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## CONSECRATED WOMEN IN THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD *UISG 1965-2015. Notes for a history*

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### Introduction

Women religious superiors inaugurated a point of convergence in the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). Through a quick mention of the themes treated by the *UISG Bulletin*, it seems to travel through the fifty years of religious life from the perspective of superiors. Of course, the reflections do not reflect the effective path of each Congregation, rather they indicate searching, common expectations and prospects. In fact, since 1966 the *Bulletin* has been the organ of formation and information of the association, edited in various languages. In addition to talks held in conferences and assemblies, it contains written texts by men and women from various nationalities, accounts of questionnaires and discussions; information on local initiatives, collaboration and solidarity.

The path of the UISG is set out in three parts whose interpretation is the change of women religious in the Church and in society. The first part traces the origins of the UISG; the second recalls the topics of reflection on religious life; the third part regards the years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a premise for choices being made.

### Part One

#### Origin and profile of the UISG

##### **Predecessors and origins of the Union: December 8, 1965**

Pius XII had expressed the need for renewal of Institutes for women in the first international Congress of women superiors in 1952. Thus the *Roman Union of General Superiors* arose (1952), "as a kind of consultative commission of the Sacred Congregation," that organized the opening of the *Regina Mundi* Pontifical Institute in 1954 and in 1958 the support Commission for Latin America. But the *Union* was made up of only generalates present in Rome, many too few with regard to the nearly 2,600 institutes for women.

Meanwhile John XXIII recognized the involvement of women in public life as a sign of the times (*Pacem in terris*, 1963.) However, especially Vatican Council II (1962-1965) gave a drive to the entire Church. Twenty-three women were invited to participate as auditors; among these, 11 were consecrated women of whom 9 were general superiors. The question of congregations for women was studied in the final session of the Council. On December 8, 1965 the Sacred Congregation of Religious established the International Union of Superiors General, with a purpose similar to that of the Union of Superior Generals (USG.) In January 1966 the Prefect asked Maria Rosario Araño, rjm, to accept the presidency; he also designated Françoise de Lambilly, rscj, as secretary and the other members of the Council. Their term of office lasted until the first General Assembly (1967.) In the face of the first organizational endeavor, several congregations generously offered personnel.

In article 3 of the Statutes it is stated that all "general superiors of religious institutes and societies of common life, whether pontifical or diocesan institutes, are, by right, members of the Union." But it was necessary to search out members. The superiors of international congregations were activated and gave an enthusiastic response. The initial headquarters of the UISG was in an apartment, which quickly became too small, and was then transferred to Lungotevere Tordinona in the old Scholastic building of the Assumptionist Fathers. The building was acquired with

the contributions of the congregations. On May 31, 1969, Pope Paul VI inaugurated the locale and reminded the women religious that they are not *of the world*, but *for the world*.

### **From the initial phase to the development of the association; search for dialogue with the holy See**

Sister Mary Linscott, snc, was elected president in the 1970 assembly; Sister F. de Lambilly, rscj, remained general secretary. In the early years the UISG was concerned with its development: refining its identity, deepening its relationships with the Church and its international character. Its mission codified in the Statutes was communication, and communion among the General Superiors, between themselves and the Holy See, and between themselves and the National and International Conferences of Religious, in addition to a dialogical relationship with some Ecumenical Conferences of Religious Life.

In 1970 the President was consulted for a document about religious life, the *Evangelica Testificatio*, but she asked and obtained the involvement of the entire Executive Committee. Since then the Union was consulted along with the USG about some big projects: In 1972 a consultation on formation was begun (the Congregation published the *Directives* in 1990); in 1977 it was consulted on the section of the Code of Canon Law dedicated to Consecrated Life (1983).

On another level, consultations regularly occur among the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes (SICLSAL), USG and UISG, with the *Council of 16* (8 general superiors of men's institutes and 8 of women's institutes), while the *Council of 18* maintained a similar link with the Propagation of Faith.

At the last moment the president and vice president of UISG were invited to the Bishops' Synod in 1971 and in 1974. Twenty years later, in 1994, however, the Union had the right to choose the people to be sent. In the Special Assemblies for Bishops, for Oceania (1998) and for Europe (1999), two members of the Executive Committee were invited as auditors. In recent Synods the presence of the UISG was more consistent. Consultation about the plenary session of the Ministry of religious was slower, though since 1967 several women religious worked there. In short, the paths of collaborative dialogue slowly opened up.

Within the association, in addition to the meetings which quickly became triennial in nature, some Committees were created to study some aspects: education, justice and peace, vocations; work groups on women and trends in religious life. From the beginning the various organs, like the Assemblies, had an international composition. From that came a greater awareness about apostolic mission, greater information about the world situation and a deepening of the charism of each institute within the general charism of religious life in the Church. In the 60s and 70s UISG's activity was very intense in keeping with the critical time of transformation. Later, apostolic spirituality and the need for constant conversion surfaced. More or less consciously the UISG contributed to the filling up of some theological gaps, with thought springing from the practical, especially in preparation for the 1994 Synod. However, the concrete impact of women religious seemed to decrease, at least in some areas.

Regarding the *division of the association into periods*, post-Vatican II could be gathered in the twenty-year period 1975-95, of the simultaneous presence and tension between the old and the new; then the Synod on Consecrated Life marks a milestone that gives direction at least to the decade 1995-2004, up to the international Congress. Afterward, enriched by the year dedicated by Pope Francis to consecrated life (2014- February, 2016), is the chronicle that takes us to the present.

### **Membership in the UISG by geographical areas and the organizational structure of the Union**

It is not easy to know the exact numbers of congregations for women. In 1971 the data regarding the continents was reported:

Geographic Areas	Delegates elected from the General Superiors of the following countries	Presidents and secretaries of the National Conferences	Number of women religious in the world	Number of superiors.
Africa	16	22	29,975	43
North America	8	13	217,139	317
South America	17	5	123,125	225
Asia	14	22	47,300	125

Australia	4	10	15,358	41
Europe	34	25	625,178	1,548

At the end of the 90s the Union registered the increase of Superiors from Asia, Africa, South America, mostly in diocesan congregations, together with a decrease in Europe, North America and Australia, where the median age of the members was increasing.

With the revision of the Statutes in 1998, Constellations and then the respective Delegates was inaugurated, promoting geographic representation and territorial initiatives. The *Council of Delegates* (52 in 2015) then elected the *Directive Committee* (10 members in 2015.)

## Part two

### Religious life reflected in the *Bulletin*

#### Themes of the early post-Vatican II years

##### *Rethinking religious life for women in a new ecclesial and social era*

In the *first assembly* (March 1-12, 1967) the awareness surfaced that religious life for women was facing a new era, through the evolution of its place in the Church and a deep transformation of its relationships with the world suffering from big problems: peace, development, social and racial justice, cultural equality, ecumenism. There was a need to move from charity to the awareness of the need for a “pedagogy of political life.” Women religious were called to participate in the re-awakening and care of the entire world. For Msgr. Gremillon, the million women religious around the world represented “the most conscious nervous system and the greatest hope of the Church,” for their presence “in the villages, the bush country, the cities, wherever human beings are found

In the face of these expectations, it was not hidden that the action of women religious was still not expressed sufficiently by *Gaudium et spes* and by *Populorum progressio*. Their wide-spread presence could be an important instrument of animation of the grassroots, on condition they moved from a “spirit of superior protection to an attitude of sharing and mutual fraternal help.” If, however, the Institutes were not adequate to the changes, they would be isolated, remaining outside the trend with regard to ecclesial thought. Therefore, the need for formation jumped to first place, as well as *the apostolate of information*, with the critical use of the media. *Updating of governance* is a constant topic and the new theme of dialogue grew in the coupling of authority-obedience.

In 1969 more than 500 superiors spent time on the *Social-cultural Evolution and Religious Life*. Among the big topics, the promotion of women was recognized as the very field of commitment of women religious. “Satellite” communities were also talked about, or not having a local superior...., as well as interpersonal relationships and new kinds of candidates, restructuring and participation as subsidiarity and co-responsibility. Some convention members hypothesized that in the institutes with more than 5000 members there could be three or four general superiors, but Father Molinari, sj, noted that unity and internationality would be lost in doing that, fostering nationalism and division. He looked favorably on small “fraternities”, as long as they were not isolated from the province.

Moreover, the UISG president spoke to the VIII General Assembly of *Charitas Internationalis* (1969) prior to the International Year of Education proclaimed by the UN for 1970 to combat illiteracy. The idea was latched to actively cooperate in a literacy program for adults, in the equal recognition for education to young girls and women, in the development of pedagogical research and education of teachers. The UISG wanted to create a Permanent International Office for this purpose.

Also in the 1970 *Assembly* contacts with various institutions, from FAO to *Miseror*, etc. came up as well as meetings with the laity and people in the ecumenical movement. Decentralization and integration in local ministry was desired for Latin America, by improving contemplation and study, especially of theology. The Africans felt the need for a maturation of consecration within their mentality, as well as having meetings and cooperating in the promotion of African women. Conditions were put in place for an appreciation of cultural diversities that could put the congregations in the frontlines for multi-cultural dialogue.

##### *The world is changing with or without religious*

In 1972 new topics such as mass media, futurology and prediction were treated. What was happening also regarded religious and there was no desire to just be spectators. “If no one is preparing plans for the future today, tomorrow will be chaos. If we do not prepare for our future, it will be done for us and it will probably be against us.

Whether we want it or not, religious life will be transformed at the same rate as that of society ... planning is an essential task of generals.... The new person is about to be born. She will ask us: do we understand the new person? Are we being born along with the new person? Are we re-generating the new person?"

That year, dedicated to peace for justice, the general councils were invited to do concrete action, beginning with themselves (properties, solidarity among provinces, legally hired personnel...). Msgr. Benelli explained the expectation of the Church regarding the avoidance of a disembodied spirituality.

#### *Women religious in dialogue with the Roman Curia*

There were two days of intense dialogue in November 1973 with those in charge of the Sacred Congregation of Religious. The basic question was: *What do the general superiors of women's congregations expect from the Sacred Congregation of Religious and what does the Sacred Congregation expect from the general superiors?* Above all it was seen as an opportunity for more dialogue in the *Council of 16*. Some superiors hoped for a new form of *leadership* from the Congregation, in order not just to receive directives but also pastoral and spiritual orientations; orientations more than restrictions so as to maintain the uniqueness and unity of each Institute and the essential elements of religious life in current life. They called for better communication, at that time clouded by male dominance, and an adequate representation of women religious in the Congregation. They would also like a consultation during the process of the writing of norms, with attention to concrete situations, avoiding misunderstandings. The expectations concern subsidiarity and collaboration. The English speaking group hoped that UISG would seriously deal with the topic of women, in concurrence with the international year declared by the UN for 1975. The group asked for a study on the theology of women and that the Church study the invaluable contribution of women in her mission, as well as to consider the loss of human potential when complementarity was not recognized. Overall there was a great desire to participate, corresponding to the spread of the Congregations in the various contexts; they dared to ask and propose. There were attentive participants in the discussion, at least in listening.

#### *Historical dimension of charisms and evangelization in the current reality*

In 1974 there was a wondering about the role of women religious in the evangelization of our contemporary world. The slowness with which the apostolic vocation was recognized for women was noted, as well as the fact that the visions of some foundresses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were only partially realized, thus there was room to do more as women in society. The vocation of "being the Gospel that passes" according to Paul VI, had run the risk of the dichotomy between consecration and activity, nevertheless it urged women religious to embrace their responsibilities and consider the frontiers of the Church as a place of encounter rather than a wall of separation.

The decrease in the number of priests occurred at the same time as the crisis of traditional works, which left more women religious available to exercise all the ministries except those reserved to priests. *Incarnation* was needed, involvement especially in the environments of the people to show that human history goes beyond, in *Transcendence*. Distance from the people, instead, made women religious appear like a world apart and spawned the idea that Christian life was a privilege for the few. In order to be *agent of change*, changes in structures had to be prepared by changes in mentality, including juridical aspects. Regarding the time when the rules of the Institutes prevailed, after the 1917 Code of Canon law, the originality of the Congregations was demeaned, fostering an identity crisis of religious, because of the aridity and meticulousness of the laws.

#### **The charism of consecrated life in the present**

In 1975, year of Women and a Holy Year, the importance of the feminine awareness surfaced in order to look at reality with God's merciful eyes. It was not so much a matter of being everywhere, but of discerning the calls and being involved in the world with new responsibility requiring on-going formation. New fields regarded respect for life, rebuilding broken families, help for young victims of drugs and prostitution, participation in movements for the just freeing of women and the right use of mass media.

#### *Women religious in the Church: the courage of truth*

Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, sj, focused on the situation of women religious in the Church. He carefully examined the reasons why women are recognized as equal to men by principle, according to the Gospel, but contact

of Christianity with cultures compromises her freedom and flexibility. The Jesuit lamented the disproportion between the numerical potential of women religious with respect to men religious and the reality of their ecclesial contribution for various reasons. In addition, he indicated aspects of the masculinization of religious life for women in the norms, foundation, spiritual orientation, influence on decisions and administration of goods. The error was obviously in the subjecting of women religious not in collaboration.

The custom that institutionalized the subordination and passivity of women religious was translated in some indicators which had not completely disappeared. The speaker also indicated promising signs of change, thanks to the cultural and professional development of many women religious. Appreciation was not always (nor is it) guided by the evangelical concept of equality, but rather is an updated re-managing of male dominance, like, for example, when the sisters were obliged to substitute in parishes (catechesis, administrative affairs, care...); when work groups are manipulated where the men think and the women do the work, etc.

Renewal of women religious depends upon their evolution as women in the Church and in the world. From this flowed the rethinking about community life, in avoiding the treating of adults like children, by combining authority and obedience with equilibrium, more so because young women, especially in urban settings, having greater autonomy and a certain economic independence from the family were more critical, open and uninhibited. With difficulty would they have done well in settings where the perpetuation of an outdated figure of women was demanded. It was said that to realize equality it was indispensable to have a concurrent liberation of men from their claim to dominance. The process of dehumanization linked to progress could be rebalanced with the search for ways of truly human civilization. It would be a matter of a cultural revolution to make the human emerge in its completeness, in collaboration.

#### *Daring to rethink religious life*

Reflections on the vows, Constitutions, General Chapters occurred especially in the 70s and early 80s. There were always those who questioned the names of the vows that were hardly understandable in some places. Father Tillard indicted the root, the vowing not so much or only *for*, but above all else, *why*. For one thing the heading *Intrepid Women Religious* presented various experiences in base Christian communities, in new communities, among the gypsies or in ecumenical fraternities, in *open communities* with the inclusion of women religious and laywomen. In 1979, among other things, Australian women religious were cited who were involved in a rethinking of the ecclesial community that had created tension with the hierarchy. In 1978, for the first time the UISG Executive Committee was invited by the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes, for their Plenary meeting on April 25. It was greeted as the first "Women's Day" to the Plenary. In entire issue of the *Bulletin* of 1980 women were treated. A laywoman, Elisabeth Lovatt-Dolan, expressed the expectations of prophetic witness, "We need sisters ...who share our mission of justice and liberation and who are involved in the action required to build a bridge across the gap that exists between those who have and those who have not, between theory and practice, between life and the gospel."

#### *The institution as a mediation, not an end in itself, and relationships in the local Churches*

In 1979 Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, sj, illustrated the dichotomy between the Church and modernity. With Vatican Council II the Church had chosen to leave its cultural isolation in which it had been closed, by taking up dialogue with modern humanity again. And from this came a question for everyone, "Does who we are and what we do correspond to the real and urgent needs of humanity today, in its relationship with God and the people? If the answer is yes, that's great. We need to keep going. If the answer is no, we must have the courage in faith to begin again. In that is our conversion, the only fertile seed of our inner freedom in Jesus Christ

Looking toward the future of religious life in the Church, Bartolomeo Sorge, sj, called again for a more active participation of women religious, according to the variety of their charisms and open to more difficult ministries. And Cassian Yuhaus, cp, entered into questions of predictions in order to organize and lead change. He sustained that the future is already present in the decisions that are made. "The only way to change the future is to ponder well our decisions in the present." "If we do not foresee the needed changes enough, as well as the way to implement them, we will be victims of an uncontrolled and disordered change." The *key to the future* would have been the way of dealing with, adapting and dominating the *change*. Rather than considering it a problem, there needs to be openness to it with foresight and preparation.

In 1982 Sister Katherine MacDonald reflected on *Mutuae Relationes*, between Bishops and Women Religious. The women religious appreciated in it the recognition of the charism of religious life, but lamented the insistence on the administrative role of the bishop and its vagueness on the structures fostering dialogue and mutual understanding in view of common decisions. Situations, expectations and difficulties were described with great clarity.

### **Formation as a priority for superiors**

#### *Need for rethinking beginning from the apostolic mission*

In 1983 John Paul II had shared the necessity of developing a clear vision about religious life. Thus it was understood that studying as *apostolic spirituality centered on mission in the world* would influence the way of understanding the vows, community lifestyle and participation in the mission. In the Assembly the women religious requested the study of the topic of initial and ongoing *formation*, in order to communicate the faith in a changed world. Then the spirituality of *authority* as a lifestyle was treated as lifestyle, relationship and behavior, in clarifying the introduction of the term *leadership* especially in the area of English language. In addition time was spent on prayer in relationship to apostolic demands, in the sense that it never stops but sends us out to our brothers and sisters.

#### *Expectations of the laity: "something more" from women religious*

In the context of the Synod of Bishops on the laity, the questions of justice and peace, the society of consumerism, thirst for the spirit (with the proliferation of sects), the emergence of the laity, youth, values and moral questions were dealt with. Dr. Guzman Carriquiry of the Pontifical Council of the Laity referred to what the laity expect from each woman religious. In short, "something more." Since the saints were the greatest reformers, we need to wonder if religious were at the avant-garde of the trends of holiness that effectively renew the Church and the world. Carriquiry saw religious as fulltime "professional revolutionaries" of the Church. Regarding political participation, he warned against idealistic improvisations. He noted that living in faithfulness to the current value of one's charism in the face of the needs of the Church and people is the best contribution that the laity also expect from sisters. Relationships in the natural family should also be able to find more reconciled humanity and "new society" in religious communities. The laity especially hoped to find in women religious unified people transmitting joy.

#### *Discernment: from words to actions*

On *Prophecy and religious life* (1987) Marie Suzel Gerard, sjc, noted that after having written in documents the need to read the signs of the times requires moving to actions in communities that are convinced that contemplative life would have started bolder initiatives. According to Ricardo Antoncich, sj, vocation invites one to look at history from God's perspective, to show the limitations of ideologies and how to leave them in order to foster people. To do this requires realism in analyzing the reality in order not to lapse into false or distorted assessments. And in 1989 a concrete method for discernment was studied to distinguish the elements proper to the charism from those that enter in a historic response which is now inadequate.

#### *Enculturation and the Christian image of the person*

The subject of *enculturation* was connected with evangelization and its resonance in religious life called to find a path to unity in diversity. Various experiences made reference to Africa and to its cultures (1988), to Oceania (1989), and to Asia (1994). The topic of *belonging* came up again, including lay collaborators. From the central dynamic of the persons identified in the charism, it was noted, depends an ability to attract, renew and share the gifts received to be given to others.

#### *Between crisis and future prospects*

On *vocational ministry between crisis and future prospects*, J. Rovira Arumi, cmf, considered that uniformity and centralization inculcated in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century brought conservatism along with the

stability of Institutes; much mobilization of people and works but little theological creativity. The restoring mentality did not immediately create excessive cultural time lag and ultra-conservatism of crushing aspirations until about 1960, as the great changes of the western world have caused crisis and wars. In religious life it seemed that the crisis had arrived late in respect to the society. General chapters had also pinpointed stability, conservatism and promise of perennity. But vitality diminished and a subtle decline crept in. When everything still seemed secure, the invitation came to renew and change, but in what direction was not well understood. The commitment for the Institutes of having to adapt to the demands of culture, social and economic circumstances (PC 3) lit the fuse, because the problem was truly a cultural time lag. Thus confusion and crisis came, because adaptation did not just refer to activities but also to internal life and required an unheard of participation of all the members. In some cases the cultural revolution was transformed into cultural confusion. Blame for the crisis was not that of Vatican Council II because there was a previous lag that could not last. The crisis of celibacy was not the cause but an effect, because religious life was not at the human, cultural and spiritual level of its time. A hypothesis for the future: above all a return to the Gospel and to our origins in order to draw from them a new youthfulness, not to copy the forms of the past.

About *mutual relationships between women religious and the laity*, in 1989 Father J. Aubry, sdb, treated the unprecedented situation for the rediscovery of the missionary presence of the laity in the world. It was up to religious women to educate future involved adults and to dialogue with the new Movements. Moreover, regarding *Vocational Ministry... for what kind of religious life?* brought up the concern for the decrease in vocations and the search for new formation models for a religious life that is more involved rather than separated from the people.

#### *Feminine dimension and mission of the Church: unavoidable combination*

After *Mulieris dignitatem*, a woman religious reminded that only at the beginning of the 1900s was it allowed to live religious life without being cloistered, therefore: "active women's apostolic religious life is really in its infancy, if you consider it from the point of view of history." And referring to mission she noted, "When we begin to talk about the poor, of quality rather than quantity, of people rather than buildings, of collaboration rather than individual endeavors, we are using concepts that are easily identified with feminine models." Collaboration with men required the study of participation in the Church and in her mission

#### *Religious, God's therapy for ecclesial conformism*

In looking toward 2000 we wondered what we should do to find the ability to "re-vitalize" or "re-found" ourselves. Renewal could not come from documents. Finding the initial inspiration again and adapting it to the current reality demanded a concrete decision regarding some challenges: correct interpretation of the Bible with regard to sects; solidarity with the poor, the problems of refugees, dialogue with other religions, the process of secularization. Religious communities were like "a society of contrasts" to conformity, as a therapy of God" to prevent the Church from forgetting her character and the temporary nature of this world.

#### *Religious Life, antidote to the secularization of salvation*

In the 1991 assembly John Paul II emphasized consecration as the antidote to the "secularization of salvation" of the more advanced societies. He recognized the co-responsibility of women religious for evangelization and recommended the formation of formation directors, without becoming discouraged for the decrease in the number of candidates. Cettina Militello evoked the crucial themes, the importance of cultivating a culture of dialogue, attesting that God works through *Kenosi*.

Then followed the theme of *ecology* connected with religious life, both in the implementation of frugality, to which there is the need for conversion, and in the message of classical asceticism. *Respect for Creation and Evangelization* launched a challenge against consumerism, nomination, and the destruction of creation. Cristo Rey García Paredes, cmf, indicated the need to develop a theology with an ecological outlook. Rose Fernando, fmm, spent time on the interconnection between social justice and eco-justice.

#### *Internationality of charisms, witness to the universality of the Gospel in serving life*

It was ascertained that presence in more countries was not sufficient to assure that Congregations were international (1993.) Charisms need to be re-read in the individual cultures, establishing a dialogue with the original

one. Some intercultural experiences were shared, without hiding the cost of being international; nevertheless the benefits far outweigh them in accepting a conversion process.

The 1993 Assembly spent time on *Apostolic Women Religious serving life*. The charisms had appeared like “powerful insights that changed the view of humanity,” while various more recent congregations appeared rather fated toward specific works, forcing themselves then to identify a fundamental insight capable of stimulating and directing their members. The emphasis on *being with and among* surfaced. Salvation of the institutes passed through the poor, God’s mediators in them

### **The identity of religious life around the Synod of Bishops on consecrated life (1994)**

#### *Communication and new evangelization in the face of the big trends of society*

Eleonora Barbieri Masini encouraged women religious to know the great world phenomena in order to approach the people: cultural pluralism, growth of sects, revealers of religious searching that opens other paths also to Christianity, the competitive view of life with growing individualism. In her opinion three areas would influence the future: information technology, which requires education to a critical sense; biotechnology, which require ethics; the area of management and *governance* and *leadership*, to be rethought of in a more participative and shared way. The invitation was to adjust attitudes to the big changes, through a new way of seeing things by using adequate means so that the contemporary world could understand the Gospel.

#### *Formation as a ministry and challenge for the future of consecrated life*

In preparation for the Synod of Bishops on consecrated life (1994) women religious participated in the *Lineamenta*. Enculturation and internationality stood out as challenges that question *formation*. Federico Ruiz-Salvador, ocd, spoke on the need for personal and community *revitalization* as vital adherence to the living God. And he suggested that *ongoing formation* courses not become courses of *periodic information*.

The Union, in effect, concentrated on *Formation* understood as a priority ministry and challenge for the future of consecrated life and its mission, with a concrete indication of working on the *Ratio formationis*, the formation plan for all stages of life, for all Institutes. The Synod launched the idea that needed the re-formulation of the theology of consecrated life and, unfortunately, opportunities for discussing it in depth were lacking. At the same time, noting that the future of the Church was sighted in the laity, religious were called to support them in assuming the lay dimension of the charism, which also nourishes a greater awareness of their own particular specificity in consecrated people.

On the day after the Fourth Conference on Women in Peking, the question then stood out: As women religious, what could they contribute for greater equality, peace and disarmament, by manifesting that faith spreads a critical light on what is happening? Many forms of solidarity could make progress if women religious joined with the many NGOs and involved women, and also tried to go to the structural causes of the injustices in order not just to remain on the level of words. In the 19th century religious congregations had perceived in their own way the religious and social problems of the developing industrial age. And in the change at the end of the 20th century? To be a sign, it was said, it was needed to courageously wonder of what are we really living, and ask if we are committed to being prophetic elements of counter-culture, by announcing that God is on the side of the poor and that the Church does not consider humans objects of assistance, but subjects of their own liberation. Institutes can signify a “reconciled diversity” between contemplation and prophecy, men and women, clergy and laity.

#### *Spirituality as a culture of consecrated life: Possible change in solidarity*

The 1998 Plenary Reunion centered on the theme: *Women religious, builders of an alternative future moving toward new solidarities*. For E. Masini, a greater visibility of the “feminine genius” was needed that was able to deal concretely with problems in order to have an impact on tomorrow’s world structure. Among the trends that had had greater influence on women and women religious was the passing from a bipolar world to a multi-polar one with migration, from abundance of resources to their depletion, progress in female education, and variable composition of families. Women religious would have to try to understand the world, with the advantage of their international nature, as builders of an alternative future, not as victims but society’s actors.

In the 1999 *Bulletin* questions were begun to be asked about verification of the process undertaken, which appeared to be an “incomplete renewal” in the face of the needs of the world, in spite of progress. Religious had



noted the presence of a great, though not yet assimilated theology; of a critique of traditional community life, but one in which they continued to be. It had been demolished without rebuilding. The need for spiritual upgrading was seen in order to overcome spiritual superficiality and individualism. A lack of prophecy was suffered, previously called acceptance of middle-class values. Perhaps it was the time of “little things” rather than great missions, of making Christ present first of all with personal witness.

*What is the future for religious life?*

Here and there the question popped up whether religious life would have a future and reasons for saying “yes” were expressed especially around a culture of life. On the other hand, for example in India, it was indicated that after the beginning of the 1980s women religious were living a kind of closure, not moving with the times and not immersing themselves in the social-cultural reality. In addition to social works, they needed to be involved especially in creating equality and justice as much as possible.

The 1999 UISG Assembly concerned *Called to be witnesses, life bearers and servers*. Being near the jubilee celebration, they were aware that they were facing a totally unknown future with only the certainty that in order to continue to live, foundations for the future needed to be laid.

*Animation capable of big dreams and small steps.*

In the post-modern culture M. Pia Bonanate emphasized the need for sisters to communicate with the people, to re-balance a society that bears the mark of male chauvinism, with their complete dedication and service. “Today the Church needs to begin again from the Jesus of women.”

**Synergy around the Jubilee**

In the 2001 Plenary Reunion on *Women Religious: many cultures – a single heart: sent to be a living presence of God’s tender mercy in this suffering world*, the president, Rita Burley, acj, noted among other things, that since 1998 they had been working to promulgate the Declaration of Solidarity with the poor and suffering, especially with women and children, through which they had accepted 2000 Jubilee Coalition against the crushing debt of impoverished countries; they had asked for a moratorium against the death penalty; they had declared they were against any kind of sexual abuse. The synthesis of the Reports of the constellations presented the lights, shadows and perspectives of women’s religious life.

**Part Three**

**New momentum and concrete steps**

**Is there a shift in the visibility of a communal commitment? Commitment Statement**

From the proposals developed in the atmosphere of the jubilee the superiors of the UISG released a statement in May 2001, with a planetary-wide public and communal commitment.

We, almost 800 women leaders of one million members  
of Catholic Religious Institutes throughout the world  
reflecting on the theme:

*Women Religious: Many cultures, One Heart:  
Sent to be a living presence of the tenderness and mercy  
Of God in our wounded world*

publicly declare our determination to work in  
solidarity with one another  
within our own religious communities and  
in the countries in which we are located  
*to address insistently at every level  
the abuse and sexual exploitation of women and children  
with particular attention to the trafficking of women  
which has become a lucrative multi-national business.*

Drawing on our long tradition as educators *we will continue*  
*To promote the education and formation of women*  
 Within and outside our own organizations  
 By committing personnel and financial resources  
 To ensure the holistic development of women at every stage of life  
 Empowering them to develop an inner strength and appreciation  
 Of their God-given gifts to promote and enhance life.

As women committed to human rights  
*We declare once more our solidarity with the poorest countries*  
*and restate our resolution to work*  
*For the cancellation of the international debt.*

As women opposed to the perpetuation of war and violence  
*We express our commitment to the creation of a culture of peace*  
 And we call on heads of governments and multi-national companies  
*To stop the sale and purchase of armaments.*

As women concerned about the preservation of Mother Earth  
 We will take action when and wherever possible  
*To end the destructive behavior that causes global warming and climate change*  
*And threatens all forms of life on our planet.*

We pledge ourselves to implement these resolutions  
*Through a system of networking among ourselves*  
*And with other existing organizations with similar concerns*  
*Within Churches and society.*

Attentive to the cries that arise with one voice from many cultures  
*We will respond as women disciples of Jesus Christ*  
*Seeing the world with the eyes of the heart*  
*And with the compassion of a loving God.*

*Feminine perspective to be implemented for a culture of peace*

With regard to the *Declaration of Commitment*, in 2002 the Executive Committee redacted a *Priority Declaration* with some topics upon which they wanted to begin working: promoting the positive role of women by creating a culture of peace; identifying the major forms of exclusion, abuse and sexual exploitation of women and children in certain cultures. The topic of feminine identity was revisited as a resource for a culture of peace after the events of September 11, 2001: *What kind of evangelical presence for an "active citizenship" in a globalized society.*

The 2003 Assembly was held in Nairobi, the first time outside of Rome. The Priority Declaration inspired other collaborative activities and networking both with the Congregations of the Holy See and with other Conferences of Religious; for example, at the annual meeting with CLAR and with LCWR of the United States, the meeting with the Canadian Conference was added.

In addition the UISG was invited by the USG to participate in a Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue, to collaborate with the SECAM and the joint Commission of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; with the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCEP), especially about Children and HIV/AIDS; *Women Religious, children and armed conflict*. The president had also been invited to be a member of the new European Council of Religious Heads and also to collaborate with the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) on the topic of violence against women. In addition a list of potential women theologians was being created for a Commission of Theological Reflection and a profitable exchange occurred in the joint reunion of the UISG/USG executive committees regarding the formation of priests on the topic of sexuality. In looking toward the future, there was the desire to enable the

network with the Constellations as well for various educational and formative projects through the establishment of an office of Project and Development Agents. Interesting feedback came from Bernadette Mbuy Beya, of the Circle of African Women Theologians, who asked Catholic women religious to be more present among the African women theologians, to be more directly involved in society and in the Church in order to Christianize the structures, stimulate the people to become a transformational force of their conditions. The Conference of Religious in Brazil shared two systematic projects of re-reading the reality in the light of the Word: prayerful reading of the Bible; the experience of solidarity, communion and participation.

### **A renewed impetus in 2004**

Something new of the 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life, *Passion for God, passion for humanity*, was the common preparation with the USG, that would mark a shift in the sharing of Projects. In the meantime the Conference of Superiors of Africa and Madagascar began. A realistic accounting of human trafficking and of the commitment of religious women manifested a concrete aspect of consecration and of the UISG in service to life. In 2007 a new prophecy was identified with the involvement in redoing the fabric of human relationships. Ecology, “the land and its sacredness”, inter-religious dialogue, migrants and refugees, laity, and women were threads with which communion was woven.

The 2010 Plenary Reunion with about 800 women superiors concentrated on *Mysticism and prophecy*. “*I know well the springing and flowing fountain well ... even though it is night.*” Later new frontiers were mentioned: the relationship between contemplation and the life of justice, peace and protection of creation; the digital age as an opportunity of consecrated life, consecrated life in Europe. The AMOR Forum, Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious, created as a response to the call to action for justice, consolidated the identity of oriental women religious in a multi-religious land.

### *Suggestions for a theology of consecrated life*

In 2011 a theological seminar was held. Josune Arregui, ccv, did a re-reading of religious life in a secularized, impoverished and violent context with which it must maintain a dialogue, however, being liberated from obsolete methods. It is necessary, he noted, to re-image religious life *in the world* with a *theology of the world*. Apostolic life has to be more clearly defined by the call to unite the ancient wisdom of Christianity with a new justice, in a pluralistic world incapable of dealing with difference. Sandra Schneiders, ihm, also spent time on consecration to God and at the same time on its being modeled by the historical context, according to the original concept of the apostolic Church-world relationship delineated by Vatican Council II. On the future, the theology delineated the picture of a community reduced in number, that is less institutional in ministry; with older women religious who are active much longer. The most difficult transition to be accepted is perhaps that from the traditional works to new forms of apostolate. The traditional ministries of education and care could not be those that currently have greater need of the presence of women religious, while other pastoral and diocesan ministries are open: ministries of social justice aimed at structural change, that have the social doctrine of the Church as a “theological bond; ministries that work directly with the victims of social injustice or natural disasters, whose theological bond is compassion for Christ’s suffering body; intellectuals, scholars and artists, whose bond is the deepening of search for faith in our time; ministries that are directed toward the thirst for meaning and transcendence, whose theological bond is spiritual growth. With regard to the past, not all religious do the same thing, yet individualism needs to be avoided. “Responding to the needs of the People of God is what determines where and how we live. First of all, preaching the Gospel where it is most needed.”

Moreover, in 2011 the superiors were involved in the preparation for the Synod on New Evangelization. In 2012 the high point is the appointment as cardinal of Father Joao Braz de Aviz and of Nicola Spezzati, asc, as Undersecretary of CICALSAL, replacing Enrica Rosanna, fma. Regarding *leadership* in consecrated life Paredes spent time on the true meaning of *leader*: not the one who has a plan and directs, but the one who allows the Spirit to lead in order to contribute to the flow of God’s grace poured out upon the world. Meanwhile Pat Farrell, President of LCWR, after having received the evaluation of the Congregation of Doctrine of Faith, together with the representatives of the men and women religious of North America, had met with the directive Councils of the UISG and USG. The closing talk to the Assembly of the Conference of Religious of the USA, published by the UISG *Bulletin* had encouraged starting with contemplation, a prophetic voice, solidarity with the outcasts, community, non violence and a life of joyful hope.

In 2013 the Plenary Assembly was on authority: *"It will not be so among you!"* In addition to an analysis of models of authority present in the Church, biblical and sociological reflection was offered emphasizing relational quality, as "companion of grace." At the end of the Assembly the superiors decided upon an Orientation for their mission 2013-2016: *"Thus it must be among you."*

#### *Active Projects*

Above all, the implementation of Projects pertaining to burning problems promoted a concrete collaboration both among the Congregations, and between the UISG and the USG, as well as with other ecclesial and civic international institutions. In addition to the *Talitha Kum* Project against human trafficking promoted by the UISG, *Solidarity with South Sudan* is being carried out in collaboration between UISG and USG. There is also the intention of dealing with the refugee and migrant emergency by putting forces together.

Regarding the *Regina Mundi* Pontifical Institute, and in remaining faithful to the original objective of fostering theological formation of women religious from developing countries, the UISG had decided to utilize a part of the income of the building to create a scholarship fund, to be increased in coming years. A recent Project regards then the availability of women religious canon lawyers willing to help general superiors in responding to questions that come up from daily life and require a juridical solution.

#### **Concluding remarks**

The traced out path documents how the UISG, in overcoming an isolated view of Institutes, has put women religious in dialogue on a world-wide level to foster needed and difficult change around identity and mission thought out together, without dichotomies. In the first period great ferment is noted, a wanting to be renewed and collaborate, of "being" in the world. In the search for the proper role the superiors asked for more listening and interaction with the Holy See and bishops, remaining, on their part, receptive toward the Magisterium and to the innovative experiences also in collaboration with the laity and international organizations. The UISG promoted the development of a feminine religious consciousness, desiring greater responsibility in the local Churches and in their countries, competing, yes, with the great issues of development, but also with the resistances to a real breakthrough needed to decrease ecclesial and cultural delays.

Later on an evaluation directed more inward began. In dealing with society and the insistence on formation seems to move toward spiritual issues, it seems, however, to flee the need for real growth of a critical ability that makes women religious capable of being involved as women in a proactive way in an increasingly demanding world.

Some prospects and terms discussed and studied in the course of the decades became common patrimony. Some became obsolete, other reflections seemed to get lost along the way. It was not the task of the Union to continue their implementation which was up to the individual Institutes in order to decrease the gap between reflection and lived experience, between customs and the risks, nevertheless in facing the current reality, the perception remains about a certain dissipation or segmentation that has slowed if not hindered the growth of "cultural offerings" or evangelical revolution in a relevant form in society and in the whole of the Church. The UISG traced a path that could be well kept in mind to be followed. One wonders what to do so that the path already set out upon does not become lost in the alternation of people in governance positions of institutes such as the UISG. The Projects and actions for the life of the most threatened remain prophetic signs legible to everyone, but evidently they are not sufficient. It would probably be more fruitful for each institute to ask itself what changes happened within it in the time period of 1965-2015 regarding the topics treated by the UISG.

Even the important criticisms mentioned her aim at contributing to the reflection about the path that is open before us, joining forces and insights beginning with the assimilation of the steps taken so that each superior can get in-tune with the greater concert of religious life for women. While there has been a loss of public importance in the West, elsewhere it offers new perspectives to people. Given that migrations are calling human and religious geography into discussion, it is evident that new missionary frontiers are continually being opened. In the long course of the Church's history, truly the two centuries of women religious are still perhaps at the initial stages of their flowering in significance and impact, and the UISG has much to offer as interlocutor in the Church and as bridge with the civic communities. Wherever there is a person needing recognition, service and promotion, in the metropolitan areas as in the remote villages, women religious in fact express hope based on new humanism through their own humanity evangelized each day.

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	SOME CORE IDEAS PRESENT IN THE UISG BULLETIN 1965-2015
<b>Post Conciliar</b>	<b>Need for re-thinking</b> religious life for women in a new ecclesial and social time: amid thrusts forward, resistances, prudent steps
Externally suggested reflections	Needs for <b>updating</b> Constitutions, internal organization of religious life
	Necessary changes in <b>governance</b> , relationship among authority-obedience, dialogue, leadership...
	<b>Social-cultural changes</b> and religious life: issues of justice, peace, development, solidarity, education, mass-media, secularization, women...
Gradually internalized in their consequences	<b>Formation:</b> an ever ancient, ever new topic. With ongoing formation. Ministry and challenge for the future of consecrated life
	Request for greater <b>dialogue and collaboration</b> with the Congregation of Religious, the Holy See, the bishops. What is the image of religious life for women in the Code of Canon Law?
	Demand for <b>renewal</b> of consecrated life <b>starting from the apostolic dimension</b> , which implies rethinking the vows, prayer, mission, community life and <b>involvement</b>
	In virtue of the charism – new look at reality – how can we become proactive <b>agents of change</b> in society, without passively undergoing a cultural evolution?
	Re-reading the charism of consecrated life in the present: <b>discernment</b> in local Churches in the countries, <b>concreteness</b> in choices, even bold choices
	<b>Feminine consciousness and responsibility</b> in the Church and society for a new culture of collaboration between men and women in the light of the Gospel
<b>From the late 70s</b>	Expectation of <b>prophetic witness:</b> women religious closer to involved women and the people, more prepared and formed for dialogue between the Church and modern life
Listening also to the laity	Something more: reconciled <b>humanity, witness</b> of interior unity and joy
	<b>Enculturation, internationality, belonging, universality, collaboration</b> with the laity
	<b>Vocational crisis, future prospects</b>
	<b>Women and mission of the Church:</b> perhaps the best is yet to come. Steps for participation
	Call to inner life, to spiritual life. <b>Spirituality</b> as a culture of consecrated life
	<b>Revitalization, renewal, refoundation:</b> religious as God's cure for ecclesial conformism, an antidote to the secularization of salvation.
	<b>Service for life</b> , especially where it is most threatened, as priority in choices
	<b>Synergy</b> around the jubilee 2000: great dreams and little steps
<b>Since the Jubilee of 2000</b>	<b>Commitment statement and priority choices: culture of peace, ecology; commitment to overcome poverty, exclusion, abuse and sexual exploitation of women and children</b>

	Evangelical presence for <b>active citizenship</b> in a globalized society
	Sharing the commitment with other women theologians for an <b>in-depth study of consecrated life modeled by</b> the historical <b>context</b>
	<b>Mysticism and prophecy.</b> Relationship between contemplation and justice, peace and care for creation, digital age
	Renewal of activities, <b>new ministries</b> and places where the needs of people grow. <b>Creative fidelity</b>
	Conditions for continuous renewal in step with the times: <b>formation, authority</b>