

WEAVING GLOBAL SOLIDARITY FOR LIFE

UISG BULLETIN

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INTRODUCTION TO THE XX PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF UISG

Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, President of UISG

Original in English

Dear sisters,

In the name of the executive board, the executive secretary, and all the staff of the UISG, I have the joy of welcoming you to this our Plenary Assembly. I also welcome our guests, our speakers, the members of the press, our translators, our listeners and all those who will help us with the liturgy and with various other services so that all will go smoothly during our meeting. We thank each one of them wholeheartedly.

This is a special assembly as it marks our golden jubilee. We are right to want to celebrate as we remember with gratitude all those who have given an active part along the years, with courage, dynamism, vision and perseverance, so that today we can move forward with passion and look to the future with hope, as Pope Francis suggested we do during the year of Consecrated life.

The theme of the 2013 Plenary Assembly was *“It shall not be so among you : the service of leadership according to the Gospel.”* As we worked through the orientations 2013-2016, we heard the call to co-create global solidarity within religious life, in favor of those who suffer, including our Planet. Indeed we all have our own charisms, yet beyond these, we hear a common call for all of us in apostolic religious life. EGN. 130: *«The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the center which is Christ and then channeled into an evangelizing impulse. A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all.»*

Thus the theme of our assembly is *“Weaving Global Solidarity for Life: That they may have life and have it to the full”*. Each one of these words is

important.

Weaving: We all know what beautiful, complex, patient, creative, skillful work weaving is. The commitment to global solidarity is also a most beautiful and complex enterprise which needs patience, creativity and skill. And like all weaving, it starts with one stitch and goes on, one stitch after another, growing nearly imperceptibly. Let us make this our assembly one step forward towards global solidarity, by weaving relationships among us. We are here more than 800 women religious from all over the world, from such different contexts and languages. This is for us an occasion to come to know each other, to know how religious life is lived in the various contexts, to know how our love for the One who calls us leads us always deeper into the waters of life, so as to be light and salt for others. It is a grace-filled time when the weaving can be advanced so that when we are far from each other our network can become more efficient. Let us weave dreams that awaken what is deepest and truest in us, dreams that will lead us to action, to participation, to commitment.

We want to weave global solidarity: *"Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."* (Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concerns*, 1987)

"This word solidarity is too often forgotten or silenced, because it is uncomfortable. It almost seems like a bad word ... solidarity. I would like to make an appeal to those in possession of greater resources, to public authorities and to all people of good will who are working for social justice: never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity! No one can remain insensitive to the inequalities that persist in the world! Everybody, according to his or her particular opportunities and responsibilities, should be able to make a personal contribution to putting an end to so many social injustices. The culture of selfishness and individualism that often prevails in our society is not, I repeat, not what builds up and leads to a more habitable world: rather, it is the culture of solidarity that does so; the culture of solidarity means seeing others not as rivals or statistics, but brothers and sisters. And we are all brothers and sisters!" (Pope Francis 7/25/13, Varginha, Brazil)

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis invites us to a solidarity in favor of the future of our planet and of all peoples, a solidarity from the heart, which shows itself in our actions.

Weaving global solidarity for life : That they may have life and have it

to the full. This is why we have given our lives as followers of Jesus. That God's Kingdom may be an everyday reality.

In order to weave a beautiful tapestry, the weaver needs to have the pattern in the head and not to be distracted. For us too we need to come with an open mind, an open heart and an open will. As we listen to each other, we need to *suspend* our judgments, to *redirect* our attention, *let go* of the past, of what is familiar, *lean into the future* that wants to emerge through us, and *let it come*.

The speakers will give us food for thought. The quality of our conversation in the group work will allow for creative exploration in our contexts. The prayer times, the silence and the discernment process will call us to an inner exploration of what the Spirit is awakening in us. The whole will hopefully bring us to a personal and group commitment as we face the next three years.

On this our jubilee feast we are right to look to the past with gratitude. Let us also live this present moment with passion so that we can move forward with hope.

I wish us a very fruitful assembly. May it bring us abundant life.

JOINT REPORT - PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF UISG

Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, President

Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, Executive Secretary

Original in English

1. Carmen: UISG at the Service of Communion and Solidarity:

Sr Patricia Murray and myself decided that we would give you a joint report of the executive board and the executive secretary because our service is one and the same. We will do this as a conversation, sharing on how we have tried to fulfil the aims of the UISG during the past three years. As you listen to us, you need to keep in mind the many sisters and lay staff who have been involved in the work that has been done in the last three years : the members of the executive board, the members of staff, sr Josune Arregui who was with us as executive secretary for the first year.

The great dedication of each of these women, the love and care we have carried in our hearts and our lives towards the UISG, has made the hours of work a light burden for us, because we had a common goal, that of bringing forward our union so as to represent who we all are as religious and how we want to be recognized in the Church and in the world. I thank each with all my heart for the great family atmosphere that was created. It was really a great privilege to be with all of you.

2. Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity

The UISG is at the service of communion and solidarity and the image that represents our deep identity is that of the Trinity. Rublev paints the Trinity as three distinct persons, communicating with each other, ready to move, with a staff in their hands. The way they are seated leaves an empty space where we can slide in, to be at table with them. As a union, our individual congregations

remain distinct, each with their own charism, yet there is deep unity as we share the same table of the common charism of religious apostolic life. Our communion is mission, we also are constantly ready to move on together wherever the Spirit calls us.

3. Pat:

When I took up the position of Executive Director one of the first things that I did was to trace the history of the UISG. It is a very interesting one and you will hear much more later in the week when Sr. Grazia Loparco, fma will outline developments over the years by examining the articles written in the Bulletin. It is sufficient here to note its official beginning on the final day of the Vatican Council. It was something desired greatly by Pope Paul VII who wanted women religious to have a similar group to that of male religious. Initially Pope Pius XII had established a Roman Union for Superiors General based in Rome but almost immediately these women wanted to establish a worldwide association of all women religious. Once established the leaders of the congregations based in Rome were asked to inform all the Superiors General that they met on their canonical visits to different parts of the world about the new Union, encouraging all to join. Today I want to invite you to encourage leaders of congregations in your countries, who have not yet become members of UISG to consider doing so. It makes us stronger when we are united.

4. Pat: Aims of UISG

Fr. Molinari SJ was one of two consultors appointed by the congregation for Religious Vatican to work with the first Council of UISG to develop the statues and structure of UISG. The Council did such a good job that the original aims are still being used today. In the following slides we will look at each of the aims and see how we are responding to each in the context of religious life in today's world. You will see how the words of communion and solidarity echo through the aims.

5. Carmen: Aim 1 – To bear witness to the charism of religious life:

The first aim of UISG is : to bear witness to the charism of religious life and to help support the development of Religious Life in the Church and in the world.

6. Carmen: Aim 1 – What we did

(a) We, the executive secretary and the board members, did our best to respond to the invitations we received to attend and participate in constellation meetings and in meetings of religious in various countries as well as meetings of Continental Conferences among which : Australia, Nigeria, Lithuania, Spain/

Portugal, Belgium, ACWECA, COSMADT, LCWR ... we have received here in Rome delegates from CLAR and from LCWR. Sr Pat also attended the Vocation Promoters' Conference. We had a policy of trying to respond to the invitations we received so as to support the various groups, and to be able to share the riches of one region with another, to serve as bridges between the various actors.

(b) We also attended and took part in press conferences, like the one on the occasion of the World Cup of Football, denouncing trafficking for sex. We wrote articles and answered many requests for interviews from the press, at all times and especially during the Synod. We have really tried by the means offered to us, to make the UISG known, and through that the charism of apostolic religious life.

(c) I will not speak now of what we did for the Year of Consecrated Life or for the Day against trafficking for we will come back on all that in details in the slides that follow.

7. Pat: Aim 2

To promote deeper collaboration by providing opportunities for Superiors General to share experiences and exchange information and promote worldwide communication. It is very clear that in today's world communication is vital means of building a sense of belonging. With new means of communication we can build a global community and share information and experiences using various means according to different contexts. The important thing to realize that this deeper communication is built through the participation of each member of UISG throughout the world.

8. Pat: Aim 2 – What we did.

- *Appointed a communications officer in 2015:* The appointment of Patrizia Morgante was a very important development for UISG. This was the first time that we had a dedicated person for communication. She is able assisted by Sr. Anna Sanchez Boira who as well as doing translation work, does much of the graphic design work that you will see on folders, brochures and on the website. Then there is the challenge of translation material into so many different languages. We are particularly aware of that 85% of the members of UISG do not live in Rome and we want to continue to develop a variety of means to communicate worldwide.

- *New website, facebook and twitter:* We hope that you will begin to visit the UISG website regularly. Within a short time there will be a private side for members of UISG to share information and for the Executive Board to communicate

more sensitive materials – minutes, reports etc. to members via the website.

- Reorganizing communication system so that we can use *Skype, email Superiors General directly*: in the past all communications from UISG went to the members through the Delegate from the Constellation. In the future most communication will go directly to each congregational leaders. We will send a regular newsletter which we hope will contain the kind of information and news that will be help and interest to you. If the Executive Board wants certain matters to be discussed by the Constellations, then the Delegate will be contacted.

- Reorganization of the staff to be more at the *direct service of members*: When you check the website now you will see that certain staff members are looking after various language sections and other are focused on finance and administration.

- *Appointment of an Assistant Executive Secretary*: It became very clear that the Executive Director could not attend to the many increased demands and in 2015 the Executive Board appointed Sr. Elisabetta Flick, former Superior General, as the Assistant Executive Secretary. Her appointment has been an enormous help and she has taken particular responsibility for the new Project in Sicily.

9. Pat: Aim 2 – Building a global community of sisters – through regular contact.

We speak now about building “global sisterhood” because our common challenge is to promote the charism of religious life throughout the world and to support and encourage one another as sisters in different ways. To help you and the members of your congregation to reflect on religious life today, we search for articles for the Bulletin from different parts of the world. You can help us if you have sisters who could contribute articles that nourish our spirituality and help us to explore various aspects of religious life from a theological perspective. The bulletin is translated in 7 languages and on occasions some of the articles are translated into other languages. In the future when you receive the printed copy of the Bulletin, you will know that it is available at the same time in the Members Only section of the website. So if you need one article in several languages it can be easily downloaded.

I mentioned the renewal of the UISG website and now I would like to draw attention to two other websites that UISG has helped to develop:

- With the USG, we have developed the Vidimus Dominum website, which focuses on news about religious life throughout the world

- The Talitha Kum website is dedicated to the worldwide networks of

consecrated women and men and their collaborators.

Both are very valuable sources of information.

10. *Pat: Aim 2 – Building a global community of sisters*

Therefore in order to communicate with you we need your up-to-date email information and more importantly when there is a change in the Congregational Leader please make sure to send the changes in names and contact information to the UISG office.

We are delighted to welcome Superiors General to visit whenever you are in Rome and many do so. In addition the building is home to many meetings and conferences organized by the various commissions of the UISG-USG. Increasingly the fruits of these meetings will be shared on the website, through short videos or written accounts and reports.

11. *Carmen: Talking about the synod*

In the same line of sharing among ourselves I gave a long account of my presence at the Synod on the Family “from the back bench”. We had time to discuss and to give our views. Many other sisters shared their experiences here.

12. *Carmen: To reflect on global challenges*

Each of our congregations is called to reflect on the challenges of our time and to search for appropriate responses. At the same time we need to reflect on the global challenges that come to us and for which a collective answer needs to be given. Besides the fact that a burden shared is a burden halved, we all know that today we need to put competences and human resources together if we want to remain significant. We will later speak of the UISG projects through which we try to collectively give an answer to the challenges of our time.

13. *Carmen: Doing this in conjunction with the USG*

We try to examine and search for responses to global challenges in conjunction with the USG through our biannual joint meetings of the executive boards and secretaries and through various mixed commissions.

The Executive Councils of the UISG and USG meet twice a year; we also have a joint meeting twice a year with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life where we have been working on Mutuae Relationes and the Congregations for the Evangelization of Peoples.

There are also joint commissions:

-Commission for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

- Education Commission*
- Commission for Health*
- Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue*
- Theological Commission*
- Canon Law Commission*

They represent the two Unions at meetings with various Vatican Departments and liaise with different Catholic organizations and International NGOs.

The two unions have helped organize the various meetings which took place during the Year of Consecrated Life.

In the past few years the relationships and contacts between UISG and various Vatican Dicasteries has strengthened. Increasingly there is a desire to consult religious women worldwide about various matters. Last year the Congregation for Evangelization asked UISG to help to circulate a questionnaire to missionary congregations. In the near future you will once again be consulted by the Congregation for Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life as part of the process of rewriting the document *Mutuae Relationes* which focuses on the relationship between bishops and religious women and men.

14. Carmen: Aim 4

To strengthen relationships and engage in collaborative dialogue with the Holy See especially with the Congregation for Religious, Propaganda Fide and various Councils.

15. Pat: Aim 4: What we did

- *Acquiring representation at the Synod on the Family*: It took some time to acquire 3 official places at the Synod on the Family. Our brothers at USG automatically get 10 places as their canonical status is the same as that of Bishops. The USG were very supportive and volunteered to give us 50% of their places if we were unsuccessful in our appeal. Fortunately through representation at various levels we were assigned 3 places and Srs. Carmen Sammut, Bertha Maria Porres (Costa Rica) and Maureen Kelleher (US) represented UISG at the Synod.

- We had to go to Card Parolin, then to Card Baldisseri to get our representation as auditors. However, as auditors, we could still give our three-minute contribution and participate in the group discussions.

- *Mutuae Relationes (Council of 16)*; The council of 16 – 8 male and 8 female Superiors General meet twice a year. For the past 18 months the focus has been on the review of the document Mutual Relations. The participants agree that what is needed is a new rather than a revised document.

- *Establishing and accompaniment of new congregations (Council of 18)*: The council of 18 – again 9 Superiors General male and female meets twice a year. Looking back over the history of the foundation of religious congregations, it is clear that new congregations were usually accompanied by a member(s) from another congregation with a similar charism. We have looked at how best to offer this type of accompaniment today and at the process of actually approving new congregations. There is some concern that some congregations have no clear sense of their charism and this is often confused with the apostolic works of the congregation.

Relationships with Pontifical Councils:

- *Justice and Peace*: we have had much contact with the Council for Justice and Peace in relation to our worldwide anti-trafficking initiative. The UISG/USG Commission for Justice and Peace has recently collaborated with this Pontifical Council and Pax Christ International in organizing a conference on Non-Violence.

- *Pontifical Academy of Science* is also another partner in the Church's anti-trafficking initiatives. They have been given responsibility by Pope Francis for inter-faith collaboration against human trafficking. They hosted a meeting of the Talitha Kum worldwide coordinators in January.

- *Migrants*. We have had contact with the Council for Migrants when planning the UISG Migrants project.

- *Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU)*. Each year we meet with the students who study at the Bossy Institute of the WCC in Geneva to speak about religious life and women's role in the Catholic Church.

16. Carmen: The Year of Consecrated Life

Year of Consecrated Life (Pat and I) : The executive secretary and the staff of the UISG has worked very hard to help CICLSAL set up the last week to end the Year of Consecrated Life, where religious men and women of all branches were invited together to Rome. This was a first experience and a beautiful one. Pat tell us a bit about what this entailed.

I gave a talk to end the part about apostolic religious life with a paper entitled : Apostolic Religious life looks at the future : vision and pathways and

was on the panel on the last day.

17. *Carmen Aim 5*

To provide a forum and a meeting place for all Superiors General of female congregations of Apostolic life and of female diocesan congregations. We do this through the Assembly every three years, through the Bulletin and letters, the website and especially the meetings of constellations.

18. *Carmen: Council of Delegates in Nemi*

In February we held the Council of Delegates in Nemi. We had planned to go to Ghana and we must here thank very specially the delegates of Ghana for all they did to prepare the meeting. However, because of fear of Ebola, different delegates had said they would not come. We saw that this defeated its purpose, and so we decided to change the venue to Nemi. We were very sorry about this. During this meeting there was deep sharing of experiences in the form of symbols. We saw how many of us are living in difficult circumstances because of war, poverty, abuses of all sorts, diminishing numbers, aging... the reasons were varied. We were able to deeply feel for and with each other and grow in communion.

19. *Pat: Arrangement of the Constellations worldwide.*

The members of UISG were organized into units or Constellations based on language/geographical proximity in 1998. Here is the map of the worldwide Constellations: Asia (6); Oceania (2); Europe (8); Africa (10); Continental north, central and south America (10). A Constellation has 1 or 2 delegates depending on its number of members. They meet immediately after the Plenary Assembly and mid way between the Assemblies. They perform the following important tasks: (a) They elect the Executive Board from a list of nominees that come from the Rome Constellation – who are multi-cultural and multi-lingual and come from different parts of the world (b) They work with their Constellation to carry forward the outcomes of the Plenary Assembly and (c) They contact members of the Constellation periodically to ask them for feedback, suggestions etc. to matters that come from the Executive Board. Some Constellations function very well and others are much weaker. The success depends on the participation of each member.

20. *Carmen: What we did*

What we also did was to try to provide a forum and a meeting place for you all : We have already spoken of plenary assemblies, meeting of delegates,

constellation meetings, meetings with continental conferences. What we also did was to consult the delegates and through them all the members for the strategic plan which we are undertaking for the first time in the history of UISG, we consulted you for ideas about *Mutuae Relationes* (the relationship with the Bishops), we asked you for names for participants at the Synod.

21. *Pat: Aim 5 – To express solidarity and collaborate in projects of general Interest*

When we hear later in the week about the historical development of UISG we will see that from the very beginning this commitment to solidarity among ourselves and in outreach to the needs of the world was a very strong focus. One of the first commissions in the 1970's focused on Latin America and its particular needs at that time. At the Plenary Assemblies and in the UISG Bulletin there was a constant reference and commitment expressed to the big social challenges of the day. Our day is no different and thankfully our collaborative outreach has continued and even been strengthened.

22. *Pat: What we did do*

We will comment more fully on each of the following but it is good to list the various collaborative initiatives that have emerged or been strengthened during the past three years.

1. *Strengthened the Talitha Kum office*
 Appoint a fulltime coordinator
 Visits to Local/Regional networks
 International Meeting of regional coordinators
2. *Solidarity with South Sudan*
 Continued to support the office here at UISG
 Help with the search for personnel and financial support
3. *Regina Mundi in Diaspora*
 Support for the theological education of sisters in the Global South
4. *Launching the Migrants Project in Sicily in response to an appeal from Pope Francis and as Jubilee Project*
 Co-ordinating team
 Selection/training of community members
 Two communities established
5. *Zambian Research Project*
 Just completed a study of the formation and educational needs of sisters for mission and how to help congregations plan for future needs

6. *Canon Law Service*

-Ongoing canonical support for leaders of congregations re canonical matters. During the year at certain periods this service is available through visits, Skype and phone calls, emails etc.

-The Canon Law Council has organized two meetings – one for 40 sisters who are already trained as canon lawyers and the recent workshop for SGs.

7. *Theme of Assembly 2016*

23-25 Carmen: Talitha Kum

Strengthened the International coordinating office and website. The UISG anti-trafficking initiative was approved at the General Assembly in 2004. Various training workshops were held in many parts of the world in coordination with the International Organization for Migrants (IOM). There are currently 17 networks of religious sisters and their associates, worldwide working in over 70 countries. Direction: Sr. Gabriella Bottani cms.

Many initiatives have been taken to strengthen the network, for we realise that trafficking in humans is happening everywhere and that many religious men (especially) and women do not realise that this is going on at their doorsteps.

We were asked to launch and promote the international day against trafficking requested by Pope Francis in 2015 on the feastday of St Bakhita - February 8th. We had a meaningful Eucharistic celebration, then we went for the Angelus in St Peter's square and in the afternoon were able to meet with three young women who had been trafficked here in Rome.

The second international coordination meeting of Talitha Kum was held in Rome (at UISG office and elsewhere) in January 2016. The participants were 27 sisters of 25 different congregations, representatives of all the member networks of Talitha Kum . The aim of the meeting was to define the priorities of Talitha Kum and to formulate a strategic plan for the three years 2016-2018.

26. Pat: Project 2 – Solidarity with South Sudan

This project was initiated in 2006 by both the USG and UISG in response to an appeal from the Bishops of Southern Sudan in 2005. The signing of *the Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. There are currently 27 religious from approx. 22 congregations living together in community.

Training teachers, nurses, mid-wives, pastoral workers and farmers.

Unfortunately, South Sudan is still very much in the news because of the recent civil war. We are thankful that the first steps have been taken in the formation of a government of national unity because it is the people who suffer when the leaders haggle over power. We are grateful for the commitment of the sisters and brothers of Solidarity who have stayed with the people during this difficult time at great personal risk and sacrifice. We remember also the other diocesan and international congregations present in South Sudan and assure them of our prayers.

27. *Pat: Project 3 – Regina Mundi in Diaspora.*

The Regina Mundi Pontifical Institute closed in 2006. However, in 2012 the Executive Board established the “Regina Mundi in Diaspora Grant Programme.” Each year about 100 sisters from the Global South receive tuition grants for theological studies. In 2015, 110 sisters received grants

28. *Carmen: Project 4 – Zambian Research Project*

The UISG has received funding from the GHR Foundation to study the education needs of women’s congregations in the Global South in terms of future congregational and ministry needs. Zambia (through ACWECA and ZAS – Zambian Association of Sisters) was chosen for the study which aims at developing a planning tool that will be useful for congregations worldwide as they seek to plan their own educational needs into the future.

29. *Carmen: Project 5 – Refugees and Migrants*

To mark the Jubilee of UISG in a practical way, we decided to launch an appeal to set up an international inter-congregational community in Sicily with the various language, legal and counseling abilities needed to help migrants. We want to thank you for your prompt response in naming sisters for the project, in sending financial help, in lodging the sisters here in Rome for more than two months as they prepared to go to Sicily.

UISG is appealing to its members to attend to the needs of refugees and migrants in every part of the world. We hope that other inter-congregational ventures can be undertaken by women religious, and we have a new call from the Vicariate of Anatolia in Turkey.

Later in the week Sr. Elisabetta Flick will give an account of how the project is developing.

30. Pat: Project 6 - Canon Law Service

Thanks to the generous support of the Conrad Hilton Foundation this is a new initiative to provide canonical services to congregational leaders throughout the world. During the past 18 months the following steps have been taken:

(a) A Canon Law Council of 5 Sisters has been established. Led by Sr. Mary Wright (Australia) they include the following Sr. Marjorie Gallagher (Canada) Sr. Licia (India) Sr. Mary Gerard (Nigeria) and Sr. Tiziana Merletti (Italy). So they are from different continents and can offer advice in different languages.

(b) They have provided canonical consultation here in Rome at certain periods which have been advertised. During those time periods and indeed beyond in some cases, they have offered consultations by phone, email and Skype.

(c) They have helped to organize two meetings – one for 40 religious women canon lawyers at Nemi (December 2015). These canon lawyers came from many different countries with the majority coming from Africa and Asia. This meeting was an updating and the first step in establishing an international network of women religious canon lawyers. We intend to publish a list of these sisters on the member's side of the website so that you will know who you might consult in your part of the world. We continue to add to this list as we learn the names of others. A trained canon lawyer is a resource to be shared with other congregations.

31. Pat: Project 7 – Improved Communication Capacity

You will hear a lot about communication this week and our efforts to really connect the membership of UISG globally. Again with the support of the Conrad Hilton Foundation, UISG has begun to improve its communication capacity in order to improve relationships with you the members. When you look at the membership of UISG – 1860 in total – the vast majority don't live in Rome or in Italy. Therefore, our capacity to communicate globally is essential. Many envy our international network and we need to commit to connecting with each other, as part of our mission to today's world. There are many networks that bring destruction and evil and we see signs of those in our world. Our network has enormous capacity to do good and to challenge the forces of evil in our world but we will only be as strong as the weakest link!! So we want to communicate regularly with you and so we must have up-to-date information re your email and

telephone. We can't tell you how important it is to hear from you what is happening in your country or region and what the world needs to know. It is being acknowledged more and more that the people who know what is really happening on the ground are the sisters who are close to the people. So it may feel that it is another burden to carry when we ask you to communicate but sisters this is the new way of being in solidarity and of witnessing to God's reign.

As well as our communication with you the members of UISG we also want to expand our relationships with national, regional and continental conferences and with other groups and organizations who want to be part of who sisters are and what they are doing in the world. Believe you me that this number is growing.

32. *Carmen and Pat - How did we do this?*

(a) Reorganization of the office

- auditing of finances - departments - increase of full-time staff

(b) New relationship with Embassies to the Holy See:

US, Australian, UK and Ireland.

(c) Financial Support in Solidarity from Congregations

(d) New Partners :

- Conrad N. Hilton Foundation,

- GHR

- SC Ministry Foundation

- Arise Foundation

(e) Major partnership: USG

(f) INGOs and other Church based Organizations:

Caritas Internationalis, WUCWO, JRS etc.

33. *Carmen: Moving Forward – Strategic Plan – Mission*

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

34. *Pat: Moving Forward – Strategic Plan – Values*

The work of UISG is being carried out while keeping the following values in mind:

Discernment: there are many choices to be made in relation to the promotion of the charism of religious life for women and therefore we need

discerning hearts.

Collaboration: working together has to be a key value for all of us in a world that is fragmenting. The days of competing against each other as congregations should be over. I believe that we should never do alone what we can do together.

Celebrating Differences: At Executive Board level, in Commissions and Committees ; in our collaborative projects we need to show forth and celebrate the richness that difference brings. This is a prophetic witness in today's world.

Unity in Diversity: Our very differences bring so many perspectives into play and yet we can witness to the fact that in the midst of this diversity we can remain unity – why because we are followers of Christ and we seek to serve the people who are in need. With this at the core our very differences can build a multi-faceted unity.

Mutual Support: We will support each other at every level of UISG in whatever way we can – often a listening ear; a space for conversation and then other more practical helps in times of great need, times of suffering and sadness or indeed in times of celebration.

Integrity and Transparency: This is an urgent call to each in the context of authentic witness. We must be seen to be people of integrity and transparency in everything that we do and are. Our systems and procedures whether financial or related to personnel must demonstrate these important values.

Rooted in the Word of God: Finally our lives at personal and community levels are rooted in our contemplation of God's living word.

35. Carmen: Moving Forward – Strategic Plan – Vision

That UISG will be a vibrant and recognised international organization, with a prophetic voice within the church and the world. We will communicate effectively to support and offer hope to religious women. We will collaborate as a global community responding together to critical issues in today's world.

36. Pat and Carmen – some future hopes

Sustainable development goals (maybe during this assembly we will manage to choose one or two of these goals towards which we will work together in the next three years). Proposal that we focus on SDG No. 5 - *Goal 5*. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Worldwide network of religious women theologians and biblical scholars.
What do you suggest?

37. *Pat – Pope Francis*

Pope Francis has spoken very clearly through his various encyclicals about the needs of today. He has also spoken clearly to religious about the need to “leave your nests” “go out on the streets” “go to the frontiers” leave the centre and travel to the peripheries” and “reach the fringes of humanity.” In the days ahead we will explore together how to respond to these challenging words. We know that our conversation with Pope Francis later this week will be an important part of our journey into the future, for the sake of the Reign of God.

38. *Carmen – Final Words*

The commitment to global solidarity is a most beautiful and complex enterprise which needs patience, creativity and skill. And like weaving it starts with one stitch and goes on, one stitch after another, growing nearly imperceptibly.” We have been weaving the past together. Let us begin now at this Assembly to weave the future together.

(The slides of this PPT Presentation are available on the UISG website: www.uisg.org)



CROSSING THE THRESHOLD: WEAVING GLOBAL SOLIDARITY FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Sr. Carol Zinn, SSJ

Dr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph from Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA has ministered in the formal and non-formal education profession. Dr. Zinn served on her Congregation's leadership team and in the Presidency of LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) for a 3 year term, 2012-2015. Sr. Carol served as the main representative for the Congregations of St. Joseph, an NGO in General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations. She represented over 15,000 Sisters of St. Joseph who live and minister in 57 countries.

Original in English

"...I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord, I will come back to you and your hearts will rejoice...that they may all be one...why are you standing there looking at the sky...may the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to His call...let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope...for the One who made the promise is trustworthy...how were you baptized...if then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above...do you believe now...come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of Your love...the Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you."

(Scriptures from 7th Sunday of Easter, Feast of Ascension, 9 May and Pentecost Sunday)

*Earth, I am. Fire, I am. Air and Water and Spirit, I am
Earth, you are. Fire, you are. Air and Water and Spirit, you are.
Earth, we are. Fire, we are. Air and Water and Spirit, we are.
(Lakota Sioux)*

It is an honor for me to be here with you as you gather for the 2016 UISG Assembly and celebrate the Golden Jubilee of this important, significant and

much-needed network of the leadership of women religious around our world. If the UISG hadn't been created in 1965, surely it would be created now because now, more than ever perhaps, we women religious must think and act and pray and lead as one.

The time for individual, autonomous, sovereign nation states is over, we often observe and lament as we watch what is happening in and to our world and all of God's People and Creation. We have to be careful with that observation because that same critique can be said of us. For far too long, and in some cases while it might have been somewhat necessary depending on the culture and the historical foundation, the individualization of mission, the autonomy of ministries and the sovereign nation-state-like charism lock on which we stood firm and fast and ferocious has finally begun to cease.

Yes, the UISG invites each and all of us to embrace the times in which we live: times of increased interdependence, accelerated communication, globalized travel, widespread intercultural relationships, unprecedented peril and promise, historical interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and unimaginable vulnerability and vision. The mission of UISG is needed here and now. The members of UISG are needed today and tomorrow. And the manifestation of UISG is needed again, anew, each day and every day. Earth needs UISG. The world needs UISG. The Church Whom we Love needs UISG. The future needs UISG. Religious Life needs UISG. You need UISG. The time for the lone wolf is over, says the poet. It is time for working, walking, and witnessing together, for the life of the world.

Happy Jubilee, UISG. May this Assembly put into place the manifestation of the promise and mission of UISG so that the world may be touched in new and healing ways with the love of the One in whom and through whom we have our being, Jesus Christ our Lord, Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, even here, even now, ever faithful.

As I considered the theme of this Assembly, "Weaving Global Solidarity for Life" and the three lenses through which the theme would be addressed: for the Planet; with those living on the margins; and our life and living as women religious", I was keenly aware of the order in which the topics emerged for the planning committee. It is most appropriate to begin with the most comprehensive venue into which all of life and our vocation as women religious is situated.

The phrase, "a long, loving look" has been ascribed to the practice of contemplation. And indeed it is an apt description of the practice of placing ourselves in the presence of our good and gracious God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the companionship of our brother, Jesus the Christ as

we open ourselves to the ongoing revelation of God's unconditional love, mercy, healing and joy. Our contemplative prayer and life stance takes us out of ourselves with the Gospel message of self-emptying love so that we might be that self-emptying love to all the world.

In the spirit of taking a "long, loving look", I would like to explore some components of how we might be weavers of a global solidarity for our Common Home, planet Earth. I'd like to offer this exploration in three (3) parts:

1. The Power of Worldview and the Conversion of Mindset Needed
2. The Mutuality of Relationships and the Conversion of Heart Needed
3. The Witnessing of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit and the Conversion of Will Needed.

In the first part, I will offer some reflections on the impact of how we see the world with the understanding that while we can only see the world from where we stand, we are living in times demanding that we shift where we're standing, at least metaphorically and figuratively, but also literally. Truly a conversion of mind, thought, thinking and perspective is needed.

In the second part, I will offer some reflections on the necessity of mutuality in all of our relationships, with all living beings and with Earth Herself. Without this mutuality, our way of relating in the world devolves into competition, survival of the fittest, domination and control of the many by the few and conquest over rather than compassion with. Truly a conversion of Heart and capacity for connecting is needed.

And in the third part, I will offer some reflections on the ways in which we, women religious leaders and those whom you lead, might give witness to the truth that we are called to be Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit for the life of the world. Truly, a conversion of will is needed because the temptation is too great for us to gather here, be inspired perhaps by each other, be challenged by each other and yet, return to our own place on Earth, wake up the next morning and continue our lives and our ministry as if this gathering happened on another planet other than the one we call our Common Home, Earth.

Before we launch this reflective journey, let me make some observations. The topic of the ecological and environmental crises we face on Earth is overwhelming on many levels. The amount of data that exists on the multi-faceted aspects of this crisis is beyond comprehension. The scope and impact of the crisis is serious cause for pause. Trying to do justice to this reality lies way beyond the limits of the Assembly and certainly beyond the parameters of this session.

If this Assembly were held in May 2015, our task this morning would be

insurmountable, the range of scholarly references would be endless and the focus of the content would be unwieldy. Fortunately, we gather here in May 2016, 13 months after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, a prophetic, poetic, poignant and practical reflection and call to conversion. In just 246 paragraphs and 44,000 words, we have a comprehensive, cohesive, cogent and compelling invitation to look at our current reality, open ourselves to the grace of conversion and transformation, move towards an integral ecology, chart a path of sustainable love and compassion for all beings, and reclaim our role as co-creators with the God of All Creation.

Our Jesuit brother, Tom Reese, offered a summary of the main messages in *Laudato Si'* in his June 2015 publication in *Amercia* magazine. This could offer us a foothold on the breadth and depth of the teachings as we begin our own exploration here this morning:

1. The spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment.
2. The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change.
3. Less is more.
4. Catholic Social Teaching now includes teaching on the environment.
5. Discussions about the environment can be grounded in the Bible and Church tradition.
6. Everything is connected—including the economy
7. Scientific research on the environment is to be praised and used.
8. Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen environmental problems.
9. Global dialogue and solidarity are needed.
10. A change of heart is required.

It is my hope that we have all made the time to at least read *Laudato Si* and perhaps read it thoroughly and seriously. Maybe we've had the opportunity to study it or plan to do so. Maybe our congregations are praying it, teaching it, embracing it and embodying it in all the ways they can. Therefore, I am going to use *Laudato Si'* as both the context and content for this reflection. With its ink still drying on our minds and hearts, immersing ourselves in the encyclical seems the most faithful and meaningful response to its Gospel call.

Part One: The Power of Worldview and the Conversion of Mind Needed

In Part One, I'd like to begin with a story, invite you to take a test, present the characteristics of the prominent ways in which our world is viewed today and then suggest a way forward that embraces the conversion of mind needed for these times and placed before us, women religious leaders, as a way to live our radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the

world.

- Story
- Test of Earth knowledge
- Characteristics of prominent worldviews today
- Conversion of Mind: Spirituality of Earth

First the story: We have a Queen in our family, she is 8 years old and her name is Mackenzie. I know that we all have these members of our families and they bring us great joy and blessings. They can also speak profound words of wisdom and truth in great innocence and humility.

When Mackenzie started school a few years ago, I had the opportunity to ask her how things were going about 2 months into the school year. Her answer was quite amazing. She simply looked at me and said, “You know, Aunt Carol, it’s actually very boring.” Of course that led to a conversation about what the source of the boredom was and how she tried to move past the experience of being bored. I even tried to help her know that boredom comes from within, but she was not really interested in that idea. For her the boredom was coming from external circumstances. Finally she took a deep breath and said, with great emphasis, “Aunt Carol, do you know that there are some children who need to hear the same thing over and over and over again.” She really couldn’t believe what she was experiencing at school. For her, hearing the same thing over and over and over again was just a bit beyond what she expected in school!

I think of that conversation with Kenzie whenever I consider the concept of worldview. It does seem that we humans need to hear the same thing over and over and over again in terms of Earth, Our Common Home, in that it is our home, the only one we have at this moment in time and it is common to all living beings on the planet—not just humans.

Test of Earth knowledge: As a way of understanding the concept of worldview, I’d like to invite you to a simple test about the planet. No need to worry about being prepared for this test—you are all prepared for it by virtue of living on the planet. Like all simple tests, there will be 5 questions and you may not share your information with your neighbors:

Question 1: Draw a picture of Earth, Our Common Home

Question 2: How many oceans are there on Earth, Our Common Home?

Question 3: How many land masses are there on Earth, Our Common Home?

Question 4: How many continents are there on Earth, Our Common Home?

Question 5: How many species are there on Earth, Our Common Home?

In order to get a sense of the vastness of species on Earth, let's do a visual right here in the room. (Demonstrate the approximation of species by dividing the room into the various groupings of species: insects, flora/fauna, bacteria/fungi, other, humans). The visualization of the relative scope of humans to all the other species is humbling to say the least. When we recall that science tells us that our species needs every other species in order to survive and, conversely, all of the other species could benefit sevenfold without the presence of humans, it becomes immediately clear that we humans need to hear the same thing over and over and over again.

Characteristics of prominent worldviews: If a picture is worth a thousand words, let's take a look at the two prominent images of our world today. The first one here is the one that continues to be taught in schools around the world and remains the mapped image of Earth. And this second one, the image of the planet from space, taken in 1969, continues to be used as a decoration more or less. This is the one that is displayed on Earth Day for instance, while the former one is often referred to as "the real world". There are very distinct and critical characteristics of each of these images of Earth and I find them quite compelling as we try to discern what will get us, as humans and especially as international women religious, across the threshold so that we really begin to live and act and pray and lead as one.

Characteristics of the "western/northern" worldview: perception, relationship and humanity's role

1. Everything is seen, understood and experienced as being separate from everything else. (Water, oceans, land, continents, species, humans, religions, cultures, races, gender, economies, politics, etc. are all seen not only as distinct and diverse, but as stand-alone entities.)

2. In a separate worldview, the relationship understanding is that of a ladder. (There are some species, races, cultures, economies, religions, etc. that are simply perceived as being higher/better than others)

3. In a ladder-like relational, separate worldview, the role of humans is understood to be one of practicing the illusion of control. (Everything from the mis-read of Genesis [dominion] to the current mis-read of global climate change [political science] reflects this notion of humans thinking that they are actually "in control")

I suggest that while we might be quick to see how this worldview plays out among others (i.e., politicians, lawyers, leaders, churches, educators, etc.), it is important to recall that this worldview is alive and well within and among

us, also. It was only a few decades ago when we were presented with the awareness that all are called to holiness and that religious life is not on a higher rung of the holiness ladder than marriage or single vocations. And in the not too distant past we know that the competition among charisms lived quite a full life among us as women religious. Perhaps it is still breathing in some parts of our minds and hearts. Or in recent times, we've seen how challenging it can be for us to really work together because of the sense of ownership we might be tempted to retain over our novices, our ministries, our fiscal resources, our land, our buildings and even our charisms, as if they belong to us and us alone. And Pope Francis has called us in these immediate times to remember our first vocation and to see the times in which we find ourselves as opportunities for grace and conversion and joy and to cross any artificial boundaries we've created in our minds and hearts. Truly, the only boundary is within the Heart of God and our vocation is to give witness to that Heart and lead others beyond boundaries that try to put limits on that Heart.

The image of Earth from space has only been with us since 1969. Not a very long time, really. And certainly not long enough to transform our view of the world. It is important to remember here that while this image is relatively new to some of us, it's a view of Earth that continues to shape how many of our indigenous sisters and brothers, the first peoples of nations and many religious and spiritual traditions have lived for centuries and continue to live and act and pray and lead as one.

Characteristics of Earth as seen from space: perception, relationship and humanity's role

1. Everything is seen, understood and experienced as being connected to everything else (there is only one body of water, one land mass, one community of life based on the unity found only in the celebration of diversity, one desire to share in the fullness of life and the praise of a being/energy "beyond oneself")

2. In a connected worldview, the relationship understanding is that of a circle. Whatever happens to one member in the circle happens to all members of the circle. The joy, hope, pain and anguish of one is the joy, hope, pain and anguish of all. Until all are free, no one is free)

3. In a circle-like relational, connected worldview, the role of humans is understood as choosing to participate in the emerging, ongoing and irreversible transformations. (Every choice we make, regardless of the content, support or weaken our capacity to choose for the whole, for the common good, for the life of the world. The more practice we get at choosing from the perspective of

participating in the holy process of conversion and transformation, the closer we move towards mirroring the likeness of God in Whose Image we are made)

Conversion of Mind: So what kind of conversion of mind is needed as we consider the power of our worldview and how challenging it is to literally learn to see in a new way, a way that reverences all of life, recognizes the Source of all life, respects the diversity inherent in the community of life and reconciles current ways of thinking and being, planning and acting that overwhelmingly and repeatedly fail to foster the health and well-being of Earth, our Common Home? While scientific, sociological, ecological, economic, cultural and corporate approaches have been tried, they have yielded less-than helpful fruit in terms of actual conversion of thought and mind. What appears necessary for these times is a spiritual approach, one that reaches, touches, heals and transforms our minds. Laudato Si' offers such an approach to a Spirituality of Earth:

“We are not God. The Earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the Earth has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion of the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.” (67)

“Together with our obligation to use the Earth’s goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes...each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection...each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things.” (68)

“Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.” (84)

“From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. To sense each singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s

love and hope. Alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of a leaf.” (85)

“The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God. God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and the inequalities tell us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.” (86)

Part Two: The Mutuality of Relationships and the Conversion of Heart Needed

In this part, I again begin with a story, invite you to take another test but this time about Earth’s reality, present characteristics of the Gospel message so needed for these times and then suggest a way forward that embraces the conversion of heart set before us, women religious leaders, as a way to live our radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the world.

- Story
- Test of Earth reality
- Characteristics of Gospel message
- Conversion of Heart: Spirituality of Wholeness

First the story: A mother sent her 8 year-old daughter to the corner store for a few items and she began to worry when the little girl was gone longer than necessary for the trip to the store. After several hours of concern and many efforts to try and find her daughter, the mother turned around in her kitchen to see her young child standing there. Initially, the mother was tempted to correct the child for being gone so long without saying where she was going. But, the little girl started speaking first. She said that she was aware that she was gone a very long time and she was sorry if that made her mother worry. Upon questioning, the mother discovered that the little girl did not get lost nor did she stray off the road to the store nor did she go anywhere else other than the store. When the mother asked her what took her so long, the little girl explained that as she was walking to the store, she noticed her friend sitting on the road holding her broken doll and crying very sadly. The mother was very taken with her daughter’s compassion and sympathy and inquired whether the daughter helped her to fix the doll or get it repaired by someone else. To the

mother's surprise, the daughter explained that she did none of those things. When asked what took her so long, then, if she didn't help the little girl, her daughter merely said that she did the only really helpful thing in the situation which was to sit down next to her very sad friend and help her cry.

This poignant story captures the core of our vocation, it seems to me: to be present enough to the reality around us that our hearts are moved deeply enough to prompt an appropriate response. It is so easy for us, women religious, to avoid the reality in which we find ourselves as a species and as a community of life. It's easy because the reality often times stands right in front of us and still we do not see it for what it is and therefore are unable to fully respond to it. Instead, we can be tempted to respond to what we think the reality is or respond out of our own reality rather than to the actual reality.

Test of Earth's Reality: As a way to try to grasp the reality of Earth, I invite you to a little test. Only two questions this time. And each answer is only one word. So, this should be quite easy and go quickly.

Question 1: As you consider Earth, Our Common Home, what do you think is the single most serious challenge experienced by the human species? (Poverty)

Question 2: As you consider Earth, Our Common Home, what do you think is the single most serious challenge experienced by all the other species as a whole? (Poverty)

It's probably surprising to realize that poverty is the answer for both questions. Truth be told, it's not so much poverty that's the answer because poverty is a created condition. It doesn't exist except as a consequence of behavior. There is no want or scarcity in the natural world. It functions on an economy of abundance. There is enough for all in other words, the only place where that principle fails to find expression is when it comes to human-related interactions.

And so poverty in some very real ways is not the answer. The more accurate answer is the presence of the obscene accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the needs of the many. In other words, both the environment and the human family suffer because of the dynamic interaction between the few and the many, between wants and needs, between those who have and those who have not.

Poverty is the symptom that the human interactions are out of sync, are not based on the common good, are not focused on Care of Our Common Home, Earth.

It is difficult to imagine that there is anyone on Earth today who has not seen the images and/or statistics of poverty. We know that 8/10 people are under-educated, under-housed, under-fed and under cared for in terms of medical treatment. The other 2/10 are over educated, housed, fed and cared for. We know that 7/10 people cannot read (and that 6/7 of them are women and girl children). We know that 1/3 people subsist on less than \$1 USD. We know that 4/5 people are unable to drink the water around them while the other 1/5 has more access to water than they know what do with.

We also know that water is a right and not a commodity; that land is a gift to be tended lovingly and not property to be owned by the highest bidder; that all species are expressions of the Creator God and not for the use and abuse by humans; that the current conflicts around the world are connected, for the most part, to some aspect of natural resources being fought over from religious/cultural/ethnic perspectives; that patterns of production, consumption and reproduction are part of the fabric of a first-world dominated global economy; that the drug wars, gangs, violence against women, trafficking of women and children and the unprecedented movement of peoples on/from/into every continent on the planet are consequences of political and economic policies of exploitation and manipulation; and that deforestation, GMOs, soil depletion, river/ lake/ ocean pollution, air quality, species endangerment/extinction, habitat deterioration, coastal village and commerce disappearance, and global warming indicate a planet in need of tremendous healing and return to its Creator's design of wholeness and wellness.

And yet even with all this information, the most serious human and environmental challenge continues to be this presence of poverty caused by the wants of the many having priority over the needs of the many, regardless of their species. And while there are signs that some conversion is taking place and some progress is being made in terms of wealth re-distribution, the overarching reality is that when the leaders of the world gathered in September 2015 they were compelled to put forth a global agenda for 2030 by identifying and committing to Sustainable Development Goals. And, again, as in September 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals, the very first goal reads: eradication of poverty with a description of specific targets that will indicate the progress towards this goal as the year 2030 comes closer. So serious is the issue of economic disparity that every international and national gathering has it as one of its meeting agenda items. So serious is the impact of poverty on the environment, that every environmental effort takes into account the economic and social dimension of sustainability. And so serious is the reality of poverty that every faith tradition, including ours, focuses its attention on the most marginalized and vulnerable peoples as a way to live out the tenets of the

sacred texts. This reality, the extreme suffering, pain, anguish and injustice rendered by some humans on their sisters and brothers and all of God's Creation clearly breaks our hearts.

And yet, what to do? How to address the issue? What is the remedy? Who can dare to offer it? From where will the courage come? And why does it take so long for Earth's reality to reach our hearts? And perhaps even more startling, why does it take so long for our hearts to be moved to action? Even with all the ministry efforts of women religious around the world who focus on the needs of those children of God who sit outside the city gates and beg for mercy, still the needs prevail. What is it that we are not seeing in terms of eradicating poverty? How is it that for all of our direct service the impact of poverty runs rampant around our world and touches the life, health, sustainability and viability of everything that lives?

Characteristics of the Gospel message: Perhaps our hearts have become broken enough by the literal suffering in our world that we are ready to have the words of the Gospel message seep in and prepare the way for conversion. Our Jewish sisters and brothers often pray that the Word of God might be on their hearts. This seems an unusual place for God's Word to land—we typically pray that God's Word might be in our hearts. The wisdom of the Torah teaches that God's Word can only really sit on our hearts until our hearts are broken open by the pain and suffering in the world. Once they are broken open, then the Word of God that has been sitting on our hearts can fall into our hearts; thus, beginning the process of conversion. It just may be that for all the decades that women religious have been on the forefront of responding to the needs of those who suffer, the time has come for us to really be heartbroken by what we see as we look at our local, regional, national and global world and allow the pain and destruction of ecosystems, social systems, political systems, family and tribal systems, economic systems and institutional systems, including our own, to finally resonate with our consciousness in such a way that moves us to action that binds us together to think and act and pray and lead as one.

This will be a challenge of critical proportions, though. It is a well-known fact that women religious are among the most educated group of women on the planet today. It is also understood that religious life has emerged as a first-world lifestyle regardless of where the religious live. This is for the simple reason that education is an important and necessary constitutive element of our life. And this is a good and helpful element. Surely we don't want to move towards less education. However, the level of education present among us, as a whole sub-species of the human community, tips the scales of our mind and heart towards the temptation of becoming quite comfortable in our comfort zone. It also creates an occupational hazard in that the phenomena of entitlement

creep can do just that—creep into our minds and hearts. And it presents the eternal challenge of trying to minister at the edges and peripheries of our world while we ourselves live in the center. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to journey to the margins when one's home is situated far from the margin either in mindset or actuality. The built-in security, access to resources, and education are gifts for sure and we often use those gifts at the service of others. At the same time, they create the space for a numbness of consciousness and its consequential blindness of heart that can easily become a lens through which we think and act and pray and lead as one.

In Scripture, we see quite clearly the message of Jesus about the manner of discipleship. Time and time again we see a trinity of choices set before Jesus that he in turn sets before his disciples. Church teaching, Catholic Social Teaching and more recently Vatican Council II teaching and *The Joy of the Gospel* all capture this trinity in profound and prophetic ways.

The mutuality of relationships pivots on choosing love over fear, every single time and in every single circumstance; mercy over judgement, every single encounter and in every single experience; and inclusion over exclusion, every single opportunity and in every single venue. It is so clear how Jesus lived his life out of this pattern of mutuality. Every relationship he had, created, met, observed demonstrated his fundamental option for love, mercy and inclusion, even when everything and everyone around him tempted fear, judgement and exclusion.

And we see that the practices of humility, hospitality and holistic perspective sustained Jesus' capacity for choosing love, mercy and inclusion. With humility, hospitality and holistic perspective as daily practices, it becomes part of one's nature to stand in solidarity with all that lives and welcome all as neighbor, sister and brother. Humility starkly points out the temptations to arrogance, righteousness, and callousness of heart. Hospitality staunchly opposes the instinct to think or feel attitudes that sound like "not in my backyard (of neighborhood, country, congregation, local community)" or "we can't do that (take in a refugee family, truly pray with another faith tradition, engage in meaningful relationships with those who are least like us, really create partnerships among ourselves that test the boundaries of ownership and control)". And holistic perspective systematically critiques a way of being in the world and in relationship that calls into question whose needs are primary, whose agenda is addressed and whose presence is both faceless and voiceless.

How honest, welcoming and holistic we can be with each other will pave the way for a conversion of heart needed by the larger world that could happen through our witnessing to it. The cost will be great. The cost not to witness

such humility, hospitality and holistic perspective will be far greater. Perhaps part of our vocation at this moment in time is to witness to the capacity for conversion that lies fallow in the human heart.

In some ways this seems so simple that we might wonder why or how we more often than not fall short of making the Gospel choices. The soul-depth truth is that these Gospel choices are not easy, popular, successful, or user-friendly. We run the risk, time and time again, of holding lightly what we've come to know as our prestige, our power and influence, our possibility of failure, and our propensity for achievement—all in service of those to whom we minister. Nestled in our heart's mind though are the perennial temptations Jesus faced in the desert. In the desert of our own lives and ministry of elected ministry we face the same temptations. Thinking and acting, and praying and leading as one will surely shift the tectonic plates of security, safety, comfort and control. Fear, judgement and exclusion are templates for us, even if they are our defaults, they are templates nonetheless. And it takes daily attentiveness to discern when we allow our default templates to reign.

Conversion of Heart: So what kind of conversion of Heart will prompt us to weave global solidarity for the life of the world? How can we move beyond the ways in which we have come to think and act and pray and lead as one? How might we find the courage and vision to actually cross the threshold at which we've been standing for decades now? Where do we turn when the choices before us are stark, serious, sobering and self-effacing? We can turn to Laudato Si' for some practical and prophetic conditions needed for conversion of heart in a Spirituality of Wholeness:

“The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.” (48)

“It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet, they are the majority of the planet's population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a questions which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage.” (49)

“In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of

richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership that is structurally perverse.” (52)

“A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted.” (91)

Part Three: Witnessing of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit and the Conversion of Will Needed

In Part Three, I’ll begin again with a story, invite yet another test—this one has only one question and a one-word answer, so the tests are getting easier, or so we think. Next I’d like to employ the characteristics of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit as a way of understanding how we might move forward together. And then suggest some practical next steps for women religious to embrace the conversion of will needed for these times as a radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the world.

- Story
- Test of Earth Awareness
- Characteristics of Partnerships
- Conversion of Will: Spirituality of Influence

First the story: I return to our family Queen, Mackenzie. I asked her how things were going midway through second grade. She responded with great enthusiasm that she was a leader and that’s how things were going. Of course, I prodded about what being a leader meant. She thought for a while and then explained that the teacher says she is leader and calls her a leader. Upon further conversation, I was trying to help her see that the teacher was certainly inviting all of the children to be their best and do their best, etc., Kenzie stopped me and declared that while the teacher was encouraging all of the children, she was, in fact, a leader! And the explanation of why that was the case was quite profound: Kenzie simply said that she was a leader because the teacher always asks her to do things first because she’s not afraid to make a mistake.

Leadership: ability and freedom and courage to try things first because there is no fear of making of a mistake! Would that leadership on every level

in our world, nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, churches, temples and mosques, congregations, ministries and communities exercised that kind of leadership.

The freedom and courage needed today to resist the temptation to be afraid of stepping out in response to the critical issues of our times looms everywhere in our world, even in this room and in each of our minds and hearts. The resources needed to eradicate poverty are readily at hand; the resources needed to honor Earth's capacity to heal and flourish abundantly for all of life are readily at hand; the one resource that is blatantly absent is the one that is most needed: will, choosing to think and act and pray and lead as one. Whether we are critiquing the global landscape of political, economic, social, ecclesial, cultural or educational leadership or whether we consider our own capacity for freedom, courage, fearlessness and will that resource is lacking.

Why is this so prevalent? How does this resistance continue to have such a hold on us, all of us and each of us? In what ways does it manifest itself, even among us, here and at home in our congregations and communities? Perhaps a quick test might shed some light on this mystery.

Test of Earth Awareness: Imagine for a moment that we, women religious around the globe, committed to addressing the symptom and poverty and its cause: the unbridled and obscene accumulation of wealth garnered by the wants of the few being met at the literal expense of the needs of the many. How would we need to work together in order for our witness to a radical response to the Gospel message in this historical and cultural context to become a reality? I'll give you a hint: the answer is only one word! (allow time for engagement at tables)

I'm going to surmise that the answer "partnership" barely emerged and if it did, there is very little understanding of what it actually means. There are some key ways that humans attempt to work together:

Competition: whereby two or more people work against each other for the same goal;

Cooperation: whereby two or more people work with each other for the same goal;

Collaboration: whereby two or more people work with each other for a shared goal freely and willingly using processes and resources to do so;

Partnership: whereby two or more people work together in creating a shared goal freely and willing using processes and resources to do so with total

mutuality of power, influence over the outcome.

We women religious are quite adept at cooperation and even collaboration. Many wonderful projects exist demonstrating our ability to work together in service of God's people and all Creation. The international community recognizes that need for partnerships as the way into a future that is healthy, whole, sustainable, just, peaceful, and viable for all members of Earth, Our Common Home. While all partnerships are collaborations and cooperative in construct, the reverse is not true. And we tend to use the word partnerships quite freely even though the efforts we're describing fall far short of true partnerships.

The most compelling aspect of a partnership revolves around the dynamic of power and control. In order for a collaborative effort to upgrade as it were to a partnership, the very goal trying to be achieved needs to be mutually discerned and the resources, all of them, need to be "put on the table" and offered with no strings attached. And the outcome needs to emerge and unfold and develop as the partnership evolves. The need for flexibility, error, change of direction, shift in planning, and even the presence of failure demands a freedom, courage and fearlessness beyond what many of us are used to offering.

The very best example of a partnership is the miraculous process of conception. Our 7th grade science and high school biology teaches that this remarkable act of reproduction by all species is not merely an act of cooperation and collaboration. It is a partnership in the fullest sense of the word. The individual cells bring all that they have to the effort, they give over their own identity/power/influence in the process of creating together what neither one of them can do alone. And the new entity, while containing every bit of the original cells, is an entirely new creation. Science even ascribes a new name. In fact, the original cells cease to exist, they have died in the act of creating together what neither of them could have done alone.

When the international community talks about creating partnerships in order to meet the 2030 SDGs or address global crises, it becomes easier to see why it is so difficult to do. And the countries and governments that have the most to give over are the ones who resist becoming partners. This pattern is found not only among the typically wealthy, developed, so-called "first world" countries, although it does play out in greater starkness among those stakeholders. The pattern is alive and well within and among all nation-states and governments. The human desire and tendency for power and control exists everywhere and when the political and economic atmosphere in the global neighborhood is dominated by this energy, the creation and achievement of true partnerships all but disappears on the horizon as a dream, an impracticality, totally unrealistic,

a Pollyanna mode of behavior.

It's humbling to realize how women religious are perceived by the international, diplomatic community. We're described as:

- a. Worldwide presence and effective/efficient network
- b. Long histories
- c. Present in very hard places
- d. When the going gets tough, we don't leave
- e. Accomplish a lot with a little
- f. Come to table for persons and issues not our own
(women, children, planet)

Might we be ripe for creating true partnerships? How can we learn how to do this? Where do we turn for insight, guidance, modeling, and benchmarks?

Characteristics of Partnerships: Perhaps we could look to the presence of God's Spirit in Creation and see how Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit can teach us to think and act and pray and lead as one.

Earth: consistency, responsible, reliable, respectful, persevering

What if we exercised these attributes of Earth in creating partnerships with each other and many others in order to weave solidarity on the Planet? What if we committed to plant a tree for every member and every ministry every year? And what if engaged the most diverse groups to join us? Or what if we joined groups already doing this very act? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that all over the world, women religious were going to be partners and begin replenishing and restoring the very life-giving soil of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable partnerships.

Fire: creative, transformative, enthusiastic, courageous, vigorous, zealous, daring, decisive

What if we initiated efforts to transform our heart, mind, home, neighborhood, community, congregation every month of the year? What if we committed to transforming our worldview, transforming our capacity for compassion, transforming our comfortable comfort zones, transforming our complacency, transforming our inertia? And what if we engaged with each other and others to do this really hard work of transformation? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that all over the world, women religious were going to be partners and set ablaze the fire of transformation thereby replenishing and restoring the very digestive system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by

doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable partnerships.

Air: vigilant, kind-hearted, trusting, clarity, optimistic, joyful

What if we created conversation circles on the political and economic issues to address the environmental concerns each season of the year? What if we made use of the venues we have to invite others into courageous conversations about the issues that really matter right where we live? It is increasingly clear that the way one changes the world is to change the world where one's feet are. What if we reached out to our local political and economic leaders in ways that fostered partnerships in order to create barrios, neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities in which all beings are nourished and nurtured to live life fully and freely? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that women religious, all over the world, were going to transform the very respiratory system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable.

Water: nourishing, healing, sustaining, understanding, forgiveness, compassion, mercy

What if we provided healing and reconciliation rituals that took place on significant international remembrance days?

8 March	International Women's Day
22 March	World Water Day
22 April	Earth Day
22 May	Bio-Diversity Day
9 August	Indigenous Peoples' Day
21 September	International Day of Peace
17 October	International Eradication of Poverty Day
8 December	International Human Rights' Day

What if we were intentionally inclusive of all religions and faith traditions in our locales? What if we extended this inclusion to all sectors making sure that there was some public awareness of these rituals? And what if we offered "take-home-rituals" so that families, businesses, schools and places of worship could engage in rituals that heal and reconcile? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that women religious, all over the world, were going to heal and reconcile the very circulatory system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership all over the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable.

What appears necessary for these times is a spirituality of influence that

points us to the integration of what we know with the fortitude of will to actually choose to create and commit our resources of time, energy, personnel, mission, charisms, and ministries in the service of generating partnerships for the life of the world. *Laudato Si'* is filled with elements of a Spirituality of Influence based on the Gospel message of Jesus:

“The most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance or romantic illusion or an obstacle to be circumvented.” (54)

“Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment. In this sense, social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national, and international communities.” (142)

“The extreme poverty experienced in areas lacking open spaces, or potential for integration, can lead to incidents of brutality and to exploitation by criminal organizations. In the unstable neighborhoods of mega-cities, the daily experience of overcrowding and social anonymity can create a sense of uprootedness which spawns antisocial behavior and violence. Many people in these conditions are able to weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness are overcome.” (149)

“The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which requires patience, self-discipline, and generosity, always keeping in mind that realities are greater than ideas.” (201)

“An integral ecology is also made up of simply daily gestures which break with violence, exploitation, and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms.” (230)

Spirit: animating breath of God, maintaining and sustaining the presence of Holy Mystery.

How to think, act, pray and lead as one with this animating breath of God? Do we make it harder than it really is? Do we plan in such a way that the process itself extinguishes the very animation? Is it possible that the resistance to cross the threshold is real enough for us that we stop just short of taking that

step, together?

In closing, perhaps a final story could en flesh Pope Francis' call to religious to "Wake Up the World" and cross the threshold that will weave a global solidarity for the life of the world.

My Dad died on a Sunday afternoon in 1996, in his own home, sitting in his own favorite chair. My brothers and sister and I were a family tag team in union with the wonderful hospice professionals.

My one brother and I were present that Sunday afternoon along with my Mom and my 2 year-old niece who called me "Carmel" because she didn't yet know how to say "Aunt Carol". When my brother came to the house to relieve me for a few hours, I went upstairs to rest. I'm sure you know how you rest in those kinds of situations, with one eye and ear open on alert for the next step in the journey.

I was resting for about an hour when I heard little footsteps coming up the stairs and into my room. I remained still with my eyes closed. Before I knew it, my niece climbed up onto the bed and was leaning over me with her hands on my cheeks. She was whispering, "Carmel, Carmel, Carmel—are you in there, Carmel?" I laughed and she asked me if I was happy since I was laughing. I looked right into her beautiful, innocent eyes and said that I was happy. She then sat up straight, looking at me from above and said with total clarity and conviction: "Good, Carmel, because Daddy and Pop-Pop need you downstairs right now!" My brother had sent her up to get me for what were the final hours of my Dad's life here as we loved and prayer and sang him into eternity that day.

I think of that experience as we come to the end of this reflection this morning. Truly we are in living in times where the World and all of God's Creation whisper louder and louder to us: Are you in there, women religious? What is your worldview? Are you really seeing what you're looking at? Do you really see the multiple opportunities for you to be the fullness of a radical response to the Gospel in these historical and cultural times? Are you able to see what is and can you see what could be if you were weavers of a global solidarity? And can you see the challenge and cost that weaving will be to you?

Of course, we want to give a positive response to that question. Yes, we are "in there" and yes, we are happy. Happy here means the kind of joy about which Pope Francis speaks. A joy that is contagious and palpable. A joy that comes from the Heart of God and our faithful response to our vocation, not

counting the cost of that “yes” spoken and lived in great happiness.

So then the moment comes when the world and all of God’s Creation awaits the joining of our minds and hearts in a way that embodies the current call: “good, because the world and all of God’s Creation need you right now.” We are needed in ways, perhaps, that we have never been needed before. We are needed to weave global solidarity for the life of the world.

Sisters, are you in there? Are you happy? Good, the world and all of God’s Creation needs you right now!

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SOLIDARITY FOR LIFE ON THE PERIPHERY

Sr. Mary Sujita, SND

Born in Kerala, India, Sister Mary Sujita joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame as a missionary in Bihar, North India. After completing her early formation in religious life in North India, Sr. Sujita did her University studies in Bombay earning a Master's Degree in Social Work and Diploma in Mass Media Communications. She was the superior general of his congregation for two terms.

Original in English

Introduction

Dear Sisters, I feel privileged and honored to be part of this august Assembly. I stand here as a voice from the periphery. Solidarity for Life on the Periphery is a theme very dear to my heart and, indeed, to the heart of every religious. I congratulate the UISG leadership for their continued focus on this most important agenda for our discipleship and mission today. I believe that the poor will continue to lead us to the heart of our mission, to where we belong and, indeed, to the very heart of God. Today, I would like to offer some simple reflections that flow mainly from my many years of lived experience among one of the most marginalized groups of people in Bihar, India; an experience which has shaped my own spirituality and challenged my way of being a religious and a missionary.

A recurring theme for Pope Francis has been what he calls “the periphery” and the movement of the Church from the center to the peripheries of our globalized world. Days after his election (March 3, 2013), he made his approach to the periphery very clear when he said: “And how I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor.” [*E come vorrei una Chiesa povera e per i poveri!*] Since then, he has repeated this same challenge over and over again: “Go to the poor, go to the peripheries.” There is a sense of

urgency in his call as he invites us to reimage religious life and mission in a radical way, and find our true identity on the peripheries. We are asked not only to look around to identify the peripheries, but to identify the most neglected and peripheralised people around us as we engage in our apostolic ministries. He continues to challenge us and the whole Church to get out of ourselves and to go toward the periphery, and to protect ourselves from becoming self-absorbed! In his encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” The UISG theme of this Assembly is a clear response to this clarion call of the Pope. Together, as consecrated women, we need to search for the relevance and implications of this call for our life and for our apostolic engagement with our world today. This Assembly is a privileged time to do some soul searching and ask some hard questions. As individuals, communities, institutions and congregations, where are we mostly located? Where and by whom are we seen and experienced the most? Where is the Spirit leading us to relocate ourselves as prophets of God’s Reign? Can we put our heads and hearts together to search for a response?

Jesus: Son of God of the peripheries

We see in Jesus that solidarity is not about what we do, but rather, how we live! It is about our personal and communal witness of life. It is all about relationships. Jesus could speak and act with freedom and authority because he spoke out of his profound experience of God. Jesus learned solidarity from his heart-knowledge of his Beloved *Abba*, total oneness with his *Abba* and, consequently, he related to all around him as brothers and sisters. For us as consecrated women too, this sustained divine intimacy is the fundamental requirement for engaging with one another in solidarity, and moving to the peripheries with the heart and mind of Jesus. It is only when the Spirit of God takes over our life that we can stand up, listen, and understand what God wants to say to us. We cannot be women on fire for the mission of Jesus, women of global solidarity and peace building, unless we live a life of necessary asceticism and contemplative intimacy with God.

The baptism of Jesus was a defining moment in his life and mission. It was then that the Spirit of God descended upon him and took command of his destiny. (Mk 1:9-12) It was then that he publicly proclaimed his oneness with the condition of all people, and was fully gripped by the reality of humanity. As Jesus entered into his mission, he took up a

stance for all the marginalized, the anawim, those on the periphery, whether they are marginalized economically or socio-culturally. He was well aware of the unjust structures that have created marginalization and poverty. The God of Jesus is clearly a compassionate God who hears the cry of the poor, the widow and the orphan. (Dt 10:17-18; Ps 68:5) Jesus entered into the pains and struggles of the poor and lived in solidarity with them. His lifestyle, the kind of followers he chose, and the focus of his ministry are all expressions of his identification and solidarity with those on the peripheries. The Jesus movement was prophetic and counter cultural and, therefore, revolutionary from the beginning.

What was one of your Baptism moments as a woman consecrated for the mission of Jesus?

To quote Tissa Balasuriya: “Jesus was profoundly contemplative, intensely human in his personal relations and authentically radical in his social options. He was a mystic given to quiet contemplation, solitary prayer and silence. “He would steal away from them into the desert and pray there” Luke 5:16. At the same time he was a person of intense action and radical commitment.” (*Globalization and Human Solidarity*) When we are rooted in God, we will be impelled from within to move out of our comfort zones and be prophetic risk-takers and healers whose very presence and witness will challenge the oppressive and divisive powers in our society. The spirit of freedom and love are foundational to building global solidarity for fullness of life. According to George Soares Prabhu, SJ, one of the most significant aspects of the spirituality of Jesus was “freedom and love, leading to identification with the powerless and confrontation with those in power.”

Jesus was a true “border crosser” when it came to many of the tightly-held religious, social and economic borders of his time. It was this border-crossing that took him to the cross. The transformation that he was bringing about discomfited all those who lived in the comfort of self-righteousness. Today, you and I are challenged to identify and cross over the tightly held, comfortable boundaries of our religious life and move to the peripheries. I wonder if we are reducing the “prophetic sting” in our call by mouthing the latest prophetic, theological and sociological jargons that give us a good feeling about doing God’s mission even when we are busy doing our own mission of conserving the past, protecting our institutions, or legitimizing the present! How can we recapture the original fire of Jesus’ mission and the founding fire that we have inherited as congregations so that our creative energies are released for the building up of the Reign of God? Let each of us

here ask herself: What “borders” have I crossed to move to the peripheries during the past 3-5 years in response to the urgencies of the Church and the world? Border crossing is a ‘prophetic walk’ to the other side where we belong!

The context of our mission today—the peripheries of our globalized world

The 21st century reality and crises present enormous challenges to our usual way of being and doing things. Our world is in crisis. Some of the critical signs of the crises are the fractures and divisions evident in extreme poverty, ecological degradation, violent conflicts and war, and the consequent mega-migration and human trafficking which we human beings continue to tolerate, and even accept, as the “new normal.” We often hear about accompanying the bottom billions to fullness of life as our call of the times. What does it mean, essentially, when we say we are carrying out the mission of Jesus today where so many are hungry, persecuted, driven out and marginalized; where homelessness is ever on the increase; where human persons, created in God’s image, are trafficked, abused, sold, and discriminated against due to race, caste, gender, religion, place of origin; where the earth’s resources are plundered with greed by the powerful; where modern forms of slavery are on the rise; where politics have become a weapon of oppression and self-indulgence; where religious fundamentalism is destroying people and nations? We know that all social problems in this century are global in nature. These major issues call us to a new presence of global solidarity, a new way of living our Gospel option for the poor in our world today. We cannot any longer reduce the mission to some traditional institutional ministries and good charitable deeds (which are necessary!) and remain complacent!

Think of a word, phrase, feeling or image that describes for you our world today.

Let us have a quick look at a few of the peripheries that call us to prophetic action today. You will hear more about these peripheries from our panelists.

We live in a world of dehumanizing poverty: According to *The Economist*: Global wealth has increased from \$117 trillion in 2000 to \$262 trillion in 2014. However, 94.5% of household wealth is owned by 20%. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening! Today, about 22% of the world’s population lives below \$1.25/day. It is a shocking reality that every

day one in five of the world's population, that is about 800 million people, goes hungry and every 20 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness. How are we affected by these realities in real terms?

We live in a world of conflicts: Pope Francis speaks of an undeclared Third World War that is going on in many forms and in many places, networked in unseen ways. These conflicts are often caused by geopolitical, territorial questions, sectarian and ethnic strife, religious fundamentalism and greed for scarce resources. Each year, at least 250,000 people die in armed conflicts and millions are pushed out of their homes and made refugees. At present, there are a total of 66 countries involved in wars, more than 686 militias (guerrillas and separatists) involved in violent conflicts in different parts of the world. What is our practical contribution to peace building?

We live in a world of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers: According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the number of refugees and internally displaced people, over 60 million, is at the highest point since World War II. This means one in every 122 people worldwide is a refugee, and half of these are women and children. Yes, ours is a refugee world! These individuals have been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflicts of all kinds, violence, or human rights violations. What is our collective response to this greatest human tragedy of our time? We will hear more about this from our panelists.

We live in a world that allows human trafficking: Pope Francis tells us that human trafficking is “an open wound on the body of the contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ, It is a crime against humanity.” There are an estimated 27 million trafficked persons in the world today, the highest recorded number in history! Human trafficking is the third largest international crime industry only behind illegal drugs and arms trafficking. (“The CNN Freedom Project.” Accessed March 4, 2015) Trafficking women and children for sexual exploitation is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. Gender inequality and discriminatory laws trap women in poverty, and fail to protect them from violence, rendering them vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking. During the past several years, a number of women religious have moved into this challenging ministry and are making a difference among the trafficked persons. Have we seriously questioned why these peripheries continue to expand when our world has more than enough resources for all to live with dignity? What are the systems and structures that give birth to these unjust peripheries? Have we really explored and utilized the tremendous potential we have as women and religious for a more pronounced and

prophetic global solidarity that can challenge systems and structures that continue to create and sustain these peripheries of injustice?

Do these “peripheries” challenge us to be women of global solidarity?

Our increasing awareness of the world situation carries with it an increased responsibility to the people who are forced by structures, groups and individuals to remain poor and marginalized. St. John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* reminds us that solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all”. Solidarity means the willingness to regard injustices committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against oneself. Genuine solidarity requires heart-level understanding of our prophetic call and a total commitment to the Jesus movement for the integral liberation of every human person. It requires common action from us as consecrated persons, along with all people of good will, to address the fundamental causes of injustice and the sources of violence in our world.

Genuine solidarity means engagement with real people, especially the poor and marginalized of our time. Pope Francis reminds us that “A keyword that we need not fear is ‘solidarity,’ that is, knowing how to make available to God what we have, our humble capacity, because only in the gift of sharing our lives will we be fruitful.” (May 30, 2013 homily at Rome’s Basilica of Saint John Lateran.) He repeatedly urges us to live our solidarity by going to the existential peripheries of our modern world. He invites us for a shift in the center of gravity of our apostolic works as religious congregations. Time and again he challenges the whole Church, *to get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery and to protect ourselves from becoming self-absorbed!* Do we recognize the most neglected and peripheralised people around us? It touches the deepest core of my being when I am awakened to the radical implications of what Jesus said in Mathew 25. Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that at the end of it all, Jesus, whom we call our Beloved and Lord, for whom we have left all things, has a set of “periphery”-focused questions for us, *all about our relationship with the marginalized and the needy. Did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Welcome the stranger? Clothe the naked? Visit the sick? Visit prisoners? In the context of our present day realities, who are these hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, imprisoned people in whom Christ is in agony?* What are the practical implications of these final questions of Jesus for us as

religious?

Our sincere commitment to justice and active concern for the poor are absolutely non-negotiable parts of living our faith and discipleship. Today there is so much theologizing and writing about the radical option for the poor and needy. While I may feel good about that on the conceptual level, where am I in my practical, down-to-earth solidarity with the poor? Has my prayer life, my spirituality, my lifestyle, my way of living community, my way of doing my ministry been impacted by my radical, Christ-like concern for the poor? We realize that we, too, are part of the system that creates and sustains poverty and exploitation. All the goods that we enjoy, all the comforts that we take for granted, all the securities that we feel entitled to should challenge us to share even out of our need and call us to live a spirituality of sufficiency. I feel that we religious have the idea of the “hundredfold” all mixed up to suit our needs for a comfortable life! Consecrated life will always mean living on the edge and participating in the struggles, the insecurities of the peripheries. I wish we could ask the poor to give us an honest evaluation of our consecrated life as they see and experience it!

We humbly acknowledge that, in the face of all the global issues of injustice that beset us, we can do very little as individuals or even as communities and congregations. But imagine, if each woman religious individually and we together as congregations, would reach out even to a few persons on the margins, how the margins would be transformed into islands of hope! Let me share with you one of my many experiences while living with the poorest of the poor Musahars in Bihar. In the late 1970s, a number of us, women and men religious, felt the call to live solidarity with the poor in a radical way. Some of us decided to share the lot of one of the most deprived groups in North India by living among them in their tiny mud huts and sharing in their struggles. We had to find our own ways of living our religious life in this new reality. One day, the poor lady, Punia, whose hut I was sharing, lost her 3-year-old daughter in the morning and five-year old son later on the same day due to a cholera outbreak. I was so broken and upset that God would allow such a thing to happen to these poor helpless people. I was angry at the system that permitted such utter poverty and misery. All I could do was to weep in solidarity with all the weeping women in that village. Pope Francis, in his homily on July 8, 2013, said: “We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion, suffering with others; the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!”

My experience that day gave rise to a barrage of questions, questions about the meaning of my consecrated life, my vows and my ministries in the

context of these kinds of terrible tragedies that continue to happen in the lives of millions of the marginalized in our world. What is my real identity? Am I who I claim to be as a woman religious? Who is benefiting from my vowed life? Will my life make any difference in the lives of those most in need? As I, too, succumb to consumerism, am I not also contributing to a system that allows these little ones to die? Listening to the poor with compassion and allowing them to touch our lives is, indeed, a mutually transforming experience. We know from experience that the poor can teach us lessons of life that surpass all theology and science. All we need is to be present among them with the Presence of Christ and be present to the present!

How has my life as a religious really impacted those on the margins: the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the exploited, and the broken?

What are some of the possible ways to build up our global solidarity?

Dialogue, interfaith and intercultural, will always be a powerful means to strengthen Global Solidarity for life. Pope Francis often speaks about the pre-eminence of dialogue as a means of conflict resolution and building global solidarity. During his visit to Sarajevo in June 2015, he said: “Interreligious dialogue... is an indispensable condition for peace... Dialogue is a school of humanity, a builder of unity, which helps build a society.” Dialogue helps one to move closer to the truth about God and what it means to be human. Interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and solidarity with the poor in their struggles for human dignity are three important dimensions of our mission today. Nelson Mandela has said “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.” I believe that, as women religious, we have tremendous potential and possibilities to be peace negotiators by opening doors to anger reduction, reconciliation, peace mediation, and healing. But are we sufficiently prepared and ready to initiate and nurture a culture of dialogue at various levels?

Dialogue is a way of life. I remember one of my experiences during my life among the poor. Two of us sisters shared a tiny mud hut with a poor family in a Hindu village. In the adjacent hut lived a very religious old woman who did her daily *puja* (worship rituals) on the sacred stone she had enshrined in a corner of her little hut. As an educated and enthusiastic but inexperienced young sister, I was eager to revolutionize the miserable condition of the “superstitious and the illiterate poor”! One day I met my old

friend as she finished her worship and I could not resist my desire to call to her attention the meaninglessness of worshiping the “stone” and so I said, “Nani [grandmother], why do you worship the stone? God is not in that stone. God lives in our hearts.” Her only response to me was a loving glance and a gentle smile. The following Sunday, Holy Mass was celebrated in our village hut and my old friend came and took her place right next to me. After communion, as I was praying, she nudged me gently and whispered in my ear, “Listen, my child, yesterday you said that my God was not in the stone I worshiped. But then, how is it that your God is in the bread that you ate just now?” I was speechless. It was this timely questioning by my illiterate but wise friend that awakened me to the realization that humility, compassion and deep respect are essential ingredients of true communion and dialogue that transform relationships. Yes, the poor are our best teachers in the art of dialogue and solidarity.

Intercultural living is another powerful expression of global solidarity in our multicultural world. Within a congregation and among congregations, our intercultural living that is centered in Jesus, sharing a common vision and mission, is a powerful witness to our broken and divided world. Fr. Anthony Gittins says, “Intercultural living is an authentic discipleship lived by culturally different people together... [It] is not easy but it is desirable and urgently needed... Intercultural living is the future of international religious life. Unless international communities become intercultural, they will not survive.”(2011 Congress of the Religious Formation Conference)

Witness of a life of harmony amidst cultural, social and religious conflicts is indeed a visible and credible mark of the Reign of God. My experience is that living immersed in the lives and struggles of the marginalized will give a new perspective to our own intercultural challenges. Formation for intercultural living has to become a priority for all of us religious. Can we religious commit ourselves to forming more intentional, intercultural and inter-congregational “insertion communities” especially on the peripheries, witnessing to Jesus and his way of life?

Together we globalize solidarity and hope

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that: “International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this.” But why is commitment to solidarity so difficult to achieve? *Global solidarity is possible only when we have a sense of solidarity among ourselves and a sense of solidarity with the suffering millions on the peripheries. If we really believe in solidarity as a fundamental value*

of life, we will have to find ways and means to advocate for solidarity at all levels, including the political sphere. If we religious want to embrace global solidarity as a way of life and become a transforming presence in our world today, then we will have to put new institutions and structures in place that witness to this value and promote it beyond all borders.

As more and more congregations face diminishment, if not careful, we can become self-absorbed, focusing most of our physical and spiritual energy, resources, and priorities on our diminishment, lack of vocations, challenges of maintaining our once flourishing and secure institutions. The question is: Will those of us who are called to consecrated life at this time in the history of the world be women who will risk moving out of our securities and comforts (which we mistakenly perceive as our hundredfold for following the poor Man of Galilee!), and go out to the existential and geographical peripheries with the evangelical message of hope, joy and life to the full?... When we expose ourselves to the vulnerabilities of life and mission on the peripheries, we will discover our real identity and purpose in Christ.

Today let us remember with gratitude those women religious, perhaps some in your own congregations, who are responding to ministries of global solidarity beyond the traditional and institutional ministries of the congregation. They have pitched their tent among the poorest of the poor, the migrants, refugees, trafficked persons, sex workers, persons suffering from addictions, physical and psychological disabilities. There are some women religious today who work with the government, with like-minded NGOs, and groups and organizations like the UN-NGOs especially in the areas of human trafficking, empowerment of women and girls, migration, and human rights issues. They are engaged in advocacy and lobbying at various levels to ensure right policies and laws in favor of the most needy and marginalized in society. They are promoting the Sustainable Development Goals. It is only a beginning, and so, the question before us today is the same one that was posed by the rich young man in the Gospel: what *more* remains for us to do, as women disciples of Jesus, in our faithfulness to Christ and to his mission? The future of religious life will be decided on the peripheries where Christ is in agony! To minister for and with the poor, we need to move away from our privileged position of power, control and security and displace ourselves existentially towards the peripheries... *This call has to be heard beyond our congregational and Church boundaries so as to bring together the transformational potential in the hearts all people of good will across our hurting world.*

Conclusion

As consecrated and committed women in our globalized world, what is our message of hope to the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest on the new peripheries of our society? If all religious today could pause and listen, perhaps we would hear again the heart-desire of Jesus: *Father, that they may be one as we are one.*”(Jn.17:21) We also need to hear his anguished question to us: “Why are you so cowardly? Do you still have no faith?”(Mark 4:35-41). Sisters, we who have everything, and often are among the privileged women of our world, what are we afraid of? What is the root of our cowardice and our fear? Why are we afraid of the future when we know God is busy shaping our future just as God shaped our past beyond our expectations? Do we really believe in Jesus? Or is our faith just a theological concept which we easily explain and teach to others? Are we ready to cross over to the other side where a new way of being religious, a new way of engaging with all our brothers and sisters, especially with those on the periphery, engaging with Mother Earth, awaits us?

From a theological and biblical perspective, the climate we are experiencing among us women religious, and in the Church in general today, is a Kairos moment! How we choose to respond to this moment will decide the future of ministerial religious life... Like Jesus, we are challenged to be filled with a “divine recklessness” that flows from a passion for God and from active compassion for God’s people, especially the weakest. We urgently need to find new ways of relating to one another as women religious, a new way of sharing our charism and participating in our common mission, beyond our congregational and national boundaries. This is the urgent need of the hour. As leaders of your congregations, you need to ask yourself: where do I want our sisters, our communities, our congregation to be in this globalized, connected and yet divided world, a world that is afflicted by violent fundamentalism, a world of mega-migration, a world of extreme disparities between the haves and the have-nots, a world of dehumanizing hunger and scandalous affluence? How can we create and enlarge spaces of global solidarity and networking, with women and men, religious and laity, NGOs, governments, and other organizations in partnership as we move on to the peripheries of poverty, exclusion and injustice? The options before us are very limited: either we live a prophetic religious life with all its consequences of witnessing to the life and mission of Jesus in real terms, or disappear as an irrelevant reality.

Let me conclude with the words of Miriam MacGillis, OP, “We’re at a moment where there are no guarantees as to the Earth’s future. What are the

new frontiers that beckon us, for which we would be ready to joyfully sacrifice our securities, our comfort...? It's a question of our own critical choices. And I think what we're deeply in need of is a transforming vision... a vision that opens the future up to hope."

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What, according to you, are the non-negotiable aspects of our life and mission as women religious, regardless of the context in which we live?
2. What would it mean for you and your community, in actual terms, to engage the new peripheries of our globalized world in the spirit of global solidarity? What are the real peripheries that beckon you at this time?
3. What are some of the practical implications of committing ourselves to a lifestyle and ministry of global solidarity? How would such a commitment change the understanding and structures of our current way of living religious life?

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WEAVING SOLIDARITY FOR LIFE:
LIVING AND WITNESSING AS
WOMEN RELIGIOUS OF
APOSTOLIC LIFE

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Original in Portuguese

Lord, how many years of my life have been dedicated to filling the clay pitcher that I am with enough water to satiate my thirst and contribute to the commitment of satiating the thirst of many other people. After many years, Lord, I note that this action of filling the pitcher each day no longer responds to the desire I feel within myself, a desire coated with something much more, which I myself do not know how to define, but that impels me beyond myself...

Lord, thank you for the water you have given me each day. Now, however, I am asking much more of you: guide me directly to the fountain, the fount that simply and gratuitously flows from your heart enamored with life. This is the transformation I am asking of you – that I may be capable of relitavizing the clay pitcher that I am and give priority to you, the fount of living water!

Dear Sisters!

I invite you to begin this moment of reflection and dialogue with a little exercise. Please put a piece of blank paper and a pen in front of you. The action of contemplating the blank paper and pen is an invitation. If we desire to make a note of a thought, a new gesture will be basic: move one of your two hands... We do not know the magic formula of the responses that could spring forth ready, automatically, for the many questions that we formulate today about Apostolic Religious Life for women – about our past, our present and mainly about our future. These answers are not hovering someplace above us. They are within us, in the same sacred space from which we have asked God the same questions.

The next 40 minutes of our time will be dedicated to reflection, to discernment. We ourselves are the subjects of this little process, we, women who live and witness our vocation, in dialogue with God who chose us and has led us up to now.

Let's go to the first step: dear Sisters, write the following three words on your blank paper: *what – why – how*.

The first two are the most common questions that come to us from current society: *What* are you doing? *Why* do you do it? They are significant questions, because they make the dailiness of our lives visual.

What are we doing? We are loaning our hands and feet, our ears and mouths, our skin and lungs to God so that God can continue to care for life through our actions, our work. But ... would it be ours exclusively? Are we doing this better than the laity?

Why do we do it? So we can respond to the call to follow Jesus, to do what he did, to witness to the Father's deep love for the world. This is the first *motivation*, the final one and the only one. But ... would it perhaps be ours exclusively? Are we better followers of Jesus than our parents, our brothers and sisters, than any other person?

Dear Sisters, let us renew our awareness that we are not special for *what* we do, nor for *why* we do it. All Christians are predestined for this answer. Religious Life is the *power of a "how."* Let us emphasize the word – *how*. It is our *way of doing*, it is the *manner we follow Jesus* that gives meaning to our being Women Religious of Apostolic Life. We are the *power of the how* for the Church and Society. The strongest, most intense word to express this concept today is *prophecy*. We witness through the incarnation and visibility of an *essential support* that describe our being: 1) mystical life that generates the daily energy of handing over our lives to the God of life, being stimulated to pronounce vows through the boundless freedom the Gospel proposes to us; 2) the evangelical relationships that guarantee community love like blood circulating in our veins and making us capable of embracing what is different; 3) the commitment with the missionary announcing of the sign of God's face that we call Charism, and that makes it possible for the world to *touch, to experience love*.

The word weave, weaving (Assembly theme), confirms what we have reflected upon in the first five minutes... We will use another two minutes to created two images, with our heart's glance: the first is that of a weaver – that woman with magic hands using the loom, mixing threads and colors and searching within herself for the pattern to be woven; the woman silently using her feet and hands till she has realized the project of warming people in times of

cold, of making life more beautiful in the spring time. The weaver works with a smile on her face or while singing a love song. Let us enrich this a moment, filling our hearts with the image of God :

*“For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother’s womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.”.*
(Ps.139:13-16)

Now let’s imagine a large and heavy machine for producing weavings. All you have to do is press some buttons, some other buttons, and after a few minutes gather many meters of identical material that will be quickly sold and resold someplace in the world.... The machine does not smile nor sing love songs, *but it is very efficient and competent*. Sisters, don’t you perhaps believe that the tiredness or frustrations we sometimes experience at the end of a lot of work can indicate something?

Dear Sisters, how are we living, how are we witnessing? Like a machine turned on day and night for greater production? Or like a weaver who has before her eyes the *person* that will be warmed, valued, and honored?

Starting from this motivation, I move to share some considerations, first of all about the current reality of Apostolic Religious Life for women that invokes a conversation, and then about the signs of the future we are dreaming to embrace.

First aspect: Naming two challenges of our current reality

1. We are becoming fewer and fewer, especially in the western part of the world. *Will this be our most important challenge?* Even if it is, we must deal with it. First of all we need to dialogue about the *quality of the vocational invitation we are directing today at the young people*. Do we know today’s young people? Do we understand their values, their limitations, their utopias, their stories, their disappointments? Are we spending enough time learning with these young people? I am not referring to learning to use Whatsapp, Instagram,

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest. No, I am referring to learning with the young women what regards their way of looking at life, cultivating their faith, integrating values, establishing relationships, announcing the Gospel, following Jesus! Do we spend time dialoguing with them, asking those who know their way of seeing life, nourishing faith, integrating values, establishing relationships, announcing the Gospel, following Jesus?

When they come to our homes, whom do they encounter, machines or weavers? When we dialogue with them about the Charism, do we reveal the **mysticism** that marks our fundamental identity or do we parade past them the quantity of our places, houses, activities we have around the world? Are we encouraging the young people to follow Jesus with us, or are we handing out vocational materials with photos and images we idealized about ourselves? Think about it well....

But we can also accept with simplicity the fact that we are living the sunset of a model that no longer finds expression today. Why should a young woman become a religious to accomplish a task that can be carried out perfectly well as a laywoman? In western countries where most of us live, many women Religious occupy a place as *temporary substitute*, carrying out all very good activities, but ones that keep us far from the testimonial radiating that our charism asks of us. Yes, today we are still acting as substitutes for the clergy, and as substitutes of the civil state. And this attitude is not captivating!

Therefore, our crisis does not depend on the fact that we are few... This small aspect of the crisis is a chance, an opportunity – it is thrusting us to a new point of view about *identity and meaning* about *radical discipleship* (including lifestyle and prophetic dimension of the religious vows.) We have *the mission of “awakening the world,”* as Pope Francis tirelessly repeats!

2. It is true that when we get together as those in charge of our Congregations, the first question we ask each other regards “vocations” ... *Do you still have any novices? And young women? How many?”*

But there is always another question on the “tip of our tongues,” *what are we doing regarding our apostolic works*, that are the secular patrimony of our Institutes? How many meetings, how many consultants, how many attempts to travel along what was once our place of apostolic works – schools, hospitals, social centers for children, adolescents, women and the many people who found the response to their cries for a more dignified life in our Congregations. How many generations of women religious gave their lives in these sacred places of care through instruction, health care, social charity...

Do we feel comfortable stating that these same works are the “name” of our crisis today? Or are we directly open to a careful and evangelical listening

to the signs of the times? It is quite important to point out that this dynamic we call “signs of the times” was already heard by the generations of our founders. Today the signs of the times are shaking us from all sides. Today the invocations are others and we know them: peace, concern for creation, mercy, shelter for refugees, struggle to overcome human trafficking, culture of life, of dialogue, God’s plan....

Where do we find the criteria that direct us in our needed discernment? Are we sure that giving up our works means overcoming the crisis? No, Sisters! Our place, as women religious, is not *there where we live, or where we work; our place is where we love, where we witness!* Our first commitment consists in manifesting – prophetically – the *Charism* that seduces us, identifies us, the first love with which we responded to the call. This is the Charism that we must radiate, communicate, prophesy. Remember that our specific way of living the Charism can be the best way the world has for reading the Gospel, for knowing God.

Sisters, this is a very special time for Apostolic Religious Life. When we recognize that from a point of view of productivity we are becoming useless in the western world, this same world is challenging us to recover what is specific to us: we are a *sign that points to God’s operating presence in history*. We have already done all the possible reforms, restructurations, redimensioning: buildings, houses, communities, structures, activities. It is time to approach the source, it is time to grow in depth.

The prophet Hosea, when stressing love, seduction, puts an expression of pain on God’s lips, “*My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.*” (Hosea 11:7) How painful is this lament of God! It is as if he were saying: I so want you to look at me, but you do not take your eyes off yourselves!

Summarizing this aspect, we are clarifying about the question of apostolic works. Should we maintain them? Or sell them? Or give them away?

Let us try to respond by updating the exercise on our blank papers... On it we have underlined the word *how*. Now, Sisters, after a moment of silence, write the word that best defines the Charism the Holy Spirit has entrusted to your Congregation so that it be witnessed to the world.

Sisters, what is the main word that synthesizes our Founding Charism?

Each place impregnated with this message ceases to be a geographic or social place, in order to be transformed into a God-enlightened space where people experience God-love: LOVE clothed in the color of the Founding Charism. This is the criteria. We will no longer have difficulty defining if an

“apostolic work” can be transferred to other people or groups, or if it is a God-enlightened space of our prophecy today.

Ready recipes for the process connected to apostolic works are not known, but there is an open door ... which already has two names: partnership and networking. They are two dynamics that we have taken from sociology and they mean “going to do something together.” Today these dynamics are also undergoing a conversion. In addition to partnering and networking, we are trying to assure a covenant. This is a biblical category. Its origins are in the fact that it is God’s initiative. On our part an attitude is sufficient – bringing God to the center of our decisions. If networking and partnering allow us to act with better results *for the apostolic work*, a covenant between us will have the aim of responding to God’s dream: life for everyone, life in abundance. This reflection lacks in-depth study: how do we include the “Communion of Charisms?” How do we speed up the moving closer together of the various Institutes, while valuing the originality of each, but with our gaze and hearts turned toward the search for unity? On the occasion of the closing of the Year of Consecrated Life, we heard: “*a new journey is required of the Congregations. At this time in human history and the history of the Church we are called to be transformed into “communion specialists” ... “to build unity of charisms among us and with all the Church, in order to evangelize together in all the contexts of the Church and in all cultures of the world.”* (Father João Braz de Aviz in the opening talk of the Meeting *Consecrated Life in Communion*, Rome, January 29, 2016)

There is more than one paragraph that I consider significant to include here: even without having a broad understanding of Apostolic Religious Life for women in Asia and Africa, I know how aware we are of the importance of breaking down borders, sharing life and experiences and establishing a covenant among the cultural, historical, geographical and religious differences. The assessment of an Apostolic Work involved in an Asian or African context does not require following the parameters used in the western part of the world. The frontiers of life, health, instruction, nourishment, family are defined by the local reality, not by a general concept. What makes us equal, Sisters, is the awareness that today we have to prepare ourselves to “begin again,” and that God is calling us right at the beginning and is inviting us to witness his love much more than to build up “*our works*.” This applies for every place in this world. If we were able to share with each other all those papers upon which we have written the word that identifies our CHARISM, we would be surprised by the similarity that unites us here, regardless of our geography or culture.

The dynamic of covenant is personal, communal and universal. The Word of God specifies, “*Now, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for*

all the earth is Mine.... (Exodus 19:5-6; cfr. Also Dt. 14:2; 26:18) We can certainly be committed to transforming our reality with the determination of establishing a covenant among ourselves.

Second aspect: Give *hope* its rightful place or Give a *future* to our past...

I chose to begin this second part of dialogue with a quote from the book of Job:

*“... For there is hope for a tree,
when it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and its shoots will not fail.
Though its roots grow old in the ground
and its stump dies in the dry soil,
at the scent of water it will flourish
and put forth sprigs like a plant.*

(Job 14:7-9)

The text is rich, and is one of Job’s responses to the wise man who tried to give an explanation to the events that had struck him. Job makes it clear that this is not the human wisdom he needs. He needs hope!

Let us also listen to the voice of Francis, our beloved Pope:

“So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create ‘alternate spaces,’ where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.”

(Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated II, 2)

The women and men prophets of the Bible ask the people to understand the *present* in terms of a *future action of God*. They both were people oriented toward the future, scanning the future. They shouted out so that the people would change direction, would act with the future in mind. The prophecies insist on repeating the phrase “something new,” new heaven, new era, new heart, new spirit, new earth, a new Jerusalem. Prophecy is always a bearer of hope. Isaiah is quite objective: *“Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. ‘Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?’”* (Is. 43:18-19)

It is in our interest to *perceive the signs of the future that God is defining for us*. Perceiving is something that implies all our senses – touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing. The basic attitude that directs us in this step is that of *making room for hope*.

After having thought and prayed, I chose the word JOY as the connecting thread of the step that follows. What gives us joy today? What are the new initiatives that bear joy, today, to other people, especially to those who have lost

joy?

Sisters, once again please take the paper where you underlined the word HOW, and where you defined your *charism*.

Together we must *PERCEIVE* what God is already doing in our midst. Thus, Sisters, we will perceive that the seeds of the future are here, now.... And a place for hope will grow in our hearts. There will be four key words that we can note here and use as a sign of the hope or as an alarm for greater attention.

a) *Key word: mysticism*

Do we *perceive* that each Sister, community, ministry is impregnated with life and prophetic witness of mysticism that nourishes our vocation, our radicalness in following Jesus? Yes? Then the air we breathe, the words we say, the actions we do all witness this core. In our mission as leaders, do we motivate our Sisters and the Community to the life of prayer rooted in the Word of God, the daily source of intimate dialogue and real conversion? Yes? Then we redeem the value that the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours offers for our daily life, the Eucharistic mystery bears fruit in us. We are people capable of adoration; we learn to contemplate God's dynamic presence again in the silence of little things; we accept creation's groans and pains in our life; we make room for the sharing of this mystical experience with other people.

Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and irrigating the seeds of the future that God is tossing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...

b) *Key word: circular gospel relationships*

Do we *perceive* the meaning of Jesus' Word, "*But it is not this way with you... (Lk. 22:26) and "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers" (Mt. 23:8)? Do we understand that Life in a Religious Community "more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord" (Vita Consacrata 42)*

Yes? Then we are making progress in the exercise of shared leadership, evangelical authority. We know how to give space for people before administration. We invent time and place for open and merciful dialogue, for the joy of fun, for loving embraces among us. We model ourselves in the Divine Trinity for accepting diversity, becoming *sacrament of new relationships* in a wounded and broken world. We humanize our communities, redeem the human, responsible freedom that widens our horizons and generates solidarity.

Then we are able to fight valiently against a passive comfort that tends to

set in, against self-referentiality, closedness, tribalism, existential sadness. Blessed Year of Mercy that allows us to pass through the holy door of our hearts and also the holy door of the hearts of our sisters, and there, in the very depth of our being, accept the forgiveness that opens her arms to us.

Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is tossing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...

c) Key word: Mission as boundless charismatic irradiation

Let us once again listen to Pope Francis: *“For all of us, the essential rule remains the Gospel ... In this way, the “deposit”, the charism of each religious family, is preserved by obedience and by wisdom, working together. By means of this journey, we are preserved from living our consecration “lightly”, in an unincarnated manner, as if it were some sort of gnosis which would ultimately reduce religious life to caricature, a caricature in which there is following without renunciation, prayer without encounter, fraternal life without communion, obedience without trust, and charity without transcendence.”* (Homily, February 2, 2015)

Do we *perceive*, Sisters, that we exist for service to the Reign of Jesus? Do we perceive any other apostolic service has its main significance among us if we become a parable of the Reign for the Church and the world? This is the place of charismatic witness. We are Sisters of Charity, of Jesus, of the Heart, of Mercy, of the Holy Family, of Our Lady, of Providence, of various men and women saints. We are servants, missionaries, recollects, adorers, daughters, apostles. We are Franciscans, Teresians, Benedictines, Carmelites, Dominicans, Ursulines, Salasians. We are of Calvary, of the Cross, of the Resurrection, of the Eucharist, of the Assumption and many others. Sisters, *we are the Gospel the world can read...*

Sisters, do we *perceive* that this witness we are to give by vocation is prophecy, denounces sin and announces hope? Sisters, are we heading out for places where humanity’s wounds are the most exposed? Yes? Then we are offering to our older Sisters the possibility of living the missionary dimension in their particular moment of life more intensely; we are leading the young vocations along the surprising paths our founders and foundresses traced out for us; we are sensitive to the new calls the Year of Consecrated Life set out for us. Then our ministries, our works, our social-political militancy, our projects will breathe in this vitality.

Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is sowing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...

d) *Key word: Formation*

Sisters, do we *perceive* that all us us are in a state of ongoing formation? That we need to “be born again,” to incarnate the newness the Holy Spirit is inspiring in these new times? Yes? Then we implement an appropriate methodology of the gradual process of steps to introduce, accompany and confirm the people given a vocation by God to follow Jesus in the way we call “Religious Life” *until Christ is formed in you* (Gal. 4:19); we foster mystagogical experience interpreted as *leading someone along the path of the mystery*, giving her the priority about the transmission of contents. Then we are aware of the fact that we form (or sometimes de-form) through contact, by means of life environment, with witness, thorough our lifestyle. Remember that the word *mystagogue* has the same root as the word *mysticism*! Mysticism, this experience that the new generations of Religious Life are searching so much for today, is not a profession that is learned. It is a way of being that comes from the deepest experience of God. Leading a person to this depth is forming for Religious Life. The greatest challenge in Religious Life is not in encountering mystagogic Formators. The real challenge is finding *mystagogic Communities*, God-enlightened places where witnessing is infectious among us who have the same vocation in common. Formation communities, communities that love, invite to love, and sow love....

Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is sowing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...

Dear Sisters, it is not easy to conclude when you know the existence of many other elements that can influence the present and the future of Apostolic Religious Life for women. There is a piece of paper in our hands with a brief itinerary: *How, Founding Charism, 4 keys for opening the door of hope!*

May God strengthen and enlighten our reflection and decisioning processes in the exercise of our mission of animating our Congregations on the path toward tomorrow.

I suggest a final time of meditation on the familiar “six notes” of the Religious, Dolores Aleixandre:

1. *Rely on reality:*

because, like the earth hides a treasure, it bears God’s presence: as near to us as our daily bread.... You can scale Mount Horeb or Mount Tabor to search for him, but you must learn to listen to his Word in the public squares or in the potter’s shop because it is among human beings that it is spoken.

2. *Wake up your ears and your eyes:*

His voice can resonate like the roar of a lion or the sound of a subdued silence. It is expressed in the center of yourself and also in the blossoming of the almond tree, to remind you that just as you are not responsible for the arrival of spring, you are even less responsible for the fruitfulness of His Word. God himself sees to this.

3. *Live while being on guard and tranquil:*

Do not be afraid, but remain vigilant, because He can suddenly appear and knock on your door in the middle of the night. If you will open, he will enter and eat supper with you; if you allow, He will carry you to the desert to speak to your heart or allure you with the stream of his love.

4. *Take care of your heart and listen to what it has to say:*

His voice indicates the paths so that you can return home, to your center, there you encounter the only necessary thing, your Father who is hidden and infuses his breath so that all your being concentrates on his Son. Learn to be and remain there, to experience his mercy and be impassioned with his world, breathing in the name of Jesus like a perfume that spreads.

5. *Penetrate into another wisdom:*

Be ready to let go of yourself like an old cloak, your learnings and certainties. The seed of the Reign grows without your knowing it. Even if the pathways you are walking seem dark, you can trust: your shepherd knows where his is taking you. According to Him, in order to make progress, you need to walk the uncommon path of loss, and the narrow gate is the one that leads to the wide space of happiness.

6. *Accept your unique name:*

God tattooed it on the palm of your hand and gives it to you printed on a small white stone, like your unique and individual way of living in communion with Him. Rejoice, you are invited to participate at the banquet of the king and the place at his right hand has not yet been reserved.

(Six notes for learning to be mystical persons, Dolores Aleixandre)

A REFLECTION ON THE 2016 ASSEMBLY AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE FUTURE

Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, President of UISG

Original in French

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.

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?

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.

*LIFE IN UISG...
AFTER THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY*

Finally in reflection on the past month we see:

That the month of May has been an important time for UISG. On **May 6-7** over 175 Superiors General attended a Canon Law workshop for Superiors General. Various topics were covered during these two days including - The role of Canon Law and its dependence on the Vatican II image of Church; Relationships between Institutes and Diocesan Bishops: Exclaustration and Dismissal; Restructuring; Community Life and Formation; Discipline Issues and issues regarding Constitutions. The presenters – Srs. Sharon Holland ihm, Mary Wright ibvm, Marjory Gallagher sc, Tiziana Merletti sfp, Mary Gerard Nwagwu dmmm, Marie Diouf fscm, Fr. Joseph Koonampampil cmf and Ms. Myriam Wijlens - were really excellent and their talks are available on the members' side of the UISG website. This initiative was planned by the UISG Council of Canon Law.

Then we moved on to the five days of the Plenary Assembly, **May 9-13**, and the main presentations are reproduced here in the Bulletin. Other materials are available on the website. There has been great appreciation of the various aspects of the Assembly – the speakers, the times for contemplation and reflection, the table conversations, the liturgies and the Audience with Pope Francis. Many who attended for the first time said that they felt “at home” and felt themselves “part of the global family of religious women.” We are grateful to each person for her participation and we will try to take on board the various suggestions offered for our next Plenary Assembly. Perhaps Superiors General who did not have the opportunity to attend might contact their Constellation delegates to get up to date information. It is particularly important to update your membership information with the UISG office as in future all relevant information for Superiors General will be sent directly to members by email. Please check the UISG website regularly as this will continue to be an important source of information.

Finally on **May 16-17** the UISG delegates from the various Constellations met for the Meeting of Delegates which is held at 18 month intervals – with one meeting after each Plenary Assembly and another mid-way between Assemblies. The post Assembly meeting was an important gathering as it provided time to review the Plenary Assembly, to look in more detail at the Strategic Plan and to elect the new Executive Board for the 2016-2019 period.

Superiors General from the Rome Constellation are nominated for election and the nominees introduce themselves to the delegates on the first morning of the meeting. A written biography is also made available and the election takes place in the afternoon. The names members of the new Board are listed on the cover of the Bulletin. Three members of the previous board were re-elected and this provides for continuity which is important during this time of restructuring at UISG. It is envisaged that the Executive Board could co-opt other members as the needs arise or if they feel that further representation is needed from certain parts of the world.

During the week following the Plenary Assembly two further important meetings took place. The Council of 18 met on **May 17th** with the Congregation for the Evangelization of People and the Council of 16 met with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL). The former discussed: *How to accompany the birth and growth of diocesan congregations in mission territories* and the later worked in groups on some key questions in relation to the preparation of material for the new document on *Mutuae Relationis*. These same questions have been sent to all Conferences of Religious worldwide and we hope that UISG members will take part in reflections on these questions at local level.

During the next two months copies of the publication: *Religious Women in the Church for the World* which captures the history of the UISG from its foundation in 1965 as seen through the pages of the Bulletin will be distributed in the various languages – Italian, French, English and Spanish. When reading the extraordinary journey of women religious since Vatican II let us give thanks for the creative legacy that they have given to us. May we grow in solidarity so that together we can weave a new tapestry for the future – one that answers the needs of people today as they search for the divine spark that will give meaning to their life's journey.

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