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A reflection on the 2016 Assembly and an overview of the future

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This day that the Lord has made is a day of joy: joy for the 50 years of life of the UISG; joy at having been able to gather as sisters of many languages, peoples and cultures to pray, to listen and to share what is dear to us, to be attentive to the breath of the Spirit; joy at having been able to present our questions to our dear Pope Francis who spoke to us from the depth of his heart.

Yes, this last day when we are all still together, is a day of joy. Now we are able to scan the horizon to see the new thing that is coming to birth in us and among us as a result of our participation in this week.

On this final morning, I imagine you standing before a narrow door. The Lord is near that door. He invites each of us by name, to pass through this door. It is up to each one of us to accept the invitation to enter or to remain outside. We are entirely free. In order to enter, we must agree to put on a wedding garment. What can that garment symbolize for us? It is the garment we have woven here, during this assembly. It is multi-coloured, with designs created from ideas that sprang up here, situations that we ourselves described, dreams that we dared express, transformations that took place within our spirits, our hearts and our wills, challenges that move us forward, calls of the Spirit we have heard in our hearts. What a beautiful garment the Lord presents to each of us! Will we dare put it on to enter the feast? With all my heart I hope that each of us will want to enter together into the future He is preparing for us.

Let us take a moment to imagine that garment and appreciate what makes it beautiful. (We can take some minutes of silence for that and afterwards, share a word with our neighbor.)

Stepping over the threshold of the door, I see a garden all set up to celebrate the golden jubilee of the UISG. The Lord congratulates us for our beautiful garments and for having the courage to accept the challenges and the invitations to enter through the narrow door. "Happy feast!"

In this garden, in which some sections are filled with flowers and others are rather barren, I see a multitude of persons. I ask myself: who are they? How is it that they have been invited to this feast? These are not the type of persons we would have invited to celebrate a feast. I even began to be frightened of some of them. The Lord looks at me and says: "Do not be afraid. These are

my friends. I wanted you to meet my friends, those who are so close to my heart. I want you to be partners with them, to enter into covenants with them.” I admit that my heart is not too ready for this and the Lord offers to lend me the eyes of his heart. I gladly accept.

I look with new eyes and I recognize the people and situations of our planet of which we spoke this week. They were waiting for us. They were the first to arrive in the garden. All these people – men, women, children, of every language and nation, of every religion and social condition, living in precarious situations of poverty, war, human trafficking, lack of water and food - all were wearing garments woven of many colours. Looking more closely, each of those garments told a story, a lived situation and a call for help. They clearly showed how their situations were linked to our choices, to our way of life, to the way we treat our Earth and the consequences this has for them, the most vulnerable. For a long time, I looked at each person and his/her story and was looked at by them, as my garment also reflected my own story of grandeur and selfishness, of openness and closure, of openness and exclusion. I felt very vulnerable in front of them.

They are the ones who invited us to sit down and listen and understand beyond their cries of distress, their inviolable dignity, the image of God set as a seal on their hearts. They placed our ears on their hearts to listen to their own music, because each person is a mission, and each person has her own music, the one placed in her heart by the Spirit. We felt one with them. We were among equals.

“Do you want to be partners with us in creating the future God gives us?” they asked us. “Do you want to work together with us to create new heavens and a new earth, where each person and all of creation are respected?”

Then, let us begin now. We must no longer lose time. How will we go about it? What can we do? I felt a bit lost. Then a young woman said to me: “Why don’t we bring together our gifts, our experience, our ‘doing-skills’ and especially our ‘being-skills,’ our desires and our dreams? Just because we are oppressed, beaten, abandoned, forgotten, marginalised does not mean that we have nothing to share. If we put together all that we are and have, we are certain that together we can build a better world. All that is needed is for each one to be willing to give of oneself and to share his/her own resources.”

Let us remember that this is the same challenge we received from Pope Francis, to wake up the world by creating spaces where the evangelical logic of gift, of fraternity, of openness to diversity, of mutual love is lived.

How can we live this call in the places where we live? What must we change? How can we give life to our constellations so that together we may be true partners with the marginalised of our region? What must we do so that our participation in the creation of a new earth and new heavens become reality? With whom and how must we work so that our Earth be respected? (A little moment of silence and then some conversation at your tables.)

Speaking of the constellations, I began to think of the UISG and its future. It is lovely to celebrate 50 years of existence, but what future do we want to build together for our union?

The mission of the UISG is described in this way: “As an International body rooted in Christ, and representing Congregations of Women Religious throughout the world, UISG seeks to witness to and proclaim the identity of apostolic religious life in all of its diversity.

Through weaving global solidarity and opening new frontiers we animate, support and stimulate leadership of religious to be a prophetic voice and witness in the Church and the world.

The mission of UISG is to build bridges that span distances, borders and boundaries in order to create ways for members to be in communication, in community and in communion. The purpose of UISG is to promote an understanding of religious life.”

How can we commit ourselves to better live this mission in this 21st century?

As a Union, how can we, together, witness and proclaim the identity of apostolic religious life for women in all of its diversity? We do that in our gatherings every three years, and our meetings of delegates every eighteen months, but what else can we do? How can we show that we exist not only as separate units, but also as a group? How can we live communion? How to increasingly take our place in the church and in the world, our place as women religious?

In weaving the future we will need to collectively voice our support for women religious already present at the UN so that they support in our name the causes we hold in our hearts.

The new Executive Board must continue to weave new relationships with the dicasteries and other church instances. We will need to think of ways we can show our collective face through press conferences, taking part in discussions and round tables, so that the world may know that we exist and that the grass-root experiences of the hundreds and thousands of sisters at the service of the church and the world is made known.

As we developed the strategic plan, we saw that one of our weaknesses was communication. Since then we have hired Patrizia Morgante to be charged with communication; we have adapted the web page so that information of interest to all of us can be more clearly seen. It is now up to us, the members and as constellations, to share our reality, our lived experiences, to send information to nourish the web page, for communication must be a two-way street.

We have already begun and continue to support some joint projects. I am thinking of *Solidarity with South Sudan (SSS)*, and the recent migrants’ project in Sicily that is still taking its baby steps. There has been a call for continued support of these initiatives. These projects are like beacons and we dream that similar projects, responding to local calls, may be organized among religious institutes in different parts of the world.. We know that alone, each one can only do a little, but together, we will be able to go much further. It is up to us to be creative in our own contexts.

There are also networks we need to strengthen. The *Talitha Kum* network has been functioning for several years. We are called to really work against human trafficking and to participate in this

network. We have created a network of sister canonists, ready to help us with appropriate consultations, and we need to establish a network of sister theologians to assist us in reflecting on Consecrated Life today and tomorrow. We are asking you for names of sister theologians of your Institutes.

One last call: we know that there are some congregations that have few financial resources. I can tell you that if a few years ago my congregation had not received financial help from other congregations, we would not have survived. Our solidarity can also be expressed in this way.

We are aware of the devastation of our planet and of the repercussions this has especially on the poor. We are called to become more aware of our actions, maybe even to change our life-style. Together, we want to dare to speak out, to bring the people and organizations of our areas to greater awareness in order to leave a livable planet for future generations. Let us join forces in support of this struggle.

What role can the constellations play to make of the UISG a place where global solidarity is increasingly lived? Let us share our ideas. I don't think we have time for a group sharing, so I propose that you give your ideas to your delegate. She will bring them to the meeting of delegates on Monday.

We have moved forward this week in weaving our relationships, in our knowledge of different contexts, of solidarity. Together, we have woven a new page in our history. May we, together, continue to weave global solidarity day by day for the life of the world and of our contemporaries. Our Executive Secretary said in a recent interview, "Let us not do alone what we can do together."

I thank you for your participation in this gathering, for your commitment at the heart of the UISG both as members and as delegates. And I thank you for your confidence.

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