it where it does not flow, seeking it in polluted aquifers. Jeremiah warned Israel:

«they have forsaken me,
the source of living waters;
they have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns
that cannot hold water.» (Jer 2,13).

It may happen that the community, even without realising it fully, begins to follow as a criterion of its living together not the Gospel of Jesus but the convenience of the group, which may come from as-yet-unevangelised dynamics.

The ties, as a consequence, become functional and serve the various thirsts of those who make up the community, or at least have a greater influence in it, rather than possessing any evangelical quality. I am going to indicate just five types of *pathological thirst* which can transform a well-community into a broken cistern⁵.

- * *Thirst for the battlefield*: here the underlying dynamic is that of flight/fight, which gives rise to a *band of warriors*. In this group we are all together against some kind of enemy: the enemy may be outside the group, and we feel united on account of having a common enemy. Here the leader has the task of finding an enemy to combat. If the leader fails to find an external enemy, members of the band may “help” her find one, even inside the group: and once the enemy has at last been found, the group finds cohesion and is ready for battle...
- * *Thirst for the baby bottle*: this gives rise to a group styled on a *kindergarten*. Here we have the more or less conscious desire to be satisfied, to gratify mutually. I’m here to satisfy my needs, and you’re here for the same reason. It may be that our needs are complementary, and so we get on very well. Frequently this dynamic can take the form of a mother-child relationship: someone takes on the role of mother, another the role of daughter. Exiting these roles is forbidden, or else the expectations of the group will be betrayed...
- * *Thirsting for the Queen’s court*: this gives rise to a slave/master dynamic, which involves the formation of subgroups of powerful people who more or less consciously manipulate others. The others must obey. It can even happen that the community’s official superior finds herself in the servile group, because another superior, a little less official, has been “elected” more or less consciously by the dominant group. This new superior, the “Queen”, is entrusted with the task of meeting the needs of those dominant personalities who have crowned her: should she fail, a *coup* is her destiny and a more suitable candidate will take her throne.
- * *Thirsting for the flock*: here there is an omniscient “elected” leader who, more or less consciously, is chosen by the majority. This majority delegates to their leader the task of maintaining contact with the outside world, of taking responsibility, of looking after and taking an interest in all the members, of being always available to listen, of making the difficult decisions. Meanwhile, everyone in the group can live peacefully, do her own thing, arrange her life, her apostolic activities, look after herself, her beauty, her health, her relatives...
- * *Thirsting for a nursing home*: here the principal objective is to leave in peace, serene and tranquil. “Disturbing” others is forbidden. Members are

very concerned about supporting each other, and helping each other to live in peace. The principal problem to solve is how solitude can be avoided, and encouragement obtained. The members are very passive, and challenging, discussing, correcting is absolutely forbidden. The group anthem has a refrain that goes something like this: «you're OK, you're good, you're very clever, carry on like that... and let me do my own thing, everyone doing their own thing, let it be, let it be...». This dynamic can be baptised with a fascinating claim to be “respecting the sacred space of others, as well as my own”.

Relationships are places and spaces for life: our freedom affords us the opportunity to take this gift and make it fruitful, or else we can reduce the desire, the search, into a quest for alternatives which will fail to quench our thirst and turn our communities into cracked cisterns.

5. The wells of the new evangelisation

The recently-held Synod on the new evangelisation invites us to pay attention to two expressions of the life of faith which are especially relevant in the new evangelisation: contemplation of mystery and closeness to the poor. Here too we find that Jacob's well can serve as our master. Precisely there, at the well, the mystery of the Son of God is revealed to the Samaritan woman, by means of a graduale process: he is Jewish, he is Lord, he is Messiah...

It urges us to recuperate the contemplative dimension of our mission as consecrated persons, insofar as «a testimony that the world would consider credible can arise only from an adoring gaze at the mystery of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, only from the deep silence that receives the unique saving Word like a womb»⁶. There persists a tendency to consider prayer and contemplation as something separate to mission. We see that there is still difficulty on recognising prayer and contemplation as dimensions of mission, ways of mission. Such contemplation necessarily translates itself in opening up to people. We have a need of «spaces in the soul, but also physical ones, that remind us of God; interior sanctuaries and temples of stone that, like crossroads, keep us from losing ourselves in a flood of experiences; opportunities in which all could feel accepted, even those who barely know what and whom to seek»⁷.

Do we recognise our own communities as these «soul spaces and physical spaces»?

The other sign of the new evangelisation's authenticity has the face of the poor. Not just the “distant” poor, the one “out there”, who certainly deserves to be served with the utmost evangelical spirit, but also the “inner” poor”, the poor at hand. Who is this?

- * The poor within: that which in our very person has need of pardon, help, healing; in short, our empty pitchers;
- * The poor person who may be our sister, whom we live alongside and is perhaps regarded as a “weight”, an “obstacle”, a “limit” to personal and community progress;
- * Finally, the poor to whom we have opened the well of our community, who have been received into our house and not just served “out there”; these are the poor to whom we have offered a bit of shade in the beating sun of the desert walk, the poor with whom we have been able to share our time, our space, our goods.

These poor ones, “inside”, frequently disturb us: our human weakness, our mud troubles us; those who, by living alongside us, “oblige” us to “slow down” our passage on the journey, or to take a different route, irk us; those whom we have received into our house irritate us, because they “upset” the rhythm of our programme, and frequently shake the human security on which we are dependent. We risk, then, in the name of order and religious serenity, embracing a dynamic which is dominant in many contemporary societies: that of the *elimination* of the poor, their removal, a taking away of that which disturbs us. In so doing, we remove from our midst a blessing, **because a poor person is a blessing.**

«We must recognise the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone, but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful: it changes persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for prayer: in short, it brings us to Christ.»⁸

Yes, the poor bless us, they evangelise us, and reveal the measure of our faith.

What space is given to receiving the poor in us and in our communities?

Let us allow the Samaritan woman to stimulate anew in all of us who are consecrated, and in our communities, a desire for the Living Water which translates itself into movement, journey, dialogue, in a renewed encounter with Christ who awaits us always, at the well of today, in order to set out anew, poor in ourselves and rich in Him, towards the human heart that still thirsts for His Love!

- ¹ Cf. Various auth., *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity*, International Congress on Consecrated Life Rome 23-27 November 2004, Pauline Books and Media, 2005.
- ² Cf. XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”, *Message to the People of God*, Rome, 26 October 2012, n. 1.
- ³ XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”, *Message to the People of God*, Rome, 26 October 2012, n. 1.
- ⁴ *Idem*, n. 3.
- ⁵ We are inspired on this point by the “basic assumptions” (fight-flee, coupling, dependency) studied by W. R. Bion. Cf. for example TURQUET, P.M., *Leadership: the individual and the group*. In GIBBARD G.S., HARTMANN J.J., MANN R.D. *Analysis of Groups*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1974, pp. 305-327.
- ⁶ XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”, *Message to the People of God*, Rome, 26 October 2012, n. 12.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*

EVANGELIZING AND EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES

Sr. Beatriz Acosta Mesa, ODN

Sr. Beatriz Acosta Mesa, from Colombia, has been Superior General of the Order of the Company of Mary, since 2003. Sister Beatriz has a Licence in Education and in Sacred Scripture. She has been Directress and Lecturer in various Colleges.

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Original in Spanish

A few months ago, the governance teams of our Institute, The Order of the Company of Mary Our Lady, gathered to continue the process of “joining our forces for the ‘more’ of the mission.” Our intention was to evaluate the steps taken thus far in each place, and from a world-wide perspective, map out a future plan in order to continue moving forward. The lay person who accompanied us in this process had us express, in terms of our charism and the characteristics of today’s world, our greatest challenges in evangelization. With this as our starting point and with the present reality of the Institute in mind, we were to formulate and prioritize strategic lines for evangelization. These strategic lines would determine the process we would follow in the coming years and the direction we would give to our strengths and energies. “*The strengthening of our local communities*” was given priority.

The facilitator of the process was surprised with this first result. For us as well, it had been an important point for discernment. At this time in history, a group of women from different parts of the world, charged with guiding the direction of our educational-evangelizing mission, representing the thinking of our various locations, designated the local community to be the first strategic line for evangelization.

In reflecting on the content of this challenge some specific points emerged: create open communities that facilitate the sharing of faith, life

and mission among ourselves and with others; nurture interpersonal relationships and a lifestyle in accordance with our vocation; experience the gift and the challenge of intercultural communities; be communities that are inserted and committed to the surrounding context and to the local church, making ourselves visible and points of reference in the places where we live.

1. The need for community: a concept that needs to be understood and clarified with special attention

To live in the company of others is today, and always has been, a vital need. The “I” is formed in relation to the “you;” we grow in our sense of being humanness in our encounter and relationship with another. Without the other our existence lacks meaning. *“The essence of the human person is discovered in relationship with the other,”* states Buber.¹ A great amount of our happiness lies in our capacity for, and the possibilities we have, to be part of the life of another and the place of the other within our own hearts. Therefore, it is logical to desire and seek relationships that allow us to channel this vital need.

If we take a close look at the world and the societies where we are present, in general, we find individualistic cultures, where the “I” comes first and the values that derive from the ego. As human beings we need to feel part of a group that sustains and fortifies us, that gives us security and confidence. *“Community life needs to redefine itself with creativity. Super-modern societies create distress, and the need for community appears with force as a way to diminish anxiety and confusion,”* states Benjamín González Buelta².

We need one another, and yet, we know from personal experience that to share our life with others is not always easy. Building community on a daily basis and in whatever circumstances is a challenge. Beyond this vital and intrinsic need we have as persons, the desire to strengthen community is often based on the emptiness and dissatisfaction that we feel, on what we wish it would be and is not, on a reality which seems incapable of providing more.

Without discounting all these factors, the desire for community also expresses the realization that it is essential to our option for religious life. It plays a definitive role in our mission of evangelization. This feeling, which perhaps we do not fully understand, holds within it the need for *“something different.”* We must attentively listen to this yearning, and to the degree that we are able, respond to it.

The gift of convocation

To live together, persons of different ages, from diverse backgrounds and mentalities, and different styles... is a miracle. It goes beyond human logic. To experience this mystery on a daily basis and to live it as a gift, directs us to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who calls us and makes us brothers and sisters: *“It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain,”* (Jn. 15:16) It is a call that makes us persons who can respond to his love; not because of our own strength and merit, but by the action of the Spirit within us. Only from the awareness of this gift can we accept this miracle of the Spirit and prepare ourselves to create fraternity in our community and beyond.

The experience of this profound reality brings us down from the false pedestals where we are accustomed to place ourselves, and it sets our feet on the ground in our true place as creatures, where we can see those with whom we share our lives each day as companions on the journey; whether they be old or young, with traditional or forward ways of thinking, from the north or from the south...

To be companions, with the depth and seriousness this entails, places us around *“a table that is shared”*, symbol and memory of the love of Jesus of Nazareth who willingly surrendered himself to the end. Sharing at this table, with the awareness that it is a gift, little by little, teaches us to order and give the rightful place to our personal priorities, and to discover in a vocation of selfless service, freedom; and fullness, the meaning of our lives. Sharing at this table allows us to be solidarity with the lost causes of the human family and makes us bearers of hope and union.

From this perspective, every effort we make towards creating community as men and women who willingly, generously and eagerly respond to being sent where the need is greatest and most urgent, is significant. When we are asked to leave a particular responsibility or charge, or when the mission assignment I receive does not coincide with my expectations, or in the face of certain circumstances such phrases as: *“they’ve used us,” “we are no longer of any good,” “I am not appreciated as I deserve...”* lose their strength; they are out of place. Only from the awareness of a gift received can we take our place alongside one another as brothers and sisters at the service for a great cause.

The place community holds

From the beginning, Jesus looked for companions, *“...that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach”* (Mk. 3:14) The task was arduous, the establishment of the Kingdom, a new world order, would

be brought about by him and his group in a new kind of relationship: “*You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father... so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.*” (Jn. 15:14-16)

Like Jesus, our founders and foundresses sought out companions to fulfill the mission with which they had been inspired. The community, the “*group of friends in the Lord,*”³ in the words of Ignatius of Loyola, or in the words of Jeanne de Lestonnac, our Foundress, “*there is nothing I recommend more than friendship among you,*”⁴ are indispensable elements in our charisms, elements of identity. The community is for the mission: “*I have chosen you and I call you friends, so that you may go and bear fruit.*” Creating the bonds that make it possible is in itself a mission.

The response to be men and women who have been convoked entails forming part of a community. From this point of view the community becomes a fundamental reference point in our way of being and situating ourselves in the world. To lose sight of this basic support endangers the foundation of the building

The assortment of values, life styles, ways of doing things and situating ourselves..., according to each time and place, creates a unique culture by which we are recognized as a group and by which we interact with others. At this time in history, we carry out various tasks, belong to different work groups, have various relationships, even virtual ones; we belong to a multitude of groups that, in one way or another, shape our identity. When the community occupies its rightful place, these multiple belongings offer us a wider vision of the world; they enrich us, not only personally but also communally.

We also know from experience that it is impossible to build community, much less strengthen it, if we do not dedicate quality time and space to it. According to Uriarte, “*live, celebrate, collaborate and share*” are the four verbs that generate the meaning of belonging.⁵

2. We share our lives in order to live with greater meaning

“*We are born to live. Thus the most important treasure we have is time. Our journey on this planet is so short that it is senseless not to enjoy each step and each instance with the help of a limitless mind and a heart that can love much more than we can imagine.*” This reflection from the singer Facundo Cabral captures the importance of not wasting one’s life and living

it meaningfully.

From the perspective of a Gospel that is totally illogical in the eyes of the world, “*whoever loses his life for my sake will save it* (Lk. 9:24-25), our life is meaningful to the degree that we place it at the service of others. In this daily offering we are growing in freedom and availability so as to be able to recognize and accept what the Lord gives us as gift through life circumstances. We grow in our relationship with Him, that loving presence that moves us and asks us to see him in the hungry, the thirsty, in strangers..., in all the poor and vulnerable of this world.

But this paradox of “*losing one’s life in order to save it,*” contains yet another paradox: we can give to others what we are if we recognize that we have something good and valuable to share. The “more” we ask of community, in some way, implies this desire to help us recognize the gift that we are to others.

Helping ourselves to acknowledge the giftedness of each person, of each community, gives us meaning and enlivens us. Not to recognize this gift depreciates and belittles us, it lowers our self-esteem to the point of making us disappear. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we lack vigor and the determination in communicating to young people that religious life is a source of meaning for us and for the world.

Accepting ourselves in our vulnerability

We feel comfortable and good when we find the affective climate necessary to be ourselves. This is possible if an environment of mutual confidence is created; confidence is the decisive component for the building of community. In order to attain this climate, we must overcome our need for invulnerability and this is no easy task in daily living.

In fact, most of the time, differences, complaints and weaknesses are an impediment for building community. However, realistically facing them as a normal part of being human, instead of lamenting over them, makes it possible to complement one another. We can help one another to grow, allowing the greatness within each person to emerge so that the gifts and energy of each one can flow and combine with one another.

To own and name our weaknesses and what is happening to us, frees us from the painful process of trying to safeguard our image. It will enable us to create bridges with others and establish relationships of mutual help. Lowering our defenses opens us up to see the way others perceive us. This makes mutual interpretation and fraternal correction feasible, identifying what is not consistent with our option of following the Lord, and it helps us

to find the means to overcome our weaknesses.

At times we encounter problems that make community life difficult, problems that could have been resolved with appropriate help at an earlier stage. It is important to keep in mind that we are creating difficulties for the future when we do not confront situations because of fear of conflict, or because we do not have the courage to confront a person whom we consider to be stronger than ourselves, or due to implicit or explicit alliances: “I do not question your behavior so that you will not question mine.”

It is also true that we need to have a respectful, kind and loving patience with one another; that is, loving in the deepest sense of the word, a love that will free us and allow the best aspects of ourselves to emerge. Anthony de Mello captures the precise connotation in one of his stories:

“For many years I was a neurotic. I was anxious, depressed and egotistic. And everyone insisted on telling me to change. I constantly told myself how neurotic I was. And I was offended, even though I was in agreement with them. I wanted to change, but I could not convince myself, no matter how hard I tried. The worst thing was that my best friend constantly reminded me how neurotic I was. And he also insisted on my need to change. And I agreed with him; I could not feel offended with him. Therefore, I felt helpless and trapped.

But one day he told me: “Don’t change. Continue to be as you are. In reality it does not matter if you change or not. I love you as you are and I cannot stop loving you.”

Those words resonated in my ears like music: ‘Don’t change. Don’t change. DON’T change... I love you.’ Then I relaxed. I felt alive. And, oh, how marvelous, I changed.”¹

Treating each other with respect, avoiding judgments and derisions, looking at ourselves and one another with eyes of mercy and tenderness as God looks at us, helps us to be responsible for the goodness we have within ourselves. It helps us discover the goodness and human worth that exists not only in ourselves, but in others as well. It humanizes us.

In this dehumanized world, making our communities places of humanization, that is environments where one can perceive attentiveness, intent listening, acceptance without reproach, sincere affection, a recognition that gives dignity... is to make it possible for our lives to have meaning. It also makes us more capable of planting seeds of human kindness in our contexts.

Transforming routine into opportunities for renewal and change

Life is made up of rites: we have a schedule for eating, praying, getting up in the morning. We have certain ways of doing things, even of where to place objects... Rites are important. *“It’s good to have rites,” says the fox to the little Prince. ‘If, for example, you come at four o’clock in the afternoon, then at three o’clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o’clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you...”*²

Rites help us to order ourselves, to know what we have to do, to take advantage of our time. There are some people, like the Little Prince, who help us prepare our hearts and express the most fundamental values. But also, by always doing the same thing, rites can become routine, and routine is boring; it wearies and makes the most important things lose their meaning.

Life will regain its vigor, vitality and newness when we dare to let go of “we’ve always done it this way” and to freely look at why we do it, to evaluate it together and, if necessary, to find new ways of doing things. It will consequently be more meaningful.

As Church, we are going through a time in which it seems that the past external forms and rites are returning to the forefront. It is important to review what we have let go, as well as to be conscious of new values that we have acquired and how they are lived in our daily lives. If not, we might find ourselves living a “faded” version of our call or going back to a past that does not respond to today.

Have the courage to give up that which possesses us

Our culture stimulates our senses and promotes the joy of accumulation. Like others in this world, we allow ourselves to be trapped by seductive sensations that *“are planted in the furrows of our natural appetites and in the artificial goods promoted by the marketplace...”*³ Almost without noticing, the result is that multiple objects invade our personal spaces and communities. We find them indispensable, and to possess them as personal property seems the most normal and natural thing.

In some way, what we possess and what possess us binds us and paralyzes us. We should ask ourselves what is truly necessary and what is superfluous. Having the courage to question how we are influenced and marked by certain lifestyles may be unsettling, but it will truly help us live with greater meaning. Neither our religious life, nor our community, is

meaningful when we live in mediocrity, when we lose the radical dimension of the Gospel.

In a world marked by social inequities and divisions, a simple and uncomplicated life, not focused on having, is a prophetic force. The secret of our apostolic vocation: *“to be in the world but not of the world”* (Jn. 17:14), takes on a pedagogical character because it makes evident, by word and through life, that it is possible to live in another way, and that the reason for the struggles and efforts of the human family go beyond having, beyond power and pleasure.

Intensify the joy that no one can take from us

A few months ago, I met with one of our young sisters whom we had recently appointed to form part of a province governance team. She told me that after beginning this service she felt that one of the fundamental tasks in leadership is to safeguard joy.

The reality that surrounds us is not easy; generalized inequality and poverty that affects many parts of the world, the global economic crisis in which we are immersed, the wars and conflicts in different parts of the planet, the ecological deterioration, the confusion and depreciation of values and traditions that have provided a foundation for the human family. These are all factors that intensify the situation. At the same time, some of the situations that we live in our institutions worry and disturb us: aging, decreasing numbers, lack of new members in some contexts. We cannot deny that there are difficulties; we would be very naïve to do so. Life in itself is complex and for many people at this time in history, it is even more so.

Incarnated in this reality, embracing it from within, God reveals himself as Father and sends us his Spirit. God invites us to allow him to act in our hearts and to discover the signs of life that also exist in our world and in religious life today. We need a heart wherein God dwells in order to face life’s struggles and not give up in the face of difficulties, not to evade problems, injustices, lack of solidarity, not to allow ourselves to be seduced by the superfluous, by comfort, by a devouring consumerism....

It is in our desire that God dwell at the center of our hearts that we encounter one another, those who have been invited to follow him. His love unites us in a free relationship and readies us for passionate service in his Kingdom. It is in allowing God to be God in us, with the help of the persons with whom we journey, that we experience profound joy, the joy that *“no one can take from us”* (Jn. 16:22)

When we have been looked upon by the Lord, like Mary, we can proclaim as she did that “God has done great things with my lowliness.” (Lk.1:48) And overwhelmed with joy we can hasten to meet our brothers and sisters. We can help one another to light the way to new life.

At times our communities do not transmit a deep sense of joy, and it seems that we lack the energy to hasten to meet those who need us. We cannot hide behind the excuse that we have good reasons, nor can we allow it. Rather we must together return to the source of our joy, look into his eyes, pray and say “*do not take from me your laughter... I would die.*” And when we return “*with tired eyes sometimes to have seen the unchanging earth,*” repeatedly ask “*do not take from me your laughter... I would die.*”¹

3. Glimpse of the future: the fundamental meaning

God calls us and convokes us to participate in his saving mission, to create together “*a new heaven and a new earth*” (Is. 65:17), contributing what we have been given, what each one is, the uniqueness and specifics of our charisms. It is in this dedication to the service of the Kingdom where the community and each person finds their reason for existence. If we want to strengthen community, we cannot lose sight of this fundamental meaning, recreated and fulfilled in our history today.

Contribute what is specific to our charism

Like every vocation, the charism of each institute is a gift. The principle elements that shape it allow us to identify ourselves as a group and also to be identified by others. Institutional identity distinguishes and differentiates us, not so as to separate us from the world and the church of which we form part, but to have a vision of our specific mission, that special and important something that we have to offer to others.

Awareness that the charism of our institute is a gift binding us to others who, throughout history, have made possible the dream of our founders, transforms us into active agents of a tradition that we create in the present so that it can continue into the future.

The authenticity of our institutes is confirmed to the degree that they are able to interact with their surrounding context. In this interaction we, the bearers of the charism, become the actors and creators. Our community dynamic, which is more than the sum of the individuals, influences our reality, transforming it. At the same time, this reality progressively modifies our ways of acting.

Each charism, by means of the freedom and creativity of those who live

it, influences reality in a particular way. It is this reality that at the end gives it an approval of belonging and nurtures it.

The experience of religious communities after Vatican II, dynamically opening the doors and windows to the world, enriched and recreated our charisms. Reflecting on the process followed by the Company of Mary during those years after the Council, we highlight the following: "... we opened up to new ways of living community, in closer contact with the suffering, hope, disappointment and aspirations of many of our people, the majority of them marked by poverty and injustice. All of this challenged us in many different ways. It heightened our awareness of the plurality in the contexts where we lived, and the need to continue uniting our ~forces, going beyond borders, to discover and live diversity as a richness and union as strength. We discovered from our own experience how the Gospel penetrates the different cultures and nurtures the seeds of the Kingdom that are already present there.²

Contributing who we are as an Apostolic Body, as a gift to the Church and the world, not seeing ourselves as owners but rather as grateful witnesses in constant dialogue with the needs and challenges of each context, is a responsibility and a commitment to be lived out each day.

Witnesses of unity in diversity

While we have the obligation to contribute what is unique to each charism in this diverse and pluralistic world, it is a need and a challenge to engage in intercongregational dialogue and to work together among different institutions and groups.

Daring to create the "common table of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 14:15) means opening our minds, our hearts and our communities to differences. It requires of us to find the means to facilitate the encounters and interrelationships that will make that which is common emerge and foster the experience of complementarity as a gift. Charisms, like people, are affirmed and strengthened in the process of interaction. To confront our charisms with that which is different obliges us to be authentic, to get rid of the superfluous, and to name our strengths and our weakness. In the encounter with the diversity of charisms we discover our true selves and the particular contribution we can make.

The author, Carlos Fuentes, offers an important reflection in this regard: "*as citizens, as men and women from both villages, the global and the local, — as religious institutions, we can add—we must challenge prejudices, go beyond our personal boundaries, increase our capacity to give and receive.*

The lesson for our imperfect human family is that when we are exclusive we are impoverished, and when we inclusive, we are enriched.”³

Our present age challenges us to strengthen our particular charism in communion with those who are similar, as well as with those from whom we are most different. To build the Kingdom like Jesus of Nazareth, we need everyone’s hands and, above all, hands that are capable of intertwining with others to form the human community.

Our journey with the laity is also a sign of our times for religious life today. We are experiencing it as a path of life. At the same time we are aware of the challenge to continue working towards co-responsibility and complementarity in the mission, as well as investing in joint formation processes regarding the charism and spirituality that sustains the mission; all of this in terms of how it corresponds to what is particular to each state of life, helping each other to live it and recreate it.

In this pluralistic world, interconnected and global, intercultural dialogue has a definitive role for the future of the human family. Religious life has much to offer in this regard. When in our intercultural communities we truly accept different cultures and the persons from these cultures, when in our conversations and in our daily sharing we take time to get to know the gift and the seed of the gospel that is proclaimed by the different cultures and what in way each one needs to be evangelized, we become like those tiny vibrating stars that light the way.

Drafting a plan of “where we want to go” and making decisions

The challenges we face in today’s reality are many and our strengths, I dare to generalize, are few. Working for the Kingdom demands quality, a life consistent with what we profess and a clear commitment that responds to a common project. The stress, rush, frenzy, living on the surface of our reality without time to approach it in depth and to enable the buds of new life to spring forth, are aspects that cannot be part of the more human world we want to create. We must plan our mission, determine where to direct our efforts, prioritize and make decisions.

What we definitively seek in our decision making is to discover *“among so many new possibilities that seductively shine before us, what is the new response that God is proposing to us today, and what precisely should be our collaboration?”⁴*

To interpret, recognize and concretize what God wants of us today, requires of us processes of reflection and discernment by which each person, each community and the entire apostolic body can feel implicated

to the degree that corresponds to each one. Open dialogue, sharing one's opinion freely, expressing one's thinking in the joint process of seeking, helps us accept the decisions that are made. We can then support them and commit ourselves to them, even though in some cases we might not be in agreement, or it does not respond to what I would have wished. Strengthening the spirit of body is indispensable if we want to fulfill a common goal.

It is true that we cannot always be sure that the decision made was the right one. However, not making a decision is also a way of making one. There is an ancient saying that states, "a decision is better than no decision at all." In this fast spinning world, making a decision is imperative and to back track or change the direction when we see that we were mistaken is an attribute of the humble and wise.

At this point in history, more than at any other time, we are urged to make decisions for many different reasons: enabling our "doing" to be the manifestation of our being, not losing ourselves in sterile activism; that the common project that is visible in our works, ministries and presences be supported by apostolic communities that are open, flexible, welcoming, living with a sense of meaning and are signs of hope and humanness; that in the restructurings and mergings taking place, the local community may be where our following of the Lord and commitment to the Kingdom is confirmed.

It is urgent that we make courageous and daring decisions in the shaping of our communities in order to find new formulas that nurture a greater reaching out and presence among the poor. With the generational gap that we have in some of our contexts, this redefinition must be made with creativity so that the new generations may find life, and where it might be possible to continue maintaining and nurturing the flame of faith and commitment.

Making decisions entails choosing and knowing how to let go of what has been previously achieved and has given security. Letting go is painful and, as communities, we should help one another to live the necessary paschal process: making it possible for the pain to be released so that God's new plan can be embraced with joy and proclaimed where God awaits us.

4. In conclusion: foster the desire for the "more"

The "more" that we ask of our communities contains multiple facets and activates our desires; to desire enables us to go beyond, to break the barrier of the impossible, and to put ourselves in motion. What we are is the sum of what we have and of our dreams and ideals.

To remain in what we have accomplished, to look only at what we do not have or what is lacking, to long for what we were and we no longer are, paralyzes us. It traps us in the pursuit of securities and impedes recognizing and giving what we do have.

To courageously surrender the gift we have received is to return to life and to God. Many faces await us; their voices call out to us, their cries and their silence.

Many brothers and sisters in need of bread, solidarity, justice, and God await us... They need to find men and women who work together to change unjust structures, who seek ways to influence the channels that cause and create them and to transform what must be transformed in our reality; they need to find groups of men and women who, with our lives, make visible universal fraternity.

We must approach these faces, share in their lives, and commit ourselves to their struggles in order to revive, once again, the desire for the “more” and for them and for all those who await us, and together with them continue to journey.

Finally, we must share with them the treasure we hold within, the All-loving God who needs us and our communities, who needs our human weakness, to continue his evangelical and evangelizing work, to offer paths of fulfilling lives and authentic happiness.

¹ M. Buber, *What is Man?* Economic Cultural Fund. México 1949, p.147

² B. González Buelta, *Caminar sobre las aguas. Nueva cultura, mística y ascética*. Sal Terrae, Santander 2010, p. 173

³ Ignatius of Loyola's letter to Juan de Verdolay, Venice, July 24, 1537

⁴ Juliá (Françoise de Toulouse). *La vie de la vénérable Mère de Lestonnac, Fondatrice de l'Ordre des Religieuses de Notre-Dame*. Toulouse, 1671, p. 194

⁵ Cf. J.M. Uriarte, *Ser Sacerdote en la cultura actual*. Sal Terrae, Santander 2010, p. 35. Citado en *Caminar sobre las aguas*, o.c., p. 173

⁶ A. de Mello. *The Song of the Bird*. Sal Terrae, Santander 1992, pp. 92-93

⁷ A. de Saint-Exupèry, *The Little Prince*, chap. 21

⁸ Cf. *Caminar sobre las aguas*, o.c., p. 30

⁹ P. Neruda, *Versos del Capitán*, “Tu risa”

¹⁰ Conference of Superior Generals of the Company of Mary and the Societé de Jésus Christ. *Como comunidad de memoria. Desde el concilio Vaticano II hasta nuestros días*. Ediciones Lestonnac. ODN IV Centenario, 2007, pp. 131-132

¹¹ C. Fuentes, *En esto creo*. Seix Barral, Barcelona 2002, p. 323

¹² *Caminar sobre las aguas*, o.c., p. 90

SPIRITUALITY IN THE SERVICE OF GOVERNMENT

“MARIAN” DECALOGUE TO ILLUMINATE THIS ANIMATION SERVICE

Fr. Gonzalo Fernández Sanz, CMF

Gonzalo Fernández Sanz, a Claretian missionary, is the General Consultor and General Spirituality Prefect of his congregation. He has a licentiate in dogmatic theology. He has taught in the Claretian Theological Studium in Madrid, in the Theology Institute for Religious Life, and in the Claretianum of Rome.

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Introduction

It is not rare for members of general counsels to complain about the service entrusted to them. And not so much for reasons that are “external” (continuous travels, exposure to illness and changes of various kinds, treatment of delicate and problematic situations, etc.) as for “internal” sentiments that have to do, above all, with being involved in many things but not “in the reality.” Being a general superior or a member of the general council implies having a broad vision that includes the totality of the institute. But this very richness of perspective becomes, at times, an obstacle to regular and stable community life, a rhythm of serene and scheduled prayer, regular work with the same people and, in short, a commitment incarnated in the here and now of daily life. These difficulties usually increase as one ages. Travels, for example, are usually lived at the beginning as “enriching adventures.” As time passes they become ever more tiresome. How can one be committed to 150, 300, or 3000 persons who live in such diverse contexts as Italy, India and Congo? **The combination of the local and the universal is, to my way of thinking, the cross of a service like this, but also, paradoxical as it may seem, a privileged source of spiritual growth.**

This morning's encounter is not an adequate space to treat all the symptoms of the "syndrome of the superior or councilor general." Nine years ago when I began a service of this kind, I gained by reading the testimony of someone who humorously reflected on his Roman experience. In an article he reviewed many of the matters that form part of our conversations when we meet people who are in the same situation: the sensation of living in "no man's land," feelings of loneliness and ineffectiveness, lack of cultural adaptation, etc. But he concluded with an affirmation that is useful for us: "It all depends on the *key* signature that you place at the beginning of the staff."

Today I would like to propose a reflection to you, almost a meditation, about this matter in the light of the mystery of the Nativity, the liturgical season that is about to end. Or, to be more exact, what precedes the Nativity. As you know, in the Gospel of Luke, the infancy occupies the first two chapters. Probably many of you have reflected about them these last weeks using Benedict XVI's book "The Infancy of Jesus." We're going to focus on the figure of Mary as she appears only in the first chapter, in the stages before the birth of Jesus with which chapter two opens. There are two icons (that of the annunciation and that of the visitation) that can help us illuminate the spirituality of those of us who, because of the assignment received, also live our "annunciations" and "visitations." This is the key of our musical staff. Beginning here we can successfully interpret all the notes of the melody.

I propose a simple decalogue formed with some significant words. I do not pretend to propose Mary as a kind of "patron" of superiors general or of counselors, but what she lived in relation to God and to human beings helps us understand and better live our service.

1. "Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you!" (Lk 1:28)

It's not possible to live leadership service "spiritually" and therefore, converted into a source of personal growth when it is not accepted as a grace. It's true that in our electoral processes we are not exempt from the temptations that affect other human groups: cultural or ideological affinities, balance of "powers," personal ambitions, various kinds of pressure, etc. but, on the whole, I think that for the majority of us the service of general leadership isn't something desirable in itself, but rather **an assignment that we accept with docility** through the election processes or designation proper to our institutes.

On the one hand, it's healthy to demythologize these processes, remove

the excess of formality and solemnity. Besides, it's a matter of temporary service. **Once we finish, we return to ordinary life.** This cures us of the temptation of careerism, so frequent in the ecclesiastical world. Our highest aspiration in life is to "become sisters or brothers." That's enough for us.

On the other hand, without eliminating this air of simplicity, it's necessary to discover that the assignment received is, in reality, **a new grace that alters our lives;** that is, a gift from God who shows us God's love and gives us God's very Spirit to carry out this mission. Better still, it allow us to surrender our lives so that our brothers or sisters may faithfully live the vocation they have received. I believe that, like Mary, we also should feel ourselves "full of grace." Traditional theology even speaks of a "grace of office." And where there is *grace* ("charis") there is always *joy* ("chara"). Therefore the first sign of spiritual health is overcoming the temptation to be always complaining, exaggerating the difficulties of the job, or presenting it as a heavy cross. **If we have been "blessed" we should be "grateful."** Thus indirectly we help our sisters and brothers to accept their own destinies with serenity and joy.

How can we be "animators" without continually recreating the origin of joy, particularly today when we live a permanent temptation to discouragement? Who animates the animators? Let's recall that it's not about something we seek but rather about a mission we receive. Although we walk through dark valleys, we do not fear, because He is with us. (cf. Psalm 22/23)

When one is elected or designated a member of a general council, she experiences a kind of "annunciation" that starts up a complex process made up of surprises, fears, questions, doubts, acceptance, etc. But it should never be forgotten that at the beginning of everything there is a **grace** ("Rejoice, full of grace") and at the end a **commitment**: "May it be done in me according to your word." These are the two poles that allow us to better understand the process.

2. "Mary was deeply troubled by these words" (LK 1:29)

In spirituality there should be no fear when one is troubled. Ours is not a spirituality for "feeling good," for soothing tensions, but rather for **discovering God in the web of our lives just as they are with their lights and shadows.** In the service of general leadership we often experience many agitations produced by:

* Persons who decide to leave the institute, at times without an adequate process of discernment, and by their actions they make us question the

quality of our formation itineraries.

- * Governance decisions that we judge to be mistaken
- * Scandals in the Church, in other institutions and in our own
- * Problems within the general team because of incompatibility of characters among its members, jealousies, difficulties for working as a team, lack of communication, etc.
- * Sensation of a loss of time and inefficacy, above all for those who work in communities in which they carry out an intense work and with a great range of personal relationships.
- * Difficulties to interpret correctly the present moment of religious life and, therefore, its immediate future.
- * Criticisms on the part of some ecclesial sectors—including certain pastors—and also some local social media.

But perhaps the deepest anxieties, those which most disturb us, are those that come from the very Word of God. In the case of Mary, the agitation is produced in the face of the words of the angel. In ours, it often has to do with the mismatch that we see in ourselves between the mission entrusted to us and our personal poverty. Often, in canonical visits or chapters we have to speak, for example, of the necessity of prayer in religious life, while we observe that our own prayer life is very deficient. And the same can happen with relation to the vows, community life or apostolic creativity. One “fears” not being on a par with the Word of God she has to serve, not being coherent and, finally, not being credible. The lack of credibility is what most undermines the efficacy of our service.

This fear can paralyze us—it’s true—, but can also help us mature spiritually because it **allows us to be conscious of what we really are** (without believing that because we belong to the central government we have sanctity assured) and, on the other hand, **it opens us to the action of God** “in” us and “through” us. When both dimensions form part of our experience they also prepare us to accompany our brothers and sisters who experience anxieties and fears in their religious life.

3. “Do not be afraid” (Lk 1:30)

In the midst of anxieties, the message of the Lord, through his innumerable angels, is unequivocal: “Do not be afraid.” This message of the angel Gabriel is like an anticipation of the *ritornello* of Jesus to his apostles in diverse circumstances: “Fear not” (cf. Mt 10:31; 28:10; Lk 12:32; Jn 6:20; 16:33).

Fear is a sentiment that paralyzes us, that blocks all the resources that the Lord has granted us for carrying out the assigned task. Although it is a constant in every spiritual experience, it must be recognized that in Religious Life today there is an overdose of fears. They have to do with:

- * Vocational decrease
- * Progressive aging and the problems associated with elderly sisters
- * Lack of understanding in society, and sometimes in the Church
- * Inefficacy or invisibility
- * The up-rootedness produced by the restructuring of provinces
- * Possible economic poverty

It is only faith that allows us to discover that there is no reality, opaque as it may seem, that cannot be penetrated by God's light. Actually our fears and agitations end up being a problem of faith. It is hard to believe that God is there where we don't see signs of his presence. This is why, **in our spirituality, it is so important to feed on the Word of God**, through the daily exercise of "lectio divina," a practice that we are cultivating more and more. In the midst of so many messages that invite us to fear (we are thinking now of the black predictions about the future of the European Union), the Word of God, without ignoring reality, always transmits the same message to us: "history, yours and that of the world, does not escape from the hands of God. Therefore there's no reason to fear."

I believe that one of the best services we can offer through general leadership is that of **inviting our brothers and sisters to have no fear**. Naturally, this is not done through persons who are psychologically optimistic and much less ingenuous and immature persons who don't assume the difficulties, but through believers who have matured their hope in the assiduous contact with the Word of God.

There are so many present indicators of fear, in the framework of this grave crisis that we are suffering in Europe and so many other places in the world, that we can easily abandon ourselves to defeatism. In this context the service of animation acquires as well the traits of consolation ("Console my people, says the Lord," Is 40:1), patience ("Be patient," James 5:7), vigilance and prayer ("Keep watch and pray," Mt 26:41).

4. "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34)

Questions constitute an important part of our spirituality. We usually

present Mary as the “woman of the yes” (that is, the woman of the answer), but we forget that she is also the **woman of the questions**. This aspect would connect a lot with the millions of believers who feel perplexed at the moment of living their faith in the complex situations of life today. And also with our most lucid brothers and sisters who don’t refuse to question the fundamentals of their faith and their vocations: Is it true that faith fulfills the human being? Who assures me that celibate life doesn’t lead, finally, to great immaturity and personal sterility? Has the time already passed for traditional religious life? Is it worthwhile to keep looking for vocations when what we can offer them is only a monotonous and routine life style?

In the exercise of government we do not always know what we have to do. We also feel perplexed at the moment of treating personal situations, economic problems, restructuring processes, relationships with bishops, etc. In my experience of government I remember a companion from the United States who formulated questions during the council meetings. I realize that it sometimes seemed a little impertinent. But questions, when they’re well-formulated, already form part of the answer. They give us clarity, penetration. They keep us from repeating things from routine or laziness. What are the questions we ask today? By groups we will try to identify the seven questions that most concern us today in our experience of government.

5. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” (Lk 1:35)

The difference between spirituality and spiritualism lies in the role we assign to the Holy Spirit: a role as an extra (in the second case) or a role as the driving force (in the first case). I remember a phrase of the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx that impressed me in my years as a theology student: “The Holy Spirit does not usually make up for culpable incompetence.” **The coming of the Holy Spirit isn’t the “yellow salve” to resolve all the problems we encounter in the service of government.** But He is the driving force for the mission. Luke, the “Marian” author of the New Testament, is also the “evangelist of the Holy Spirit.” The Acts of the Apostles could be called the “Acts of the Spirit.”

As members of general governments, we should frequently recall that “no one can say Jesus is the Lord if he is not moved by the Holy Spirit” (1Cor 12:3b). It is this same Spirit who will keep reminding us throughout history about what Jesus has said (cf Jn 14:26) and will lead us to the full truth (cf Jn 16:12-13). In other words: without the Holy Spirit, religious life stops being *memoria Jesu* and simply becomes a *modus vivendi* that is more

or less acceptable according to the social fruits it produces.

In our case what is the significance of saying that the Holy Spirit will come upon us? I think we could answer: **we receive the gifts and fruits of the Spirit so as to carry out our mission**, not in order to impose our points of view or to carry out our personal projects. When we review the gifts (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel piety, fortitude and fear of God), we realize that, although given to all Christians, they seem more necessary for those who have been given the mission of discerning, making decisions, accompanying, consoling, etc. In the framework of this retreat it's appropriate for us to be conscious of this "spiritual equipment" and to be thankful for it. It will help us a lot to face our service from a more profound perspective, as women of faith. The service of animation, parting from the gifts of the Spirit, will undoubtedly produce the fruits of the Spirit in the persons with whom we share our life and mission: .charity, joy, peace, patience, longanimity, goodness, benignity, meekness, faith, modesty, continency and chastity,

6. "I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say" (Lk 1:38)

When one says "yes" to an election or a designation, she doesn't know exactly to what she's committing herself. Actually, she doesn't say "yes" to a program of government. Nor does she say "yes" to a precise job description. She says "yes" to God and to His word. She says: *Hinneni*, here I am, as have all the friends of God: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, etc. It is an exercise of absolute confidence. **We believe that the same God who has called us will go on bringing to completion His work in us.** That's why putting too many conditions doesn't usually lead to a good result.

I invite you to mentally evoke the moment in which the president of your General Chapter asked you if you would accept the election. What feelings predominated in you at that moment? In the case of being reelected one or more times, what other feelings appeared? Were you conscious that that "yes" was, at bottom, one more expression of your vow of obedience? The fundamental question isn't where am I going to be better off, but rather **what does God want of me in this moment of my history.** When the answers we give to ourselves are often contaminated by our interests, expectations, fears, etc., it's good that God speaks to us through other means. And one of them is the discerning that a General Chapter makes after having examined the situation of the respective institute and the profile of the persons who can undertake government tasks.

Once you say “yes” you shouldn’t be permanently questioning your reply. Our brothers and sisters have a right to leaders who assume the service with joy, who are not complaining about the cross that has fallen on them or comparing the size and difficulty of their service with the facility and attractiveness of others. **The “yes” also implies a spirituality of acceptance of the consequences, of normality and simplicity.** No one burdens us with a heavier cross than we are able to bear...with the grace of God.

The “yes” is modulated today with the key of “shared mission.” It’s not a matter, in the general government, of the one (the superior general) who orders and the others (the counse-lors) who just obey and execute the orders. **It’s a matter of exercising the service of government in solidarity.** A new spiritual window also opens here. I think that we could even speak of a **spirituality of shared mission**, which implies:

- * Recognizing the voice of the Spirit in the opinions of the other companions, although they don’t always coincide with one’s own point of view.
- * Daring to propose one’s own opinion after having prayed and reflected.
- * Introducing in the councils “other voices” coming from the lay people with whom we work, the pastors, some experts in the diverse topics, etc. so that discernment doesn’t become a purely domestic and self-referential exercise.
- * Sharing work as a team, willingly accepting the tasks given to us.
- * Making critical observations without the fear of breaking the good atmosphere.

7. “Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to a town of Judah.” (Lk 1:39)

I like this phrase of Luke because it applies *sine glossa* to the task of the members of general governments. A superior general or councilors are permanent ambassadors. **Itinerancy, “setting out” forms part not only of their work but also above all of their spirituality.** Your pathways go continually from north to south and from east to west. Going often by Fiumicino, Ciampino o Termini means something more than getting a plane or a train and beginning a new journey. In reality, airports, train or bus stations, are places that express the biblical “leave your land.” They invite to a permanent **spirituality of dis-installation**. Those of you who have been in government for a long time, haven’t you noticed that you tend to simplify your baggage? At the beginning, you think that everything is

necessary: clothes, books, notes, etc. Then you learn to live just with what is indispensable and you rely on the solidarity of your brothers or sisters *sur place*.

This “setting out on the road” also implies a **spirituality of openness to other countries, climates, languages, races, cultures, etc.** We could say that without realizing it we become more catholic, correct our Roman or European centralism and become aware that the Holy Spirit has reached all these places...before us. On the other hand this permanent openness which, at times, can cause physical or emotional weariness, obliges you to bring to bear a series of virtues proper to the itinerant person:

- * *Patience* to support the difficulties of any voyage (from the problems of obtaining a visa to the flight cancellations or delays and the inclement weather).
- * *Humility* to express yourself in a language you don't master, to value meals that don't attract you, to accept the welcome offered you.
- * *Capacity for surprise* to discover what is good and beautiful lived by our brothers and sisters, and which doesn't always coincide with what we had imagined.
- * *The ability to listen* to take on what the people in each place are living, trying to overcome prejudices, and avoiding the imposition of solutions without having explored the problems together.
- * *A special sensibility for the world of the poor*, of the millions of persons who live in conditions of war, hunger, malnutrition, exploitation, etc.
- * *A sense of humor* to accept not going under in the face of difficulties and to open doors that wouldn't otherwise.

When Mary starts out on the road she does it “*cum festinatione*.” Our Bibles usually translate it “in a hurry.” Just what we need to justify our accelerated life style! It would be better to say “promptly or without delay;” that is, without useless delays, putting our hearts into what has been entrusted to us. On the other hand, Mary, in her visit to Isabel, carries the gift of “peace” (*shalom*), of universal harmony: with oneself, with others, with creation and with God. Even more, she carries in her womb the “prince of peace,” a “Christ our peace.” She is *teofora*, God-bearer. Do we not find here a new inspiration for our spiritual path? **A member of the general government, in his or her visits, should also be a *teofora* o *teoforo*, should carry the gift of peace**, and not add more conflict to that which we sometimes find in some places.

8. “Blessed are you have believed” (Lk 1:45)

The most profound thing we experience in the service of government **is the experience of faith** in the God who had come before us, who acts in people, who creates cultures, who sustains life, who through the Spirit propels the evolution of the universe. Because of this, at the end of our years of service, may it be said of us what Isabel said to Mary: “Blessed are you who have believed...because what the Lord has promised you will be fulfilled.”

We are in the midst of the Year of Faith. Everywhere diverse pastoral initiatives are multiplying. For us every year is “a year of faith.” The question today is: **in what measure is our mission of governance helping us to believe more deeply and with more dedication?** This is a question that doesn’t allow generic replies. Each of us has our own personal experience, but I would like to point out some features that may be common:

- * Probably the contact with sisters of other cultures and openness to other churches have helped us **expand our image of God, to correct certain too-ethnocentric or cultural characteristics.** The “always greater” God can only be adored “in spirit and truth.” No image fits this God. We are in permanent purification.
- * It is also probable that we’ve had the opportunity to **reflect on the diverse “moments” in which Christian faith finds itself in different continents:** a beautiful dawn in Africa and in some parts of Asia, a splendid noon-time in a large part of America and Asia, and perhaps a disturbing sunset in Europe. These phases coincide, at times, with our own itinerary. When we speak of sunset, are we speaking of the annihilation or the end of an historical form (marked by a strong church-society symbiosis) that perhaps is illuminating new ways?
- * Probably **we have strengthened our conviction that religious life is, at bottom, an exaggerated life of faith** and then when this is lacking or greatly weakened it becomes impossible to face the problems that afflict us.
- * Finally, it is probable that **we have discovered the signs of God in multiple human experiences** and that we have grown in an attitude of obedience and in availability.

9. “My soul glorifies the Lord” (Lk 1:46)

The reply of Mary to the complement of her cousin Isabel is a song of praise to God. The *Magnificat* of Mary reveals very valuable elements of

her way of living faith in God and also of our Marian spirituality:

- * The experience of God as a source of joy and plenitude and not as alienation, as the “masters of suspicion” have denounced.
- * The experience of God as an experience of salvation or “founding experience” that allows us to move from a life centered in ourselves to a life centered in God and others.
- * An image of God who turns the unjust world we have constructed upside down and privileges the little ones.
- * An image of God that reveals his fidelity throughout the ups and downs of history and who gives us absolute confidence in his love in the midst of the constant historical changes that it has been our lot to live.

When we examine our spiritual experience in these years, do we recognize these traits in our experience of God? I think that a good exercise, especially in moments of testing, is to write our *Magnificat* in order to realize the works that God has been doing in us, in the Church and in the world and of which we, because of our service, are privileged witnesses. For a greater abundance of gifts, a greater expression of gratitude and praise.

10. “She returned to her home” (Lc 1:56)

Knowing how to go home is important. Not to experience the general curia as only a service station that provides what we need, but rather that it is “our” community, to which we owe respect, information, listening. An expression of our itinerant spirituality is that of informing without overwhelming, without taking the space of the sisters of the community who live in the house. Another is that of recognizing the service of the persons who support us in the rearguard.

But there is a **more radical “going home” that means knowing how to end with dignity the period for which we have been elected.** There are members of general governments who sigh for that moment. The service of general government seems to them an insufferable burden. On the other hand, others live a kind of depression. Accustomed to moving from one place to another, enjoying certain privileges, making decisions, being consulted, receiving many e-mails or telephone calls, etc. they feel a great emptiness—that at times borders on depression—when they have to return to their original provinces or go to a new mission. They can’t get used to living in a different way.

To avoid this crisis, which consists basically in confusing the role that

we represent with the person we are, it is good to become aware ahead of time that the service of general government is temporary. Besides, it's useful to cultivate all that facilitates the return: contact with persons of the original province, preparation for new ministries, etc. This "going home" can be an additional problem for the provinces that receive us (who, at times, don't know where to locate the "sacred cows") or, on the contrary, a great wealth, in the measure in which we are disposed to humbly share the experience accumulated during the years of service in the general government and that we show, as the fruit of this experience, a great availability, without demands that are inappropriate for someone whose life has been consecrated to the Lord.

Conclusion

As you have been able to observe, this "Christmas season" encounter has not been a treatise on the spirituality of the service of animation. I have preferred to accentuate only some aspects taking as a starting point the Word of God and its echo in Mary of Nazareth. I hope it may be enough to stimulate our prayer and reflection. We have time now for sharing in groups a couple of things:

- * What questions do we ask ourselves in our exercise of governance?
- * What *Magnificat* could we write out of our experience of governance?

INTERCULTURAL LEADERSHIP

Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM

Sr. Patricia Murray is a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto Sisters). She was the first Executive Director of Solidarity with South Sudan – a new inter-congregational missionary initiative involving 250 religious congregations from different countries.

Sr. Pat presented this conference to the UISG Plenary Assembly, in Rome, on May 2013.

Original in English

My short communication today on *intercultural leadership* – an immense topic in itself - draws on my personal experiences, study and reflection when involved in two different contexts: firstly during my time as a member of the General Leadership team of an international congregation and currently as Executive Director of Solidarity with South Sudan – a new inter-congregational missionary initiative involving 33 religious women and men from 21 congregations and 20 different cultures. Many congregations here in the room support Solidarity with South Sudan financially and with personnel. On behalf of the President, Sr. Elizabeth Hardigan rndm and the Board of Solidarity with South Sudan I want to express sincere thanks for this wonderful support.

Both my congregation and the Solidarity with South Sudan initiative grapple with intercultural challenges at the level of community living and ministry.¹ Both contexts highlight the necessity for leaders and members to understand the importance of culture and the dynamics of intercultural communication in order to build communion. Some of you might be tempted to sit back and say – well this doesn't apply to my congregation – we are all from the same culture. From experience I have come to realize that we have largely ignored local sub-cultures – different “identities” that can lie unacknowledged underneath a national political identity. In addition the congregational culture is often used to mask instead of celebrate difference.

What I share with you today comes from the steps I have taken on my own intercultural journey. I have learnt that respect for each culture is

above all a matter of justice when considering “right relationships” and “human flourishing.” The importance of acknowledging the cultural dimension of religious life has come to the fore more recently for a number of reasons. In some cases this realization has grown following the acknowledgment of hurts caused in the past when a congregation’s “founding or sending culture” - despite its good missionary intentions - became dominant and lacked what one author called “the humility to submit to a culture other than (its) own.”² In other situations an increase of new members from new cultures together with the decline in vocations from traditional congregational homelands has changed the face of the congregation. Finally our global living patterns and ease of transport has meant that many more communities – like those within the Solidarity with South Sudan initiative - have become increasingly multicultural with members coming from a wide spectrum of cultures. Donald S. McGavran refers to the flourishing of “luxurious human diversity” in the human community and this is so within religious communities. Others speak about this phenomenon as “a bewildering diversity”³ and Sr. Marie Chin RSM refers to “the labyrinth of cultures in religious life.”⁴ How then to exercise leadership amid this growing diversity?

In order to be able to help members learn to respect and celebrate cultural differences, leaders must understand the importance of culture for individual members. Because we are familiar with a certain culture we often believe that we understand it. I am constantly amazed at the levels and layers that exist in coming to understand any culture even my own – it is like peeling an onion. Culture describes everything that makes a large group of people unique. It has been compared to the air we breathe, which we really only notice when it is absent. Culture is seen as a “set of norms according to which things are run or simply “are” in a particular society, country or organization.”⁵ Harris and Moran have identified ten cultural categories which (global) leaders should understand with reference to any particular culture. These categories are: a sense of self and space, dress and appearance, time and time consciousness, values and norms, mental process and learning, communication and language, food and feeding habits, relationships, beliefs and attitudes and finally work habits and practices.

A brief look at this list reveals many areas that raise very differing opinions within religious communities. Such questions as “what dress is appropriate to wear?”; “what food should be served in a multicultural community?”; “why are decisions made in a particular way?” or “how are people selected?” are just some indicators of the need to appreciate the variety of ways that cultural impacts on daily life. We sometimes don’t realize the extent to which culture impacts on our religious living and

sharing. In international congregations when we ask members to volunteer for committees, we are using a process which favors members who come from individualist or “I” cultures – those cultures in which people self-identify in terms of their personal uniqueness. In my experience religious members from collectivist or “we” cultures seldom volunteer themselves because in their communal cultures, it is the community that calls a person forth.

What is needed in religious communities is the opportunity for honest sharing in a safe environment about cultural differences and their impact. Leaders can emphasize the need for communities to undertake such processes. In one such safe environment sisters shared the following experiences:

Many spoke about the enormous privilege of being able to experience a culture or cultures other than their own. One said “I feel that I have tasted a rich banquet hosted by members of the global community.....and I will never be the same again.” Some spoke of the experienceas an opportunity for personal transformation; of the challenge of becoming a learner and being led like a child; of uncovering one’s own prejudice and a tendency to stereotype others many spoke their new appreciation of the cultures in which they were living and ministering.

Then there were other voices:

A sister from an immigrant family said “while most of the community are warm and welcoming, some of them are very hard to accept me in the way of my English speaking and culture. I try very hard to speak like them but my tongue couldn’t do it well.”

An African sister living in a predominantly European community said “when others say *I don’t see color* while the remark is well meaning I don’t find it helpful as color is an essential part of who I am.”

Another sister said “living in an inter-tribal, inter-racial community is hard, you can’t identify the contents until you scoop into the pot and taste them.”

A sister living far from her home culture said “I fear to lose my identity and I regularly visit an elderly gentleman as an excuse to compensate my craving to hear and speak my mother tongue.”

Finally one sister shared how hurt she felt when community members from other cultures criticized or laughed at aspects of her culture saying “yes we practice communal work, speak using diminutives and our favorite color is black. We believe in the evil eye, souls, black magic, enchanted places, ancestors, dreams and premonitions.”

Many of these personal feelings would probably have been left unspoken if the opportunity to share had not been provided.

The missiologist, Aylward Shorter invites us to begin our intercultural learning by first believing "...in the positive character of other cultures" and then to actively nurture "the desire to be enriched by them." He says "(we) must welcome those of other cultures and give them (our) unreserved trust."⁶ To understand and respect another person's culture is to affirm another person's identity and acknowledge her dignity. When mutual respect and understanding is cultivated this helps to build trust and openness and helps intercultural communication between persons and groups. This, in turn, makes it easier for individuals to be willing to share more openly across cultural barriers. As leaders and members we must be prepared to learn not only the spoken language of the other, but also come to know the different cultural signs and symbols which transmit meaning –as we know a shake of the head doesn't mean the same thing in all cultures!

The cultural framework which I will present in a moment, has helped me to understand and appreciate cultural differences during these past years.⁷ Study of this or another type of framework should be part and parcel of initial and ongoing formation programs. In my experience many misunderstandings which arise in intercultural communities do so because members lack the basic knowledge to help them understand and interpret the communication or behavior of a person from another culture. Cultural knowledge *involves understanding the norms and communication rules of other cultures* so that the behavior of people from another culture can be interpreted accurately. Having this knowledge will also decrease the level of anxiety a person can often experience when entering a new culture context or on joining an intercultural group. Various studies indicate that most cultural awareness happens on a trial-and-error basis and not by undertaking a serious study of culture. These studies also note that the inaccurate knowledge gleaned on a trial and error basis can often have negative results.

The first eight lenses presented in the cultural framework deal with some critical ideas, feelings and values that make cultures different. They draw on the work of many cultural anthropologists and intercultural specialists including that of Geert Hofstede. He was asked by the international corporation IBM, to identify key cultural characteristics which should be taken into consideration by international managers in their leadership roles in a new culture. If international corporations take culture seriously then so too must we.

Lens number one highlights the role that contexts plays in communication –elements such body language, silence, facial expression have difference levels of importance in different cultures.

Lens number two focusses on how people define themselves and their relationship with others – we often talk about “I” cultures and “We” cultures. Lens number three highlights how power and leadership are distributed in cultures – whether people feel equal or unequal. Lens four focuses on a person’s degree of comfort in dealing with uncertain or unknown situations. Lens five notes a culture’s propensity to put more emphasis on *being* or *doing*. Lens six and seven highlight the different ways that time functions in a culture – emphasis on the short-term or long-term. And whether time seen as “clock time” to be measured incrementally or seen as “abundant time” and finally lens number eight looks at the way people orient themselves in space in relation to others.

1. Who Are We? High and Low Context Cultures
2. Who am I? Individual and Collectivist Cultures
3. Who Is In Charge? High and Low Power Distance Cultures
4. How We Deal with Uncertainty? High or Low Uncertainty Avoidance
5. Doing or Being: Masculine or Feminine Traits in a Culture:
6. Time Orientation: Long or Short Term Orientation
7. Time Orientation: Linear or Circular
8. Space Orientation: Close or Distant
9. Formation Learning Cultures.

Studying these eight lenses has helped me in intercultural communication. Just to give one example. I have learnt that in a high-context culture a communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is actually spoken.⁸ On the other hand in low context communication the message is mainly transmitted verbally and the verbal message is elaborate, highly specific and detailed.⁹ I have found that when, a person from a high-context culture is communicating something which is on her mind she will expect me the listener to know what’s bothering her so she will not explain in great detail. Instead she will speak in a circular way, going round and round the topic, providing all the pieces of the puzzle except the final central piece. My role as listener is to put this last piece of the jigsaw in place so interpret what has actually been communicated.

The ninth lens refers to work that has been done by the Franciscan David B. Couturier OFM and Mercy Sister Marie Chin. They have written extensively about the various formation cultures which have shaped members identities within congregations. They point out that formation programs have acted as cultural overlays or “narratives that are used to make sense of the Catholic world.”¹⁰ – and the congregation’s role in the church and the world. Between them they name 8 different formation cultures

(i) Essentialist (ii) Existentialist (iii) Socialization (iv) Behaviorist (v) Neo-Essentialist (vi) Liberation (vii) Professional (viii) Feminist

The writings of Courturier and Chin are readily available and in today’s presentation I do not have time to explain these different formation cultures. I am mentioning them here to emphasize our need to understand and accept that different approaches to formation have shaped individuals differently within our congregations and created a plurality of cultures. These different formation cultures become visible in key aspects of our congregational cultural system:¹¹ in beliefs, rituals, artifacts and affect. Marie Chin speaks about the impact of these different formation cultures as follows....

It is a very complex situation in which they interplay, intersect, coincide and are often at cross-purpose with one another....Each of these cultures has a distinct and internal coherent pattern of belief and meaning – of leadership and community for example – and each culture has tools for advancing and validating that meaning. Each has its theology, spirituality, prayer forms, rituals and language that is expressive of its worldview, its values, etc.¹²

There can be a strong emotional attachment to the various positions held. This can prevent a person from hearing another perspective and can serve to reinforce what she wants to hear or see whether or not it has actually been expressed. Chin points out that “it is at this gut level where the attitudes of resistance and hostility can hold sway or where acceptance and respect of otherness and difference can develop, and conversion and transformation can take place.”¹³ In Solidarity with South Sudan building community with members who come from different congregations, different formation cultures as well as different national or regional cultures has been a challenge. Much understanding and negotiation is needed, for example, to decide on forms of community prayer which is clearly influenced by each person’s congregational charism and formation culture. Therefore the importance for every religious to understand how particular formation processes have shaped members in order to understand how others even within the same congregation can interpret reality and act in the world in very different ways.

Becoming a Multicultural International Person

The goal as a leader is to become a person, who respects all cultures; a person who can appreciate difference and is ultimately able to constantly negotiate different worlds. As we realize more and more homogeneous cultures are relatively rare in today's world. Some use the term "multicultural" to designate such a person at home in the wider world; others use terms like "a universal person" or "intercultural or international person"¹⁴ Perhaps the following describes what happens when a person feels at ease in another culture:

I am now able to look at both cultures with objectivity as well as subjectivity; I am able to move in both cultures, back and forth without any apparent conflict.....I think that something beyond the sum of each cultural identification took place, and that it is something akin to the concept of "synergy", when one adds 1 and 1, one gets three, or a little more. This something extra is not culture specific but something unique of its own, probably the emergence of a new attribute or a new self-awareness, born out of an awareness of the relative nature of values and of the universal aspect of human nature.¹⁵

A Spirituality to Sustain an Intercultural Journey

The process of acquiring an intercultural identity, by moving away from a specific culture, and learning to identify with more than one culture and ultimately with humanity itself is a process of transformation. The following theological perspective has helped me on my intercultural journey. The Asian theologian Peter C. Phan says that the development of an intercultural identity is grounded in what he calls to the state of "*marginality*." This occurs when a person is able to stand poised between two different worlds while often experiencing an acute sense of displacement, loneliness, self-doubt, isolation, and restlessness. According to Peter C. Phan *marginality* is a state of being able to live in what he calls the "betwixt and between."¹⁶ We can have this kind of experience when living in a political, social, cultural or linguistic context that is not our own. It is also the common experience of any person or group who lives at the edge – at a periphery, a border or a boundary.

Jesus the Marginal Person

Our growth as intercultural persons can be sustained by the example of Christ who was truly the marginal person par excellence. St. Paul tells us

that within his godhead Jesus moved to a new state of being:

....being in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler....¹⁷

Within his society, Jesus was a stranger even to his own people. The letter to the Hebrews expresses this state of being as follows:

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured."¹⁸

The example of Jesus' life is calling each of us, to go outside the camp as he did to be among those who are different, to meet strangers and foreigners. He was both divine and human; he was of his people and yet an outsider to them. Jesus was someone who lived the *in-between* - in different worlds and different realities - belonging to both and yet living between both. He was the marginal person who broke down all barriers between Jew and Gentile, between male and female, between slave and free. He was the reconciler who could move between two or more worlds and also within each world. He was the one who could stand in the breach.

Vita Consecrata,¹⁹ tells us that consecrated life is essentially a sign of communion that makes the Church visible to humanity. The more recent realization that the Church is a communion of cultures means that religious congregations are well-placed to witness to this communion and mutuality. Our multicultural religious communities and ministry contexts and our desire to become intercultural persons offer a prophetic witness in a world divided by differences of race, ethnicity and culture. This has been particularly powerful witness in South Sudan where the local people often ask members of Solidarity communities "how do people from so many different tribes live together?" Our witness as religious to communion will be even more credible if we commit ourselves to a continual growth in understanding and appreciation of our cultural differences and seek to celebrate this luxurious diversity.

The questions facing political leaders in today's world is "How to bring east and west, south and north into a planetary community?" For religious leaders the question then is "what role can religious congregations play in such a global enterprise?" Secular writers use concepts such as "planetary culture" and "global common sense" to articulate a vision that is broader than any national or cultural interest but one which embraces all humanity.²⁰

Religious writers use concepts like “global solidarity”, “the transformation of culture and society” and “inter-religious and intercultural dialogue” to speak of this emerging reality. As leaders of religious communities your efforts to help the members of your congregation to grow beyond their cultural conditioning and make a significant contribution to the development of this interdependent world are immensely important. If as religious we can move in this direction we will have an important and credible witness to offer to a divided and fragmented world.

May we learn more about and constantly celebrate the rich and luxurious diversity of cultures that we find within our communities and places of ministry and in the words of the Irish poet John O’ Donoghue may we grow in the realization that...

...our friends were once strangers. Somehow at a particular time they came from the distance into our lives. Their arrival seemed so accidental and contingent. Now our life is unimaginable without them.

- ¹ IBVM like many congregations has members from many different cultures and subcultures on all five continents.
- ² Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture* (Nairobi: Paulist Press, 1998), 13.
- ³ Thomas Menampampil, SDB, *Cultures: In the Context of Sharing the Gospel*(Mumbai: St. Paul’s Press, 2002), 16.
- ⁴ Marie Chin RSM, “Towards a New Understanding of Cultural Encounter in Our Communities” in *Horizon*, Winter 2003, 16.
- ⁵ Ingmar Torbjörn, “Cultural Barriers as a Social Construct: An Empirical Validation” in Young Yun Kim and William Gudykunst ed., *Cross Cultural Adaptation: Current Approaches* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1988), 48.
- ⁶ Aylward Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, 13.
- ⁷ This framework is an amalgamation of the work of Edward Hall (Lens 1, 7 &8); Geert Hofstede (Lens 2,3,4 &5); Geert Hofstede and Michael Harris Bond (Lens 6); David Courturier, Marie Chin (Lens 9).
- ⁸ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976) 91.
- ⁹ Fred E. Jandt, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 220.
- ¹⁰ David B.Couturier OFM Cap, “At Odds With Ourselves: Polarization and the Learning Cultures of Priesthood,” in *The Seminary Journal*, December 2003, 1.

- ¹¹ **Beliefs:** a shared conceptual understanding of what and how things are; **Rituals:** patterns of action and practice; **Artifacts:** distinctive tools and instruments for action; **Affect:** patterns of emotion that guide appropriate behavior.
- ¹² Chin, "Towards a New Understanding of Cultural Encounter in Our Communities," 16.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Tagore and Walsh.
- ¹⁵ M. Yoshikawa, "Some Japanese and American Cultural Characteristics" in M. Prosser ed. *The Cultural Dialogue: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (Boston: Houghton Mills, 1978), 220.
- ¹⁶ Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination" in *Journeys at the Margins: Towards an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspectives*, eds. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1999), 113.
- ¹⁷ Phil 2: 6-8a.
- ¹⁸ Heb 13: 12-13.
- ¹⁹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, par. 42.
- ²⁰ Thompson (1973); Elgin (1983) and Northrop (The Meeting of East and West-1946) mentioned in Fred E. Jandt, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001).



*INTERVIEW
WITH SR. CARMEN SAMMUT*

*Sr. Carmen Sammut, Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (MSOLA).
UISG President.*

Original in French

1 *Sr. Carmen, after 28 years as a missionary in Africa, how do you keep your missionary spirit alive since your election as General Superior? What do you miss most from this practical experience, and what are you currently using from this experience?*

I think that my missionary spirit endures wherever I am living. I was sent here by the sisters when united in Chapter and I live out this responsibility as one sent. Jesus, in the gospels, first called to himself those whom he wished; they became his disciples before they became missionaries. For me, also, it is my familiarity with Jesus through prayer and action that keeps my spirit alive. Moreover, during two years, I visited our communities in nineteen countries. I was particularly pleased to see our young sisters in Africa with great responsibilities in their apostolate. I also saw our senior sisters in homes in Europe, in Canada and in the United States who continue to live their missionary call by attending to those who most need someone to listen to them, while being creative in responding in small ways to the needs of those in their new surroundings. During these visits, I saw and I let myself be touched by the poverty and the cries of the people, and with the sisters, we looked at how we could respond to their needs.

What I miss are Tunisian, Algerian, and Muslim friends and the opportunity to visit them, to welcome each other in our homes, to talk about what is important in life, death, children's education, the desire for a more just and fraternal society. I learned much from them about the value of life, forgiveness, and faith in a merciful God. My image of God and the human person has been enlarged. This experience helps me to trust in God beyond my limits, my prejudices and my first impressions to see and to bring out the best in each other, to foster creativity through a process of discernment.

2) Your congregation, the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, instead of welcoming African vocations, have supported the creation and formation of new native congregations in Africa. Tell us why this decision was made and what has been the lived experience.

Our congregation was born in northern Africa, in Algeria in 1869, for Africa. Our sisters first went to sub-Sahara Africa in 1888. The Missionaries of Africa, our brothers, preceded us by a few years. We had to work together to evangelize the people, that is to say, to do pastoral work, to catechize as well as to teach and care for those in need. Soon, in Tanzania, several young women wanted to become religious. The local church was young. We wanted to assist in the development of the church by a religious life adapted to the country. In 1903, the first congregation that we helped form was born; they are the Sisters of Our Lady Queen of Africa. Since, and until 1972, we have assisted in forming 21 congregations in 11 countries in Africa; we continue to accompany them in another way. Some of those congregations have become multicultural and missionaries beyond their boundaries. Some have assisted new congregations to be formed. We are proud of all these courageous women.

We have had a meeting with the General Superiors of those congregations in May 2013, and we are working towards greater collaboration among them. We are becoming aware that a common spirit links us. We want to meet more often and consider joint action in response to a felt need in the sense of justice. The future is open.

In recent years, we encourage African vocations among us, in our multicultural and missionary congregation because this responds to the desire of young women and the situation of the local churches is no longer that of the beginning of evangelization.

3) You have been elected President of the Executive Committee of UISG after the 2013 Plenary. The committee's mission is to lead and coordinate the Union and the vitality of close to 2000 leaders of congregations. How have you adjusted to this new challenge and what are your priorities?

That has been a shock for me, because I did not expect it. So, my first reaction was a void. Once we met as a committee, I saw that we are a group with great possibilities because we come from five continents, with varied experiences, a gamut of different languages and a variety of formation. I sensed the energy and the willingness of each one to invest in this new responsibility. Therefore, I became confident. The two days' meeting that we recently had to begin seriously to write our action plan confirms this

intuition.

We have had a Plenary on “Authority according to the Gospel.” We have written guidelines which launched us in major challenges. Our priority is that these challenges do not remain empty words, but that they may be deepened and lived by all the committees responsible in all congregations. We are certain that something will change if they become a reality. Another priority for us is communication among members, across the constellations and their delegates. This is very important because the danger is to believe that one is alone to bear the burdens and the joys and also to make difficult decisions. Today, the call to women religious, to my thinking, is to be united in order to act together and with other people. Each one brings her share, her manner of seeing and action, her charisma, according to the gifts given her by the Spirit and it is together that we have a certain richness of gifts for the world.

4) To animate religious life at this time where the “vocational map” is changing is a challenge for all congregational leaders. There are some groups that one must support in dying with dignity; there is new life emerging in other continents such as Asia and Africa. How can we face such a challenge?

Indeed, I believe that it is a great challenge not to only look at one side. There is, as in all life, birth and death. It seems to me that we must look at the purpose of religious life today and see where God is calling us at this time. It is not easy, because we are always tempted to rest, to remain in the same place, doing the same things. Society has changed, cultures have self-transformed, and we must seriously question why we ask young women to join us at this time. Then we must ask about a formation that responds to today’s exigencies, in a postmodern culture. This new life should be radically different, adapted to our century.

For congregations that don’t have any young members, comes the need to accompany them to celebrate the life that was theirs, to return to God the gift that was given to them, to rejoice at a mission accomplished. In Arabic, we say, only the face of God is eternal.

5) You were born in Malta, but you spent 28 years in Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania. You know the Arab world and its language. Can you share with us a few words about your reaction to a great contrast in culture and religion that is lived in the West with respect to that culture?

I had the opportunity to live so many years with Muslims, especially with women. They taught me freedom and gratitude. I lived my youth and

the beginning of my adult life in Malta, a Catholic country. I had a false and bad opinion of Muslims and Arabs. In visiting Muslim families, I could feel the beating hearts of mothers for their children; share their concerns to find what is necessary for nourishment, clothing and school supplies. They can sacrifice all for their children. I saw the advancement made in education for everyone. But employment opportunities did not follow, resulting in a great disappointment. “We believed that by tightening our belts for a child to go to university we would have a better life for the family, but ...” So, we see the phenomena that we witness today, sadly. The family contributes to send a young person to Europe, and it often ends in death in the desert or at sea. If the person succeeds in crossing, life isn’t that simple either.

I had the great privilege of being in Tunis at the beginning of the Arab spring. I saw young and old, men, women and children, seeking more freedom and justice. I understood that we can kill the body but no dictator can kill human dignity, the soul of anyone. After so many years of dictatorship, people who were always peaceful could endure no longer. Today, Tunisian men, and especially women fight to save the liberty and dignity of their people from the Islam power that awaits them. They do this through social networks, through marches, like the one on 13 August, Women’s Day, in Tunis. They do this through their commitment to the cause, despite and against all.

We, in the West, often mix the Muslims with the radical Islamists. It is as if, at the time of the second World War all Christians had the same ideas as Hitler and they acted like him. This is a serious error, because ignorance causes mistrust. We must distinguish the vast majority of Muslims who seek a dignified life and want peace, and the extremist groups or governments who want absolute power, using all means, including killing, to achieve that.

About the plight of refugees, each one of us, and especially our governments and our multinational societies should question their role in this phenomenon. When we take the wealth of a country, in league with rich and influential persons, without benefitting its citizens, we should not be surprised that many seek happiness elsewhere. We, in the West, also have had our flow of migrants. So, what are we going to do?

THE LIFE OF THE UISG

THE NEW EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE UISG 2013-2016

One sometimes hears complaints that when the UISG - an international union bringing together the superiors general of women's religious congregations in over 97 countries - elects its Executive Committee, its statutes are such as to result in candidates being selected exclusively from the so-called *Rome Constellation*.

The *Rome Constellation* is made up of international congregations whose generalates are to be found in Rome. The result of this year's election is a strikingly international team, with representatives from Malta, the United States, Japan, Nigeria, Poland, Brazil, Spain, and Italy.



In the same way, their academic formation shows both variation and complementarity: Nursing, Social Work, Theology, Law, Exact Sciences, Islamic Studies, English Literature, etc. Their pastoral experience covers everything from economic administration to spiritual direction, and includes ministries of health, education, justice, and peace.

The complementarity of their congregational charisms also manifests an indescribable richness; we can only list them:

- President** **Sr. Carmen SAMMUT** (*Malta*)
Missionary Sisters of Our Lady Queen of Africa
- Vice - President** **Sr. Sally HODGDON** (*USA*)
Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry

Members

Sr. Patricia BYRNE (*Ireland*)

Sisters of Our Lady of the Cenacle

Sr. Filo HIROTA (*Japan*)

Mercedarian Missionaries of Berríz

Sr. Loiri LAZZAROTTO (*Brasil*)

Srs of the Immaculate Conception of O. L. of Lourdes

Sr. Veronica OPENIBO (*Nigeria*)

Society of the Holy Child Jesus

Sr. Oonah O'SHEA (*Australia*)

Sisters of Our Lady of Sion

Sr. Izabela SWIERAD (*Poland*)

Missionary Srs of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottine)

Substitutes

Sr. Asunción CODÉS (*Spain*)

Society of Saint Teresa of Jesus

Sr. Teresina MARRA (*Italy*)

Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother

Facing the new responsibilities entrusted to them by Delegates from all over the world, members of the newly-elected UISG Executive Committee have stated their wish to channel the energy released during the Plenary Assembly so as to pass it throughout, and spread it by means of, the Constellations.