

*YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE:
DREAMS AND DESIRES*

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FOREWORD

In this year dedicated to Consecrated Life, numerous events, books and anniversaries have as their theme this specific vocation of following Christ in the Church. In this Bulletin, we present a small sample of varied aspects of Consecrated Life.

In the first article, *Living Religious Life in a Climate of Change – Examining the Fault Lines*, **Sr. Carmen Sammut** describes the instability of our world subject to constant change, often at a furious pace, that never seems to stop and which, obviously affects the consecrated life. It is useless to complain, this is the time that is given us by God. The challenge is to be creative and daring so that our talents develop and bear fruit today. What does our world expect from religious? How does my Congregation, my Community respond to the needs of society? What does God expect of me who am consecrated to Him?

In the same vein, **Sr. Tiziana Longhitano** provides a summary of responses to the question: What do you expect from the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life? Many of the responses reveal the desire and the dream of a new face of consecrated life rooted in its history and engaged with people, formed of women and men who are responsible and courageous witnesses about a life that continues to be prophetic.

Sr. Margaret Muldoon, the only religious who participated in the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, presents the dynamism of the sessions celebrated in October 2014 and the main topics of discussion and questioning. From personal experience, she strongly emphasizes the desire for dialogue and openness to the reality of today's family and the need to turn away from rigid and closed attitudes that alienate people not only within the Church, but also with faith in Jesus Christ.

Fr. Enzo Brena exposes the complementarity of vocations to the religious life and marriage, in their common goal to manifest God's love in the world and in their way of living the mission of evangelization. Educating for freedom will mean, therefore, proposing the different life choices and following with fidelity the vocation to which each one is called. This is where our society encounters great difficulty: The fragility of commitments motivated more by a desire for personal fulfilment than by an encounter with the other/the Other.

Finally, we recall the **Pact of the Catacombs** (Domitilla), signed fifty years ago, in 1965, by close to forty Bishops in a commitment to being a "servant and poor" Church, that is to say, to resume the gospel path enculturated in the social and cultural realities of life. The credible face of the Church is the face of service and mission, of simplicity and humility, hospitality and understanding ... especially among the least, the most vulnerable, the excluded

LIVING RELIGIOUS LIFE IN A CLIMATE OF CHANGE – EXAMINING THE FAULT LINES

Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA

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Original in English

Introduction

We live in “the best of times”. This is God’s time for us. It is the space where all that has gone before us culminates, and all that is in front of us starts showing its promise. Through our faith we also intimately know that it is the time of God’s incarnate Word still with us, the Spirit breathing in and through us. It is a time to make real our dreams. Our Pope has described his dream in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27).

1. How can we define our time?

How would we specify our time? Where are the paradoxes? We as part of our society are living the progress and the regression, the abundance and the scarcity of our times. We are surrounded by wealth and masses go hungry; we are trying at all costs to prolong life, and destroying life in many ways; we advance in human dignity and freedom and enormous numbers are victims of

modern slavery caused by unjust systems such as human trafficking; we know medical advancements and are faced with new or old diseases, more resistant to known drugs; we are in an era of much social communication and of a lot of biased information. We are in an interconnected world, yet often do not notice those near us; we are in an age of interculturality, and at the same time there is an emergence of ultra-nationalistic ideologies. We are in an age of great hope and a lot of despair; where we talk of love and practice indifference. We acknowledge that we are stewards on our planet and yet act as owners. We know many beautiful families, yet the values of long-term fidelity and commitment, the very basics of relationship in human life, are put into question. We are at a point of expanding consciousness on our universe—its origin, its way of functioning and we try to understand what this means for us, for our story, for our faith. We are in an era of continual movement of peoples, bringing with it a mixture of culture and religions, yet we often fear each other for our real knowledge of each other is often superficial.

I won't continue the list but I ask you to look at the signs of the times for you, here—these paradoxes which make us aware that a great part of our contemporaries are crying out to God whoever they deem God to be. God is always on the side of the oppressed, of the ones feeling lost or discarded, of those who are abandoned and disregarded. God always answers their cry by sending someone. This is the whole Bible story and it is our story still today. This is where we enter. We are each called, because God has heard the cry of the people and God moved our hearts. We are members of our religious families because we want to listen to God's own desire in the now and make it our own. It is God's mission that we are called to take up on the fault lines.

What about our Institutes? All that I have just described runs through our own Institutes. It is not about we and them, it is about us. In an age of medical advancement, our members, and we, of course, live longer. We know members who are very rich in years. In my small congregation we have 5 sisters who are over 100 years old. Besides, fewer members are joining our institutes. So the effect of aging is even greater. This is true of the Americas, Europe and Australia, while the number of vocations is increasing in parts of Africa and Asia. Our communities are becoming more intercultural with the challenge this brings. Within our communities we can find different currents of thinking in theology, in ways of praying, in the understanding of the vows and of community life.

We have had to face our own poverty, due to all that has come out through the clerical sexual abuse of children. This is of course a terrible crime and we sincerely regret it. We know it has done much damage to children and vulnerable adults. It has brought us shame and dishonor and it is no longer very glorious to belong to our race. At the same time, it has taught us that what is happening

outside is also happening inside our walls, whether we like to admit it or not. And this includes exclusion of all types, jealousy, competition, certain inertia, a preoccupation with our own selves and you name it. This however does not summarize us. It is far from saying all about us. It does say something important, that is, that we are not saviors but saved, that we are as poor and in need as those we serve. Welcome to humanity, we come back on planet Earth. Our vision of ourselves, of others, of our God and of our mission changes. And this can be very good. Of course, in our midst are also many dedicated courageous and faithful men and women who in many ways continue to bring light and hope to our world. In us co-exist the best and the worst.

2. What could be God's desire for our world and how can we try to make it come true?

We can only try to guess what God's desire is, having studied the life of Jesus of Nazareth and of his disciples, of the Church throughout the centuries and the flame we inherited from our founders. It is the call made to us when we pronounce our vows and publicly proclaim that we want to live right relationships in celibacy, on-going discernment in community, the gift of all we are and have to contribute to make God's dream come true for our world. I make, therefore, a few observations that you will continue.

a) To include everyone

Pope Francis writes: "The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded" (EG. 23).

I want now to introduce you to someone who has been significant in my life as a religious missionary sister in North Africa where I spent 28 years. The first time I heard someone describing our missionary presence as living on the fault lines, was in Algeria, in the late 1980s. The one talking in this way was the late Mgr. Pierre Claverie, Bishop of Oran, Dominican friar. Pierre was born in Algeria in 1938 and had lived there as a child, son of a French family that had been in Algeria for four generations. When he was twenty he realized that he had lived his life enclosed in what he called a "colonial bubble", not realizing, in fact ignoring and denying that all around him were Algerian people, Muslims, in whose country he was living. When he realized this, he felt compelled to adjust to the other and this conversion was at the origin of his religious vocation. In his youth, in Church, he had heard homilies about the love of one's neighbor. However, he had never heard (even if it had been said) that the Algerians, the Arabs, were his neighbors. He needed to welcome this discovery, to allow himself to live with the other, to allow himself to be fashioned by the other. He needed to break down the walls so that there would be no more mutual exclusion or rejection. He had to change his mentality, what

he had learnt as a child, so as to make room in his thinking, in his imagination and in his way of living for the other, the one who is so near and yet so different.

I guess we who have chosen to follow Christ in religious life, are continually challenged, to some extent, to do this. To open our eyes, to look around, to identify those who are hidden from our eyes, because of the world view we have inherited, because of the fears and prejudices this has instilled in us. This demands the courage of transformation of our ways of seeing, of doing and of being. As time goes on, I realize that there are always people whom I do not notice, who are nearly invisible in our societies and sometimes in our own congregations, even in Rome. We can ask ourselves: Who do we choose not to see because of their different religion or philosophy or origin or culture or social standing or age or way of dressing or sexual orientation or character or theology or whatever. We could ask ourselves, who is invisible in our societies, in our churches and maybe in our Institutes? What is keeping us from turning our faces towards them? Let us remember how Jesus allowed the Syro-Phoenician woman to challenge him in the prejudices he had inherited and to expand his vision.

b) To be midwives

The life of Jesus teaches us not only to minister to others in their needs, going out to those we would normally avoid or not see, but also to listen to their stories, listen to what is happening for them. We need to have the ears of a midwife as she or he listens to the heart of an unborn child and listens attentively to the aspirations of the people among whom they live. What are the profound desires of this person and of these people, even if they are expressing them in an aggressive way? What is aching to live here? What is the Spirit of God bringing to birth? This calls our communities to discern in a prayerful atmosphere what they see, hear and touch, so as to respond and act in a way that “does not break the crushed reed or snuff the faltering wick”(Is. 42, 4). Beyond our work in schools, libraries, health centres, we are often called to accompany women who have been sexually abused, others who are aching for freedom to buy their own clothes or to choose their husband, instead of giving in to an all-powerful father. It takes years of walking together, of listening to each other’s hearts. In this way we witness the Spirit of God groaning actively for new life. For me, this process has helped me to recognize God’s Spirit actively present in these our brothers and sisters who reach God through the intermediary of Islam and I have had to pass through a conversion process so that I now see Islam as being part of God’s infinite loving plan for humanity.

You are in other contexts, but I am sure that you also hear the call to be midwives, accompanying all that is aching to live, wanting to break forth. I like the image of the midwife, for she or he is there at the moment of birth, a

moment full of pain and of hope, of dying to a way of relating to being born to new life. For us too, our call to follow Jesus and to know God's Spirit alive in the heart of each person we encounter can be an agonizing time because it often means being where some form of pain and sometimes of violence is also present. As midwives we have no control of who the child will be, of the circumstances of his or her conception, of the way that life will evolve. This is also the generosity and the detachment that is asked of us in our ministry and in our leadership.

c) To accompany the living of the beatitudes

We live at a time where the trust towards political or religious leaders is put to the test. A gorge has opened. Whole peoples realize that they have been born with dignity and that this cannot be stolen from them. I have witnessed the uprising of the Tunisian youth on 14 January 2011. I understood that you cannot oppress a people forever, that dictators can take away everything from a people, their freedom, their riches, their rights, but not their dignity. And when not just individually, but collectively, they become aware that this is jeopardized, uprising is the only way out. I saw the crowds of young and old, calling out that it is enough, that Ben Ali had to go. I was amazed to see a people who are so habitually pacific, ready to die for their freedom, their dignity, so that their children can inherit a different society. I understood: "Blessed are the afflicted (the gentle, but see the note in the Jerusalem Bible) they shall inherit the land." And once the first democratically elected government started becoming in its turn a dictator, this time on the religious side, they went out again into the streets. And once this government wanted to restrict the freedom of women, they went out into the streets again, and now they have a Constitution of which they can be proud, even if there is still room for improvement. It also reminded me of the Magnificat: "God puts down the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly."

What is God's mission in this context of a search to live with full human dignity? To live the beatitudes? I hardly need to mention the scourge of human trafficking, present everywhere. The refugees and migrants running from unjust and impossible situations. How are we God's presence in these situations? How can we cry out in anger at their plight? What can we do to improve their living and working conditions in their countries of origin? How can we, together, put pressure on national and multinational enterprises so that they treat the people they employ with dignity and justice? How can we join together to make sure our money is invested in a socially responsible way, not only excluding certain products and unjust labor conditions, but also ensuring that our investments have a positive social impact?

d) To place ourselves with Jesus on the Cross

To live on the fault line, is to allow oneself to be with the people, in the midst of contradiction, strife, difficulties, in an unsure and uncertain place and not to run away. It is exactly here, where it seems most chaotic, that God is with us. As we read in EG 268 “Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for His people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of His love which exalts and sustains us; but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all His people.” This entails a lot of patience and a deep loving look even beyond the actual happenings, but at the real, at the very essence of being of each person and each people. It demands of us to be contemplatives, to let the contemplation of Christ transform our hearts and lead us to action. It also means that we don’t reject any part of humanity.

As followers of Jesus, we are sent out to be servants of the Good News of reconciliation between God and humanity. We are mediators, totally given to God and to others. We are placed with Jesus where history and the Kingdom of God meet.

This is where Jesus died, on the Cross, between heaven and earth, his arms open to gather all God’s children, dispersed because of sin that separates them, that isolates them and puts them one against the other and against God. As we read in Ephesians 2,13-18 “His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single new humanity out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in his own person, he killed the hostility.”

Jesus on the Cross does not choose sides, he does not reject a part of humanity. He tries to keep both sides together. “Father forgive them.” Reconciliation is at this high price. It is somehow easier to take sides, to condemn, than to remain open to all sides. It goes beyond generosity and charity. Pierre Claverie kept telling us that the church is not only a multinational organization doing charitable works. The cross needs to remain central to our life. And so, we need to be ready to give our lives, even to the supreme witness of love. We can remember here Pope Francis’ gesture, inviting the two presidents of Palestine and of Israel, to his house in the Vatican for prayers for peace—a meeting that took place on Pentecost Sunday. Reconciliation is a courageous act. I know of one father whose son was coming out of prison and who came especially to pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa to have the strength and the wisdom necessary to welcome him back.

Sometimes we also need to be agents of reconciliation within our Christian communities. In some ways, we found it more difficult to approach and to be reconciled with evangelical Christians, who had a different concept of mission

and different ways of approaching the people, than to work with Muslims. What light does the Paschal mystery throw on such situations?

This poses the question to us: What is the meaning of our lives? We are all called to give ourselves to the other, through attentiveness, a service, a smile, which shows that we share the life that is in us. It is a life that becomes Eucharist, a life given to the end. It is Jesus who accomplishes in us today the meaning of his life and makes us be ready to give one's life for the other, not only the one we love... On August 1, 1996, Pierre's life was taken together with the life of his young Algerian friend, Mohammed, who had driven him from the airport.

What is the call that we hear? What is breaking apart in our society and in our Congregations? What is the shock that is being experienced? Where are we being called to be agents of reconciliation? How are we called to give our lives here and now?

e) To care for creation

As we develop a contemplative attitude towards creation, we know that whatever we do in one part of the planet has lasting effects on all of us. Whether we like it or not we are interconnected. Some of us have for too long profited from the riches of the planet without consideration for the effect this might have on the climate, or on the health of individuals, or on economic, political and social stability for the people from whom we take the riches. We know today that we have to do something about this or we leave a very impoverished inheritance to future generations. We are called to be stewards, not owners of creation. In many countries of Africa, mining, for example, profits the rich countries and a few wealthy individuals, and there is no respect of the environment. I know that there is a discussion on a new coal mine in Queensland which will have disastrous effects on the environment and also cuts through cattle properties. Creation is also our responsibility. I know that many groups of religious put a lot of time and effort in raising awareness and proposing actions. The UISG has various working groups: Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation, Justice and Peace against human trafficking, Justice and Peace promoters.

All that I have said so far applies as much within our own communities as it does outside. I will now dwell on some more specific situations in our congregations.

3. What could be God's desire for our own communities today?

Ours is a humble God, who has created us to be in His image and likeness.

Yet we don't like that very much. Unconsciously we prefer the image of a strong, robust God who allows us to lord it over others. But this is just a false image we make up. How is God trying to make His humility active in us?

I have already said a word about how I see the sexual abuse scandal inviting us to a more humble place. We have lost our halos, and God is not asking us to find them. Besides being just and compassionate with the victims, I think, God is asking us to stand at the foot of the Cross, with those who suffer and sometimes with those who are badly thought of, suspected, isolated, misunderstood, put aside. As this place was good enough for Jesus, it has to be good enough for us. We need to choose to be with Christ in this place, with the great numbers of women, men and children who are there already.

a) *Our institutions*

When we can no longer manage the Institutions we cherished or they are taken away from us, or we have to decide to give them away, we enter a different space. We come into a new place and we need to define ourselves in new ways. It is a hard but grace-filled time, as we, religious, had been, at least in some places, too much identified with the services we can render, the institutions we run so well. We had somehow lost our being at the margins of the Church, remaining her prophetic voice.

This dispossession has been such a grace for the Church and religious communities in North Africa in the 70s when the schools and the hospitals were nationalized, when a huge number of religious and priests left Algeria and Tunisia because there were hardly any Christians any more in those countries. Only a small remnant remained. Their motivation for staying on had to be radically different from the one that had brought them there in the first place. It was no longer necessary to be there to teach or to care for the sick, to catechize or to preach. The purpose for staying had to be redefined. The communities that were left knew themselves to be there as a witness that the God of Jesus Christ does not abandon a people. They became as small as a pinch of leaven in the big mass of Muslim local people. And I can assure you that it is not insignificant, to be just two Christians in a government school where all the staff and pupils are Muslims. I feel that in Europe, the Americas, and probably here, we are today being called to a radical choice. We need to look at the significant changes within our communities and in society, so as to make new choices, to creatively continue to answer God's ever renewed call.

Some religious congregations have set up associations of lay persons who want to continue their schools, health centers or other works in the spirit of their charism. Others choose to go into inter-congregational ventures. I know of congregations who have been very inventive to convert their institutions so as to answer new needs, always in link with the laity.

b) An aging population within our Congregations

The organization of our Institutes to care for our aging members has led us to make some difficult choices. Some of us have decided to leave our younger members in the field, and our older members have been asked to go to retirement homes, where lay personnel look after them and in many cases where they live with other older people from all walks of life. They have done this, most often with a lot of generosity, happy that the Congregation can continue the mission entrusted to it both through its new members, and also through them, for they remain missionary wherever they are, in their attitudes, actions and prayer. For this to happen, ongoing formation sessions for our older groups are necessary, for those in their 60s and 70s. We need to encourage and form our sisters to remain alive to the end.

Also because of our change in numbers and physical strength, we need to remember that we are servants, not masters, and that we are not called to do everything, or to go beyond our strength. We are sometimes placing unbearable burdens on some of our middle aged or older members, in order to keep structures which might no longer be necessary. We need to adapt our ministries and our structures not only to the outside world but also to who we have become. This is where the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life can help us by agreeing to new structures where our leadership can also include lay people. God is in the real, in the NOW.

I love to recall this text of Oscar Romero (1917–1980):

A Future Not Our Own

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

*The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.*

*Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us...*

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.*

We lay foundations that will need further development.

*We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.*

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,

a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

c) Our new members

In most of our congregations our new members are not very numerous. They are as different from each other as the older members are, but there are some more or less common characteristics. They are coming from a digital world and are often used to being inter-connected. They are often looking for a community experience, where they feel at ease. They desire to be part of a corporate mission. They would like to show their identity, through some form of external sign. This brings with it an important dilemma. Our older members (I'm talking of my congregation) have gone through the giving up of the religious habit, the strict time-table, the monastic form of living and praying, the institutions such as schools and health centres belonging to us. They were happy to become part of the crowd, not really immediately visible. And here comes a group of younger sisters who somehow see the need to restart institutions and be outwardly recognizable. The debate needs to remain open. What I find interesting is to try to formulate the motivations for our choices, so that they are not imposed from the outside or from either group but grow from the purpose of the Institute.

Younger members bring in their freshness, their desires, their questions, their enthusiasm and their ways of doing and of being. As they are fewer in number, we can fall into the temptation of seeing them as perpetually young, which in truth means incapable of taking big responsibilities in the congregation. Thus we deprive ourselves of their knowhow, of their youthful creativity. It is also important that they have space where they can meet with other young religious, to encourage one another, and also with older members of their institute so that they can learn from each other.

Our younger members are not necessarily coming from the countries from where the majority originates. This brings with it a sense of loss for the older dominant group, even though they may be happy to know that younger members are joining.

d) Our intercultural reality

Many of our communities have become intercultural, like our countries. Interculturality, especially when lived in countries with minorities who are oppressed, is a strong witness in itself. It is also a big challenge. When I lived

in Mauritania, this was very true as the negro-African ethnic groups are looked down upon by the Arab-speaking group and within some of the groups there are also social classes. Seeing us live together from Europe, America and Africa, as one family, was a witness in itself. The fact of opening our doors to whoever wished to come to us was another.

I love the picture of Sieger Köder which reminds me that our communities are a constant miracle. In the background is the parable of the All Merciful Father (Lk 15: 1-3, 11-32). In front the community is made up of very different characters, just as the local and global communities that we form. The group is very diverse: a wounded prisoner, a veiled high class lady, a man wearing glasses, a clown who looks sad, a bent over lady who does not dare look at Jesus, a prostitute, and a rabbi. They are seven, a number that signifies totality, fullness. In fact, you could say that they have not much in common, except that two open hands bearing the mark of the nails and holding bread, unites them at the same table. In our intercultural community, like in this picture, we are all poor needing healing and wholeness. We often have differences turning around power, relations with the family, trust, hospitality, cultural identity, money... To talk about these issues, to try to understand each other, to come to know the world view each one is thinking about and acting from, brings us closer to each other, and enables us to resolve our conflicts through negotiation. In my congregation, we often boast of our differences, as we have always been an intercultural group. However, for our differences to become a gift, able to enrich us all and to enrich others, we need to work hard and to work constantly. This is a very demanding exercise, which entails that we can deal with conflict constructively.

4. Leadership in a climate of change

a) *Called to be excentric leaders*

As leaders we need to put the center of our preoccupations not so much on self-preservation as on an exodus of self. In May 2013, in his meeting with the UISG general assembly, Pope Francis told us:

“It is Christ who called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continuously making an “exodus” from yourselves in order to center your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with St Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2: 20). This “exodus” from ourselves means setting out on a path of adoration and service. The exodus leads us on a journey of adoring the Lord and of serving him in our brothers and sisters. To adore and to serve: two attitudes that cannot be separated, but must always go

hand in hand. To adore the Lord and to serve others, keeping nothing for oneself: this is the 'self-emptying' of whoever exercises authority. May you live and always remember the centrality of Christ, the evangelical identity of the consecrated life. Help your communities to live the 'exodus' from the self on a journey of adoration and service, above all through the three pillars of your life."

As leaders of groups who have not themselves as the center, one of our strengths is prayer and discernment. We are called to be servant leaders, known for our ability to listen and "to see God in all things and all things in God." Contemplation takes us out of ourselves so as to recognize the face of God and God's calls hidden in reality that we cannot detect if we do not take enough quiet time with God. Another characteristic for us is the "sending" as missionary disciples. As leaders we need to give this "sending" to all our members as this gives them the courage to continue being alive and outgoing towards God and others, whatever their age. The terrible thing would be to die while one has still so many years to live. I am amazed sometimes at my sisters' missionary zeal while they are already in homes. Formalizing the sending, even to infirmaries, has proved a great strength. The sister knows she is there in the name of the Congregation, to continue living our common mission. Many have understood that even from a wheelchair one can go out towards others.

We need to ask: How is God working through our Congregation to make a difference in the contexts where we are? What influence do we have on the International context of the world? How are we going out to others to sustain them in their own ministry? Our most active Justice and Peace group is in Canada where the average age is 83 years.

b) Leaders with a roadmap

Some time ago a young couple, obviously tourists, stopped me in Rome to ask the way. I could more or less give them the directions they were seeking, but seeing a map in their hands, I said: let's look at the map. They replied that they did not want to look at the map. They wanted to ask people for the way. This is full of risk, for I've rarely met anyone who tells you "I don't know" but rather sends you off in the wrong direction. As leaders we do have a road map: the Gospels, our charism, the writings of our founders, the actual purpose of our institutes, the orientations of the chapters, church documents... In many of our institutes we have replaced hierarchical structures with more collaborative and circular ones. We aim at team work, we have networks. These new structures aim at a maximum participation from all the sisters. However structures only work if they serve the purpose of our institutes. As leaders, we need to point out to our road map, so that our community discernment,

prayerful reflection and contemplative moments stem from these foundations. We also need not only the road map but also the passersby, those people who have walked with us, who have seen us acting and being and who can help us discern the way forward.

c) Leaders who love story-telling

One of the ways to bring our members together is to invite them to tell each other the story of their vocation, whether they have lived in the Institute for two years or sixty years. It is an exercise that shows us where our real unity lies. Telling each other how we are living the Institute's charism in today's contexts reveals that age does not really separate us and that what makes our hearts beat is very similar.

Working from the individual stories to discern a common purpose, in inter-generational groups, helps us understand each other. Our purpose is not so much what we do as who we are within the Church and society today. It is about our vision, our values, our beliefs, our desires. When we communicate at this level, we are in touch with a lot of energy and joy and hope. It brings us the strength we need for the day. Like the disciples of Emmaus, who recognized the stranger in the breaking of the bread, we too are able to recognize His trace in our lives and to rejoice, even if He seems to disappear from our sight at present. In this way, we can go forward with trust. Indeed story-telling fills us with courage and prepares us for change, for daring new ventures that ensure a creative fidelity to our charism.

d) Leaders with eyes that see abundance

In a situation of crisis, we all tend to see what is not there. As we think of the need for members to take up leadership roles, we lament that they are not there. When an opportunity for some type of ministry comes we also are desolate not to be able to respond. And this is truly our lot, but sometimes we see so much the scarcity that we fail to see the abundance. Last year, our two institutes (Missionaries of Africa, men and women) wanted to celebrate the 125th anniversary of our founder's anti-slavery campaign. We asked the leadership in all the countries to try to organize something, fathers, brothers and sisters together. One country decided they were too old to do anything. Then, one of our sisters, living in a home, received the visit of a friend, who happens to be a journalist. She was talking to her about this. This lady became so enthusiastic, she started phoning associations that fight against modern day slavery. They put up one of the best manifestations ever.

We are used to be self-sufficient, and often fail to see the abundance that is around us: generous and committed lay people, other congregations also wishing to respond to new apostolic calls. The project of South Sudan is one

such venture. A number of religious Institutes are working with each other. Others have joined together for more practical purposes such as to care for their sick and elderly members or to share one Generalate. The fusion of institutes also happens and though this is not easy or painless, it is a good option for congregations that have similar charisms or origins. It needs to be well prepared and followed. Networking is another powerful means in order to break open our limits and join forces with others for ministerial purposes.

There is always more than what meets the eye. When we dare to see abundance, we become more contemplative and more grateful. We come across with a good amount of energy that helps our members to gain confidence and courage.

e) Leaders with a flexible backbone

The leader in today's circumstances needs to be flexible, to know how to adjust, to make connections, to change.

This makes me think of the poem by Pablo Neruda (1904 – 1973)

*He or she who becomes the slave of habit,
who follows the same routes every day,
who never changes pace,
who does not risk and change the color of his clothes,
who does not speak and does not experience,
dies slowly...*

*He or she who abandons a project before starting it,
who fails to ask questions on subjects he or she doesn't know,
he or she who doesn't reply when they are asked something they do know,
dies slowly.*

*Let's try and avoid death in small doses,
reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater
than the simple fact of breathing.*

*Only a burning patience will lead
to the attainment of a splendid happiness.*

We are at the crossroads between the old that is fast disappearing and the new that is not very clear yet. It is this uncertainty that our contemporaries also face very often about their employment, their economic stability, the climate change, the effect of violence. Our faith tells us that God is in this place, though we have difficulty knowing it.

As leaders, we need an open mind to see the world with renewed eyes and not to cling to old ways of thinking. We need an open heart so as to see the situation through the eyes of those who suffer and be able to show empathy. We need an open will to be able to let go of what is no longer necessary or

appropriate and to let the new come, to welcome new possibilities. We need to be able to listen not only so that we are confirmed in what we know already, or to get information but also to sense what wants to emerge.

Leaders with a flexible backbone choose discernment as their way of life. They are able to draw their members onto this road. They are open to the newness that the Spirit is always bringing about. And they are passionate about it.

This is not a very comfortable place to be in, for we prefer to know, to be sure, to have our answers ready, rather than to pray and reflect and walk an uncertain path. At some point we can also get tired of change and hope we have gone through it all already. This is clearly not the message a constantly evolving universe sends us.

f) Leaders with a child-like confidence

We are like nomads passing through a desert seeking for an oasis. We need all our commitment, our faith and trust to listen and wait patiently for the new Word God is speaking in our times. We also need each other's hope and courage to strengthen our faith. A young girl who wanted me to play a trick on an older sister once told me: "Become a child!" I often think of this in my position. We need to become as confident as a child, able to take the step our Institute needs today after reflection, dialogue, prayer and discernment. We need to let go of the need to be perfect, or the need to find long term solutions. Today's idea of time and of space do not allow for long term any more.

We need to be leaders who keep our members' passion alive, and who lead them to contemplate and discern what the Spirit is saying to us. We need to be people who not only work and act but also find joy in being about God's work today, in being missionary disciples. We need to lead our members to reflect about their experience in the light of the Gospel message, to be disturbed by new realities, by poverty of all sorts, to be able to let go of the familiar in order to risk the new possibilities to which the present is pointing.

5. To continue the reflection

Our passion for God and for others, including our members, lead us to engage with our heart, mind and will in searching and doing God's desire here and now. The cries of the marginalized, of the exploited, the suffering touch us and make us inventive in our leadership. Our own poverty challenges us forward. We can lead others from the margins and to the margins, to take up the cry of the oppressed, whether it is persons, peoples or the planet, because we know that what we live today will have an effect on future generations. As we open our tents to doing this not only among ourselves but with many others,

people of good will of any ethnic group, religion or social milieu, we have the firm hope that what we sow today will flower tomorrow.

I feel very much in tune with the poem of José Calderon SALAZAR from Guatemala who wrote (free translation):

I am threatened with death.

There is a profound mistake in this warning;

neither I nor anyone else is threatened with death.

We are threatened with life, threatened with hope, threatened with love.

We are mistaken, Christians, we are not threatened with death.

We are threatened with resurrection.

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YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE RECOUNTING THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

Sr. Tiziana Longhitano, SFP

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This article was published in the journal "Vita Consecrata", n.4, Year L, October/December 2014. The management of the magazine asked Sr. Tiziana and other authors to respond to two questions about the Year of Consecrated Life: 1) What do you hope for and what do you expect from the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life? 2) What do you fear, what would be undesirable, or is there something to be avoided in the celebration of this year?

Original in Italian

Methodological Notes

Speaking personally about a year dedicated to the consecrated life did not seem appropriate, since it is an event that involves us all. So I shared my thoughts with others: Sisters of different generations and backgrounds. Some of my students from different continents have collaborated in the writing of these pages. However, what I present here is not the result of sociological research. I only wish to point out that these questions have resulted in a pluralistic answer.

The Hopes and the Expectations for this Year of Consecrated Life

I hope:

- That the attention of the celebration will not concentrate on statistics, as if consecrated life was a question of quantity, but on the fact that we *are* leaven in the dough. One must therefore, question the *quality* of the leaven and if we are truly *living* ferments; if we announce a lively and lived Gospel; if the eschatological principles that constitute consecrated life really shine.
- That this year will help us to "go beyond the frontiers of our respective charisms and to unite ourselves in order to offer a mystical and prophetic word to our world." (*Declaration on Prophecy*, written in May 2010 by our General

Superiors). I propose that meetings be organized by sectors (school, health, social) for greater communion among religious congregations; but, do we have the desire to be less isolated? I hope we can nourish that desire.

- That we can offer to our world open testimony of what it means to be “community” (many people are at war or have recently experienced one, other people boast of belonging to a political community without knowing the meaning of the word “community”). Most of our Congregations are multicultural, and thereby they provide the opportunity to witness in our societies today, *another* way of relating. More than geographical, the mission of consecrated persons is anthropological. We should give people a sense of the choice of consecration in a broader context: ecclesiastical, worldwide, human. I hope to see the opening of *visible* paths so that people find and encounter the living God, who is among us. We want to offer to the Church and to humanity as consecrated women, a ministry of compassion and healing (*Decl.* 2010). As consecrated persons we should be able to arouse in men and women of our world—regardless of where they are and whatever their existential circumstances—the desire of an encounter with the Lord, and to show the way.
- When a Congregation with a certain culture of origin meets another culture, we perceive the transmission of methods of body movements and a whole system of customs, regulations... of moral character. I would like to see foreign consecrated persons (in Italy, in Rome), who *can describe* the joy of having met the Lord, people who are vivacious and happy. Because, for many religious, the face of Christ—the place of encounter with God and with neighbor—seems veiled by the weight of ongoing work. Aware that we go to God *with* humanity, we cannot remain confined within the limits of a Curia, a seminary, a retirement home...
- I hope not to meet *foreign* Sisters whose being is consumed by internal activities that serve to maintain institutions. I hope we can get out of traditional boundaries and try to work for a more just world, networking, locally and globally. I hope we will initiate different projects with other congregations and with the laity for the *transformation* of unjust structures (*Decl.* 2010).
- In the time of New Evangelization, I hope we will have—especially this Year—the discernment and freedom to explore paths beyond the stereotypes to reach the outskirts and show God to the world. Documents are clear about this:

The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of *spreading the spirituality of communion*, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today’s world is torn

apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence. Placed as they are within the world's different societies — societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it — communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are *signs that dialogue is always possible* and that communion can bring differences into harmony (VC 51).

In this special year, I hope that each Congregation will:

- Take the opportunity to “reinvent the art of living in common, marked by deep human relationships, a listening heart, empathy and non-violence, in order to be witnesses of Gospel values (*Decl.* 2010).
- Get to know better their own charism and make it current, lively and attractive in different cultural contexts.
- Educate oneself about the relationship among consecration, health and creation. We live in a world so broken that we need to heal the person in their totality without neglecting the context in which they live. Living in harmony with the cosmos and dwelling respectfully on this Earth (*Decl.* 2010) could be a sign that we are already anticipating a little piece of heaven and earth that have the newness of paradise (Ap 21, 1-5).

Some proposals

- Some Bishops do not know and therefore do *not understand* consecrated life. Other Bishops (especially in young Churches) create congregations without the clarity of a charism that supports them and without perspectives for the future. I propose that in the formation of pastors and in the theological studies of seminarians, courses on consecrated life be integrated and accompanied by joint formation sessions for seminarians and religious.
- I propose that a serious formation in theology be required for consecrated persons (5/7 years of theology) before final or perpetual profession.
- I propose *ad hoc* formation projects aimed at eliminating ambiguous or disrespectful attitudes towards diversity (male/female, even within consecrated life).
- I propose that formation programs be reviewed, and oriented towards lifestyles open to welcoming, to form minds educated to differences and able to recognize the richness of other cultures and religions (*Decl.* 2010). It is only after being formed in this sense that consecrated persons will be able to educate people to a human and humanizing life, showing that God is merciful Love, and utilize available resources in existential peripheries of violence, of injustice...
- See and discover in other religions the “seeds of the Word” (cf. *Ad gentes*, 11) that frequently reflect a ray of Truth (cf. *Nostra aetate*, 2).

- * It could be interesting to learn—especially during the Year dedicated to consecrated life—about forms of consecrated life present in other Christian denominations and in other religions.
- * Tend and form unofficial mentalities, because the world is dynamic, plural and complex.
- Together seek ways to provide a new image, true and joyous, of consecrated life today. Raise the question of creativity even within religious Congregations.
- Form a conscience that can say that Jesus has today's humanity; that it is not possible to stay in convents and structures that absorb a lot of forces which are an obstacle to witness and an impediment to advertisement.
- Think and create an evaluation system for the implementation of the recommendations in documents on consecrated life already published and/or in development. Without this, we could run the risk that some institutes will be in the forefront while others will remain in their previous positions, without recognizing the consequences.
- Finally, I would construct the Year dedicated to consecrated life with initiatives founded on the following brief but intense passage:

First of all living out the Gospel is the main contribution we can make. The Church is neither a political movement nor a well-organized structure. That is not what she is. We are not an NGO, and when the Church becomes an NGO she loses her salt, she has no savor, she is only an empty organization.

We need cunning here, because the devil deceives us and we risk falling into the trap of hyper-efficiency. Preaching Jesus is one thing; attaining goals, being efficient is another. No, efficiency is a different value. Basically the value of the Church is living by the Gospel and witnessing to our faith. The Church is the salt of the earth; she is the light of the world. She is called to make present in society the leaven of the Kingdom of God and she does this primarily with her witness, the witness of brotherly love, of solidarity and of sharing with others. When you hear people saying that solidarity is not a value but a “primary attitude” to be got rid of... this will not do! They are thinking of an efficiency that is purely worldly.

Times of crisis, like the one we are living through—you said earlier that “we live in a world of lies”—this time of crisis, beware, is not merely an economic crisis. It is not a crisis of culture. It is a human crisis: it is the human person that is in crisis! Man himself is in danger of being destroyed! But man is the image of God! This is why it is a profound crisis!

At this time of crisis we cannot be concerned solely with ourselves, withdrawing into loneliness, discouragement and a sense of powerlessness

in the face of problems. Please do not withdraw into yourselves! This is a danger: we shut ourselves up in the parish, with our friends, within the movement, with the like-minded... but do you know what happens? When the Church becomes closed, she becomes an ailing Church, she falls ill! That is a danger. Nevertheless we lock ourselves up in our parish, among our friends, in our movement, with people who think as we do... but do you know what happens? When the Church is closed, she falls sick, she falls sick. Think of a room that has been closed for a year. When you go into it there is a smell of damp, many things are wrong with it. A Church closed in on herself is the same, a sick Church.

The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: “Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!” (cf. Mk 16:15). But what happens if we step outside ourselves? The same as can happen to anyone who comes out of the house and onto the street: an accident. But I tell you, I far prefer a Church that has had a few accidents to a Church that has fallen sick from being closed.

Go out, go out! Think of what the Book of Revelation says as well. It says something beautiful: that Jesus stands at the door and knocks—knocks to be let into our heart (cf. Rev 3:20). This is the meaning of the Book of Revelation. But ask yourselves this question: how often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God.

In this “stepping out” it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others. We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture in which I throw away what is of no use to me, a culture of waste.

Yet on this point, I ask you to think—and it is part of the crisis—of the elderly, who are the wisdom of a people, think of the children... the culture of waste! However, we must go out to meet them, and with our faith we must create a “culture of encounter”, a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith.

They all have something in common with us: they are images of God, they are children of God. Going out to meet everyone, without losing sight of our own position (*Vigil Of Pentecost With The Ecclesial Movements. Address of The Holy Father Francis, Saint Peter’s Square, Saturday, 18 May 2013*).

The fears and the risks

- Not to reduce the Year that is beginning to a celebration of meetings without decisions. Each meeting or conference should close with a resolution taken together or a path to follow with courage, or still a declaration of *public* intent that puts into play the religious with the locale people, the Church and humankind.
- I fear that the progress and good resolutions will remain on paper. That no one will check the implementation of what will be said in the documents.
- In the assemblies and meetings that will take place, I would avoid reminding the young generation of their rights in relation to consecrated life. The young know them well! Rather, I would organize a grand seminary to tell the same things to superiors and to formators who have forgotten that:
 - * we do not open a letter before giving it to a sister to whom it is addressed (even if she is a *young* sister);
 - * if a sister has to study, she cannot be sent to a place with toddlers where she will spend her nights with infants in her arms;
 - * we must trust the young generation (if a sister is not home for dinner she may have had a setback or she preferred to continue working in the library! She will explain upon her return, if she does not breathe in a climate of *insinuations*);
 - * the sisters we call *young sisters* or *juniors*, would be, in their home country, mothers or responsible for their family; on the other hand, here, they are often treated like children, as if they were not even able... to think.
- I would avoid unilateral formation, given to women by men... interventions should be balanced. For this, we have need for people who are formed in different theological fields.
- I would avoid utilizing, from now on, common, psychological instruments in formation to consecrated life and in forms of prayer.

Conclusion

Here, in brief, is what sharing opinions with consecrated persons has allowed me to write in response to the questions addressed to me. Within humanity wounded by violence, by injustice, by disease and despair, may the Risen Lord enable women and men who today embrace consecrated life with courage, to announce that the gospel of life and love that radiates from it are creative words, breath of the Spirit in all peripheries.

REPORT FROM THE EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD

“THE PASTORAL CHALLENGES OF THE FAMILY IN THE
CONTEXT OF EVANGELISATION” OCTOBER 2014

Sr. Margaret Muldoon, SFB

Sr. Margaret Muldoon, former Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux was the only religious sister invited to attend the first phase of the Synod on the Family—called the Extraordinary Synod. She prepared this report for her congregation and for UISG.

Original in English

Context of the Synod

On 8 October 2013, Pope Francis convoked an extraordinary general assembly of the Synod to address “*The pastoral challenges of the Family in the context of Evangelisation*”. Preparation began with a very extensive questionnaire that was sent out to all Dioceses in the world, inviting the collaboration of all the faithful. The results of the responses were published in the “Instrumentum Laboris” or “Working Document”—copies of which can be found on the internet, including the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

Pope Francis had decided that the work of the Synod should take place in two stages. This present one – the Extraordinary Synod – analyzed, discussed and reflected on the document in the light of so many wide-ranging and varied experiences. The second stage, the Ordinary Synod (2015), will study and reflect on the working document that emerges from the Extraordinary Synod in order to “*formulate appropriate pastoral guidelines.*”

During the Synod the Pope mingled with the participants at the break in the morning and when coming to and from the Synod hall. Throughout the week he remained as a simple listening presence. One Archbishop said that in previous Synods the Pope entered and left when all were already seated.

Participation in the Synod

There were approximately 185 Cardinals, Patriarchs and Bishops plus 37 “auditors” and about 25 others, experts in different areas in attendance. Among

the auditors there were 13 couples from Australia, Africa, Asia, North and South America and Europe.

Method of Work

The work was based on the *Instrumentum Laboris* and all interventions were focused on the themes in the document. Each speaker was given 4 minutes for an intervention and this was strictly adhered to. As a consequence more than 70 interventions were made each day. Each speaker had to stay within the allotted theme, and each one spoke from his experience and convictions, which were very diverse and varied. At the beginning of the morning and afternoon sessions a married couple presented their testimony.

Atmosphere

There was a friendly atmosphere in the Synod Hall and respectful listening to each presentation. Opinions differed regarding the way forward—from being very open and convinced of the need to find theological responses that are meaningful and that respond to the hopes, joys, fears and struggles of marriage and family life today, to those who are convinced that nothing needs to change in the Church's position other than finding new language to present existing rules, etc. The realities from which the speakers came were widely diverse situations of war, migration, displacement, persecution, different forms of violence, poverty, small numbers of Christians in a Muslim environment, multi-religious, multi-cultural environments, secularism, indifference, etc.

Opening

Every day the assembly began with Morning Prayer which was sung in Latin.

The assembly was opened by Pope Francis. After thanking all who were part of the preparation of the Synod, he emphasized that the journey to this moment had taken many months, and invited all to live the Synod in a spirit of collegiality. He stressed the importance of listening to the voices of the local churches as well as the universal church. He urged all to speak freely: "*No one,*" he said, "*can say that there is something that cannot be said; everything one feels must be said, if you don't speak freely, it's not of the Synod. Say all without fear and listen humbly to what each one says. I ask you to keep this attitude throughout and do so with peace.*"

Overview

Given the fact that in five days there were approximately 290 interventions, there is no way that a simple report such as this can do justice to the richness

and the diversity of the ideas and realities that were expressed. This is just a “bird’s eye” view, an attempt to share some of the issues that surfaced and some of the responses. It is by no means comprehensive and in no way states definitive decisions. The dialogue up to this moment in the Synod is ongoing in a spirit of research and discernment.

Almost immediately, the many challenges that are faced in marriage and family life surfaced. There was a sincere desire to listen to the signs of the times and seek Spirit-guided responses. Recognition that family is the nucleus of society was clearly stated and the need to celebrate the beauty of marriage and give recognition to different key moments, e.g., Jubilees.

Early on there was a call to change “*harsh language*” when speaking of irregular situations. It was acknowledged that at times the Church is seen as a “harsh mother”. The need to avoid putting labels on people that actually result in pushing them further away was spoken of a few times. The idea that faith grows gradually was underlined. There was a call to develop “creative programmes” for pastoral practice. Pastors must be immersed in the joys and hopes of families. Some spoke strongly of the need for much more open dialogue. One Cardinal said: “*We need open dialogue—the world won’t hear us if we don’t listen to the world.*”

Concern for couples in difficulty, those divorced and civilly remarried surfaced frequently. It was said that the Church should offer truth, not judgement, and do so with compassion and understanding. With regard to the many people who live in cohabitation, there is need to look at the positive side of their relationships as well as emphasizing the beauty of sacramental marriage, because in these other situations there are some elements of holiness and truth.

Many interventions touched on the question of the approach to the Eucharist by the divorced and remarried; it was emphasized that it is not the sacrament of the perfect, but rather of those who are on the way. The dialogue was open, with differing opinions expressed—it is ongoing.

While there is strong conviction of the indissolubility of sacramental marriage and the importance of affirming this, the recognition is also there that the lived experience of many is not within sacramental marriage, and that for many and varied reasons, they do not consider entering into such a marriage. While it was clear that those in sacramental marriage need good support and on-going accompaniment, the fact that there are many who do not take this path needs attention. Ways to attend to them must be sought and these are to be compassionate and caring. People want to follow the truth: they also feel the need to be inspired, to feel that they are welcomed and loved. A strong desire was expressed to find pastoral responses to this reality, now a fairly common experience throughout the world.

The urgent need for practical models for the pastoral care of divorced and remarried persons was stressed, giving attention to groups who exercise the ministry of listening while avoiding moral judgements.

The importance of having an attitude of respect in relation to divorced and remarried persons was frequently stressed. Many spoke of the fact that they often live in situations of unease or social injustice and suffer in silence. Pastoral care must not be repressive, but full of mercy, understanding and compassion.

Many references were made to the processes for the declaration of nullity of marriage. The need to simplify the procedures was often expressed and of integrating more competent laypersons in the ecclesiastical Tribunal. Emphasis was also given to the need to avoid superficiality and to safeguard respect for the truth and the rights of the parties.

Attention was also given to the challenges of mixed-faith marriages. While it did not seem possible to recognize same-sex marriage, the need for a respectful and non-discriminatory approach with regard to homosexuals was underlined.

All the baptized need to be helped to recognize that they belong in the Church in whatever situation they may find themselves; they need to find a welcome there and the support and help that their particular situation requires. For many who received infant baptism there is no adequate on-going formation, and people who have no encounter with Christ end up being introduced to the sacrament of marriage. The families that are “wounded” need particular help requiring closeness, compassion and support towards healing.

There is need to look at our present-day world with love. Humanity, it was said, desires happiness and while the Christians know that happiness is Christ, we no longer succeed in finding the suitable language to communicate this to the world. And the questions were asked “*Countries with deep Christian roots reject Christ, Why?*” and “*Why aren't we “men of cloth” not happy? Where do we find the truth of happiness?*” There was a call for the use of a “biblical” rather than a “theological-speculative” catechesis.

Repeatedly we heard a strong plea for good faith formation throughout life, and the importance of good and more adequate formation in the seminaries. The hope was expressed that this Synod would provoke a dialogue in society. Questions of equality, the dignity of the person, non-discrimination and rejection of violence must be addressed. Another said “*we must love, not show the fist.*” The Gospel requires living witnesses rather than “preaching.” Homilies ought to speak of real situations of people and link them with the Gospel. There was a strong call to the laity to be involved in the proclamation of the Good News, emphasis being placed on the missionary charism, where evangelization takes

place in simple encounters with people and families. There is need to pass from a defensive stance to an active, proactive one.

In searching to find new ways of explaining natural family planning, there was quite a long debate about contraception and natural methods of birth control.

Three specific dimensions of the family were presented: *the vocation to life, the missionary aspect*, i.e., witnessing Christ through the family unity and *acceptance of the other*, as the family is the first school where we learn to relate. Family is almost the last human reality that is welcomed in a world governed by economics and technology, power and efficiency. “*A further dimension of the family unit is shown also in holiness, as the family educated in holiness is the icon of the Trinity, the domestic Church in the service of evangelization, the future of humanity.*”

The question arose as to “*what would Jesus say to us in the face of all the diverse human situations in our Church today?*” Another question was “*...how to confront the many delicate problems knowing that they are different in different contexts?*”

On Friday afternoon seven leaders of other Christian Churches spoke. It was inspirational to listen to them—their appreciation of being present at the Synod, their recognitions that their Churches are struggling with the same questions, their desire to learn from one another and the fact that their members worldwide are following this Synod with interest and looking forward to hearing more about it.

Next week most of the work will be in small groups. I am in a Group of 26 – including 18 Cardinals and archbishops, one Anglican bishop, 2 married couples, one priest, 2 laymen and one laywoman. They come from the five continents and represent about 23 countries.

Second week - Monday

At the beginning of the morning each one was given the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* or *Working Document*, which summarised the interventions and the debate of the first week. This was to be the basis for discussion in the Small Groups.

The contents of the document were read aloud in the Synod Hall during the first half of the morning. At the end of the reading it was greeted with loud applause. After the pause/break, in order to have an initial global response and to facilitate the work of the small groups, the delegates were invited to make their comments. There was a general appreciation of the fact that the drafting committee had captured all the main points that had been spoken during the

week.

The Synod Fathers felt that the spirit of Vatican II is found in this document. The message the final document gives must be one of hope. More Scriptural references need to be included.

They were happy that the document does not express decisions—we are in conversation and dialogue—the discernment process will continue until the next Synod.

Work in Groups

Work continued in the small groups from Monday afternoon through to Wednesday evening. Obviously I only have experience of one group. After studying the procedure to be followed and the election of a moderator and secretary, the work began. The listeners were free to contribute when appropriate. The Document was worked through paragraph by paragraph, amendments were proposed and discussed and then voted on by the Synod Fathers.

There was a relaxed atmosphere in the group and great freedom in accepting or rejecting an idea, after dialogue. The presenter of an amendment freely withdrew his idea if there was no support for it or accepted other suggestions for amended wording with good humour. There was also laughter. There were different opinions, experiences and realities all of which made it both interesting and challenging. The effort to be sensitive to the different realities and the discussion that this called for at times slowed down the process and made it somewhat tedious.

Back in the Synod Hall

On Thursday morning there was an Assembly in the Synod Hall. It was good to have Pope Francis among us again. The purpose of this gathering was to listen to the reports from the different groups. The amendments had already been given to the Secretariat. The Reports gave an outline of the work in the group, preoccupations, concerns, affirmations, etc. Each group reporter had 10 minutes to give a report and again time was strictly adhered to. All these reports were published.

The following are some of the points that emerged from the group reports

Appreciation was expressed of the method used to present the document: Listen – Look – Discuss (see, judge, act).

Many spoke of the atmosphere of openness that prevailed in the Synod. The dialogue took place in freedom and a spirit of mutual listening. This openness enabled the welcoming of insights and experiences of numerous

people from different cultures and five Continents, gathered together in Synod listening to the different voices in mutual trust, welcome and simplicity, expressing the reality of the universal Church in harmony and diversity.

The plurality and diversity of ecclesial situations was clearly experienced. Every local Church is not concerned in the same way nor touched by the problems that were raised. Desire was expressed that greater attention be given to subsidiarity thus giving certain autonomy to local churches to seek pastoral responses to their preoccupations.

The Synod Journey is on-going. The next ordinary Synod will take place in October 2015. It will focus on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world. The year leading up to this will be one of reflection and dialogue in the different local churches throughout the world. It is an opportunity for all of us to be collaborative and participative in the reflections and dialogue that will take place at the local level. We can also take the initiative to encourage conversation in the same spirit of the Synod—that of listening deeply with open minds and hearts—willing to stay with the questions and explore them in a spirit of discernment rather than staying with fixed ideas or ready-made conclusions.

FAMILY AND CONSECRATED LIFE BETWEEN THE SYNODS ON THE FAMILY

Fr. Enzo Brena, SCJ

Psychologist

Conference presented at the 84th Assembly of the USG, November 2014

Original in Italian

The coincidence of the year dedicated to Consecrated Life with the celebration of the Synod on the Family is providential, because it offers the opportunity for further reflection on the vocation to consecrated life and its relationship to marriage and family.

My short presentation will focus on two ideas:

- a) *What could be said today about the vocations to consecrated life and to marriage?*
- b) *What is the message that the two vocations address to each other?*

A) What could be said today about the vocations to consecrated life and to marriage?

As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton said, if it is true that “it is God’s intention that all vocations be aimed at showing His love to the world”,¹ it should be evident that there are no vocations that are more worthy or more important than others, even if this is the ever-present thought and the teaching in our religious environment.

Those who love the Church-people of God, and the journey that people make through her, are well aware of the message by Rev. Primo Mazzolari, a parish priest and prophet of his time: “*We need to count upon each other to carry out any task, because a person alone is not enough for him/herself or his/her vocation.*” On the occasion of last February’s Consistory these words were somehow echoed in the speech by Cardinal Walter Kasper: “*Either matrimony and celibacy give value to and support each other, otherwise both together enter a state of crisis.*” Central to the words by Cardinal Kasper is the concept of *freedom of choice*, which the present cultural scene offers again as a focal point of the pervading crisis suffered both by family and consecrated life. An

individual's *freedom of choice* is a basic element when speaking of vocation. It is therefore a primary requirement of discernment and formation in both life choices.

It is necessary to acknowledge that today freedom is a problem rather than a certainty. The continuous discussions about it, the constant claim for it, or taking it for granted, do not ensure that it is truly present in daily choices and decisions. Numerous psycho-social studies indicate a very high exposure of the individual to various forms of influence from the media that play on the promise of more and more freedom. From personal experience in the face of the phenomenon of the high number of consecrated people and priests who abandon their choice, or of separations and divorces in marriage, we know well how the issue of freedom of choice is critical along the path leading to those decisions. The enthusiasm, passion and strong will that were present at the beginning are quickly converted into disenchantment, frustration and desertion.

What makes it difficult to express one's freedom today? In the person's inner experience, behind the idea of "freedom" there is always the illusion of a complete independence, nurtured nowadays by the virtual reality in an unprecedented way. It is obvious that the web cannot be used as a scapegoat for every problem of the post-modern individual. However, it becomes a quite flexible tool in articulating the game of human weaknesses. In fact, the multimedia environment, that can be an indisputable means for positive opportunities, unfortunately becomes the place for the big illusion, where it is possible to change scenes and identities to one's liking and where choices can stay in a stand-by mode forever. This enables various experiments and fosters the idea of dominating time and reality. This sort of virtual "omnipotence", however, damages one's will, and it is soon converted into a true inability to commit oneself, while it slowly and implacably leads to a suicide of freedom.² The effects of this inhibiting process are also visible in the difficulty to meet one's commitments in life, both in marriage and consecrated life.

When we are born, we are not endowed with freedom, love or all the other important values in life. Freedom is *vocation* (cf. *Gal* 5:13ff), it is a goal that we have to reach, entailing a life-long journey and commitment and finding its fulfilment in love (cf. *1Cor* 13). There is therefore a common vocation that is valid for everyone: *we are called to love as God does*, in order to enjoy a full freedom and become His children by making a deliberate choice. Each person is called to express a love that is full, free, faithful, compassionate, not exclusive but open to all...

The ways and paths to express this basic call are thus different yet they are all worthy. The different forms are determined by the variety of characters, perceptions and personal histories. Thomas Merton, when speaking of vocation, used to say that "*we are called in the place where God wants to do us the greatest*

good, in the condition where we can best abandon ourselves and find Him."³

This definition conveys the vocation's proactive and relational features: *we are called to a permanent vocation*, throughout our lives, developing through *a relationship with God that is nurtured by countless mediation*, according to our life choice. This entails the ability to harmonise in a positive way one's personal history, experiences and meaningful relationships with one's desires and ideals, in order to both discover and shape one's own identity.

Human sciences reach the same conclusion, although they start from different assumptions. Both in today's life, as well as in one's ideal state, the individual needs to undergo a process to achieve full personal fulfilment. One's personal specific features—starting from freedom—are progressively acquired in time, thanks to vital experiences and relationships that one undergoes.

However, vocation entails the *ability to listen to* a voice and a call, the need to open oneself to the other/Other, to accept a message that questions one's acquired condition and indicates a goal and proposes an ideal. Today, people are not so willingly accepting to invest time and efforts to go through the steps required for achieving an ideal, for living a value. In other words, people want to love, to live something great without accepting the time and effort it entails.

Apart from eventual psychiatric causes, that are always possible, the present state of crisis of many religious people, priests, husbands and wives who abandon their path reveals a vocational surrender that has taken place in a short time and is based mainly on emotional grounds. The adjective "emotional" is not intended as a person offering his or her own love to another person, but rather it entails a closing in on oneself, on one's emotional dimension. This process reflects the need to protect oneself from disillusion, to preserve the perfection of desire because one does not accept its underlying progressive development that respects the reality principle.

This attitude denotes a subconscious aspiration to dominate reality. However, as a matter of fact, the impulse to control everything that enters one's life appears to be, in fact, closure towards reality, to novelties and to a true encounter with others. One unconsciously condemns himself or herself to fluctuate relentlessly between enthusiasm and disillusion; this is the condition that is actually entrapping too many people. Even matrimony and consecrated life find themselves suffering directly from the most unpleasant consequences of these cultural changes.

During the last fifty years, marriage has been slowly losing its vocational dimension in order to be seen rather as a *lay form of salvation*. While people state in many ways that they do not believe in anything that is absolute... the best is expected from love!⁴ This is why today we face a paradoxical form of idealism: People love the idea of love more than they do their own partner. They

beg for it, whatever it may cost, even if they have to change partners, instead of loving a person who is the only one among all the others. The value of love is being measured against an internal reality that is built around self-defence and that does not allow for offering oneself to build an all-encompassing relationship. This love that requires that I accept it inside my heart, that wants me to continuously search for it and give it a place in my life, attains a value that becomes then meaningless because “I who love” is what matters. In other words, it is the “I” who, as a matter of fact, adapts love to my desire for full satisfaction.

People find themselves underestimating the relationships that were established, aiming at an idealistic combination, as if no one were worthy enough to sacrifice one’s freedom.⁵ Those who become experts of the falling in love phase, who perpetually expect to experience the spell of the early stage and therefore put an end to those relationships that do not offer a pledge of fulfilment, have been increasing in number for a while. Instead, those who are willing to see it through, those who want to live love and its needs in a condition of life that one freely chooses are significantly less.

This misinterpretation of vocation can also be seen in a number of crisis and drop outs of consecrated and priestly life. It entails reducing the vocation—with all its values—to the satisfaction of the need for a fast personal fulfilment.

Loving like God is a vocation, an ideal. It is not an idealism.

B) What is the message that the two vocations address to each other?

Both consecrated life and marriage have been present in the Church, but no real dialogue has existed between them. History teaches us that a theology/spirituality of consecrated life seen as a life of perfection and marriage as “remedium concupiscentiae” has slowly created a barrier between the two states of life. Only during the last century, especially after the Second Vatican Council, were conditions set to foster a gradual approach between family and consecrated life, monastic and home life, with the examples of mutual sharing that were already mentioned by Fr. Prezzi.

The need for outlining the specific features of vocation to consecrated life often induced to highlighting the differences that mainly overshadowed what they have in common—*everyone’s call to the freedom of God’s love*—as if the effort to clearly indicate their differences would fully define their own identities.

Vows have always provided a sound basis to deal with the issue of identity. We are well aware that a large number of *ad-hoc* documents and training assessments on vows have existed both within male and female orders.

However, we also know that among ordinary people admiration for the consecrated person has slowly given way to doubts about how it is possible to consider “normal” a choice that entails turning down the most natural forms of individual freedom (independence, emotions, management of properties,...). There are many people—many more than we think—who do not believe that consecrated people live in chastity and poverty (obedience does not seem to arouse the same doubts). On the other hand, we all know very well that our communities live in poverty but with many “exceptions”. Chastity is such a “private” issue that it is hard to talk about it, and seldom does it add anything interesting to the community. Obedience is one of the most delicate issues for Superiors.

Experience teaches us that a *formation focused on vows* hardly helps either consecrated people or those who come across them. The core of our vocation and the effort to be meaningful in the eyes of the people of God do not depend upon *observing* poverty, chastity and obedience, unless we try to express them in a new way.

Vows are not the centre of consecrated life. It is rather the relationship with God that accounts for them, that is, the decision to reciprocate His faithful love with open and unconditional love. It is the communion with God and our brothers and sisters that gives meaning to our choice of life. This is the reason for the amazement and fascination aroused by the consecrated people who live their choice to follow God in a generous commitment to their neighbour, open and helpful to any person, with whom they established an unconditioned welcoming and brotherly relationship, inside and outside the community. It is in the light of the common vocation *to be free to love as God* that marriage and consecrated life, each of them with its own distinctive features, have something to say and give each other.

Marriage requires that a man and a woman decide to walk together towards the fullness of the Divine love through the mediation of spouse and children, living precise responsibilities that characterise this project of life. This is a kind of love entailing that one freely decides *to share all of him/herself*. This is done through the ability and creativity in planning marriage and family life on the short and long term. It also happens when one offers their sensitivity and emotions, giving and sharing themselves totally, and through the sexual dimension experiences the function of “creating”, thus building up a communion and generating life. It also takes place through the responsible care for spouse and children, that is consciously lived not so much and not only as care towards the person who guarantees a series of “services” and satisfaction, but rather as towards a *partner* who offers timely exchange, support, encouragement and loving correction. This enables the couple to aim to the high ideal of expressing God’s love and being mediators of His love.

Consecrated life entails a commitment to the vocation to God's love only in the form of life revealed in Christ. The mediation enabling to undertake this journey is the brother/sister whom we meet *in itinere*. He/she is not chosen, nor elected among others, but rather he/she is welcomed as a "gift", beyond any spontaneous emotional preference.

The consecrated person's vocation therefore goes through all the standard needs of community life, the selfless gift of oneself, service to others without calculation, even regardless of "flesh and blood". This vocation does not bear fruit through the biological "generation" of life, but rather when "taking care" of others, nourishing the lives of brothers and sisters, no matter whom they are or where they happen to live.

Due to this call to follow Christ's choice also in terms of the tools used (vows, community, services provided to all, especially to the smallest), consecrated people have no problems in feeling a harmony with others, whomever they may be, no matter where they met and no matter in which conditions he/she lives—whether it be difficult or outrageous or not. The consecrated person does not judge or discriminate; he/she only aims at enabling anyone to meet Christ and experience His love that is able to restore the person after any failure. The witness of consecrated life is therefore not based on the experience of perfection, but rather on the experience of a personal concupiscence, a wound that touches our own flesh just like that of any human being and that pushes to shout out our own misery.

The consecrated person is therefore perfectly capable of *giving witness to mercy*, because he/she was the first to live it if he/she was able to come to know himself/herself and meet Christ. This experience is pivotal to a project of life that is consecrated to the God of mercy.

From this point of view, there can be a useful interaction between consecrated life and marriage, because the former reminds the couple of the need to always keep God in sight, because He is the model, the aim, the ideal criterion behind their project of life. A very frequent risk in marriage is to remain at the level of "mediation": The spouse becomes the absolute measure and one expects from him/her what he/she cannot give; one expects precise mutual emotional satisfaction, rather than an opinion during the discussion that enables to hold the rudder straight towards the vocational aim.

Consecrated life reminds the family that the measure of love is not fulfilled by the idea of reciprocity and is not reduced to the degree of relationship, but rather it consists in being ready and fruitful for Love, therefore true children of God. Their ultimate purpose, in fact, is not themselves but rather the One who transcends them in an infinite way.

Poverty, chastity and obedience are vows with which one is linked to

Christ, by means of the mediation operated by brothers or sisters and the community. In this way, one is not satisfied with an intuition on God and love; rather he/she is well-aware and operates knowing that love and good are always *in progress* and that the person (with his/her relationships) is always under construction. This choice offers the possibility to remain on a path of freedom that leads to the fullness of God as Love, through the daily experience of God's mercy operating through our brothers and sisters.

Consecrated life reminds the spouses of the journey through their inner being, as opposed to falling back onto themselves and their own desires. It also warns against the risk of dissipation by recalling the importance of witness and apostolate.

Besides, the consecrated person needs the witness of the spouses in order to remember that there is no love without flesh, without a body, without the mediation of a brother or a sister. We know all too well that in consecrated life love runs the risk of being converted into a literary genre, if not even into an easy "spiritual" escape from the real brother who happens to cross our path. The consecrated person does not marry another person and does not form a family, but he/she "embraces" the cause of everyone—starting from the people he/she shares his/her life with. In this way he/she operates a deep mediation, enabling him/her to recognise and fully live his/her identity as God's child. Thus it will also be possible to create the communion God wants for his children.

"*Embracing the cause of mankind*": this is not a random definition but rather a theological one, because in the Holy Scripture we find the proof that God chose the spousal relationship to express His relationship to mankind.

The timely coincidence of the Synod on the Family and the Year of Consecrated Life requires everyone to rediscover their common foundation: *the vocation to the freedom of God's love*. It also requires that we question ourselves, in a permanent attitude of learning and conversion because, as Pope Francis states: "*The first reform must be the attitudes. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them... but without getting lost.*"

¹ MERTON T., *No Man is an Island*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1955.

² Cfr. HADJADJ F., *Parcela con la morte. Anti-metodo per vivere*, Cittadella ed., Assisi 2009, p. 144-146. (*Réussir sa mort: Anti-méthode pour vivre*).

³ MERTON T., *No Man is an Island*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1955.

⁴ Cf. BRUCKNER Pascal, *Has Marriage for Love Failed?* Polity, 2013.

⁵ *Ibid.*

THE PACT OF THE CATACOMBS (DOMITILLA) A POOR SERVANT CHURCH

On 16 November 1965, shortly before the close of Vatican Council II, forty Conciliar Fathers celebrated the Eucharist in the Domitilla Catacombs in Rome, and requested to remain faithful to the Spirit of Jesus. At the end of the celebration, they signed the “Pact of the Catacombs.” This document is a challenge to their “brothers in the Episcopate” for a “life of poverty”, a “servant and poor” Church, as Pope John XXIII had already suggested. The signatories—among them, many Brazilians and Latin-Americans, with others adding their name afterwards—committed themselves to live in poverty, to give up the symbols and privileges of power and to place the poor at the center of their pastoral ministry. This text has had a strong influence on Liberation Theology, which was born soon afterwards.

Here is the text.

We, bishops assembled in the Second Vatican Council, are conscious of the deficiencies of our lifestyle in terms of evangelical poverty. Motivated by one another in an initiative in which each of us has tried to avoid ambition and presumption, we unite with all our brothers in the episcopacy and rely above all on the grace and strength of Our Lord Jesus Christ and on the prayer of the faithful and the priests in our respective dioceses. Placing ourselves in thought and in prayer before the Trinity, the Church of Christ, and all the priests and faithful of our dioceses, with humility and awareness of our weakness, but also with all the determination and all the strength that God desires to grant us by his grace, we commit ourselves to the following:

- * We will try to live according to the ordinary manner of our people in all that concerns housing, food, means of transport, and related matters. See Matthew 5, 3; 6, 33ff; 8, 20.
- * We renounce forever the appearance and the substance of wealth, especially in clothing (rich vestments, loud colors) and symbols made of precious metals (these signs should certainly be evangelical). See Mark 6, 9; Matthew 10, 9-10; Acts 3, 6 (Neither silver nor gold).
- * We will not possess in our own names any properties or other goods, nor will we have bank accounts or the like. If it is necessary to possess something, we will place everything in the name of the diocese or of social or charitable works. See Matthew 6,19-21; Luke 12, 33-34.
- * As far as possible we will entrust the financial and material running of our diocese to a commission of competent lay persons who are aware of

their apostolic role, so that we can be less administrators and more pastors and apostles. See Matthew 10, 8; Acts 6, 1-7.

- * We do not want to be addressed verbally or in writing with names and titles that express prominence and power (such as Eminence, Excellency, Lordship). We prefer to be called by the evangelical name of “Father.” See Matthew 20, 25-28; 23, 6-11; John 13, 12-15).
- * In our communications and social relations we will avoid everything that may appear as a concession of privilege, prominence, or even preference to the wealthy and the powerful (for example, in religious services or by way of banquet invitations offered or accepted). See Luke 13, 12-14; 1 Corinthians 9, 14-19.
- * Likewise we will avoid favoring or fostering the vanity of anyone at the moment of seeking or acknowledging aid or for any other reason. We will invite our faithful to consider their donations as a normal way of participating in worship, in the apostolate, and in social action. See Matthew 6, 2-4; Luke 15, 9-13; 2 Corinthians 12, 4.
- * We will give whatever is needed in terms of our time, our reflection, our heart, our means, etc., to the apostolic and pastoral service of workers and labor groups and to those who are economically weak and disadvantaged, without allowing that to detract from the welfare of other persons or groups of the diocese. We will support lay people, religious, deacons, and priests whom the Lord calls to evangelize the poor and the workers by sharing their lives and their labors. See Luke 4, 18-19; Mark 6, 4; Matthew 11, 4-5; Acts 18, 3-4; 20, 33-35; 1 Corinthians 4, 12; 9, 1-27.
- * Conscious of the requirements of justice and charity and of their mutual relatedness, we will seek to transform our works of welfare into social works based on charity and justice, so that they take all persons into account, as a humble service to the responsible public agencies. See Matthew 25, 31-46; Luke 13, 12-14; 13, 33-34.
- We will do everything possible so that those responsible for our governments and our public services establish and enforce the laws, social structures, and institutions that are necessary for justice, equality, and the integral, harmonious development of the whole person and of all persons, and thus for the advent of a new social order, worthy of the children of God. See Acts 2, 44-45; 4, 32-35; 5, 4; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; 1 Timothy 5, 16.
- * Since the collegiality of the bishops finds its supreme evangelical realization in jointly serving the two-thirds of humanity who live in

physical, cultural, and moral misery, we commit ourselves: a) to support as far as possible the most urgent projects of the episcopacies of the poor nations; and b) to request jointly, at the level of international organisms, the adoption of economic and cultural structures which, instead of producing poor nations in an ever richer world, make it possible for the poor majorities to free themselves from their wretchedness. We will do all this even as we bear witness to the gospel, after the example of Pope Paul VI at the United Nations.

- * We commit ourselves to sharing our lives in pastoral charity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, priests, religious, and laity, so that our ministry constitutes a true service. Accordingly, we will make an effort to “review our lives” with them; we will seek collaborators in ministry so that we can be animators according to the Spirit rather than dominators according to the world; we will try to make ourselves as humanly present and welcoming as possible; and we will show ourselves to be open to all, no matter what their beliefs. See Mark 8, 34-35; Acts 6, 1-7; 1 Timothy 3, 8-10.
- * When we return to our dioceses, we will make these resolutions known to our diocesan priests and ask them to assist us with their comprehension, their collaboration, and their prayers.

May God help us to be faithful.

Since the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life there have been many meetings and activities in different parts of the world. Some of these are annual events while others are planned for this significant year. All have taken on a significance given the words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter exhorting religious “*to look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion and embrace the future with hope.*”¹ In early January, the President of UISG, Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, traveled to **Vilnius** (Lithuania) to speak at a national Conference organized by the Conference of Religious. The energy and vitality of religious life in Lithuania was a wonderful experience and a very encouraging sign. In the same month the Executive Secretary, Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, represented UISG at the COSMAN/COMSAM meeting in **Kinshasa** (DRC). This meeting was an important gathering of representatives of many of the Conferences of Africa and Madagascar. Each of the attendees gave a detailed report of the challenges facing religious life in their respective countries. A new Executive Board was elected with Sr. Marie Sidonie Oyembo, CIC, as President. In early January the members of the **Rome Constellation** had their annual two day meeting in Monte Cucco (Rome). The theme of the gathering was inter-culturality. A panel of General Superiors shared their knowledge and experience leading to a very stimulating conversation among the participants.

Meanwhile two important ecumenical meetings occurred in January in **Rome** before or during the Week of Prayer for Church Unity. The first was the annual visit of students from the **Bossey Ecumenical Institute** (Switzerland) to the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU). During their annual visit, members of USG and UISG meet with the students to speak about religious life within the Catholic Church. Sr. Filo Hirota, MMB (Executive Board), represented the UISG at this gathering. The Bossey Institute focuses on ecumenical theological formation and education.

From January 22-25, the Ecumenical Colloquium of Religious Men and Women organized by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) was held in Rome. About 100 invited participants represented Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, Eastern and Western Rite Catholic Religious. Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, attended as a representative of UISG. Each day began and ended with prayer led by one of the different Christian denominations present – the evening prayer taking place in a Catholic, Anglican or Orthodox Church. There were presentations from the different traditions and very engaging small group discussions. The role of religious in furthering Christian Unity was one of the key themes to emerge.

In late January the Executive Board met with **New Leadership Teams** and new members to existing teams to outline the aims of UISG and its activities in Rome and globally. From February 4-11, the **Council of Delegates** met in Nemi, Italy, to reflect on the theme *Leadership for Global Solidarity*. The delegates shared about religious life in their various parts of the world and reflected on the many biblical insights on the theme offered by Sr. Teresa Okure, RHCJ (Nigeria). During the meeting the delegates heard about new initiatives being planned by UISG in response to the refugee and migrant crisis in Italy. They also participated in events organized for the **Feast of St. Bakhita** (February 8th). Pope Francis had asked the two Unions of General Superiors to “wake up the world” in relation to the scourge of trafficking and to promote February 8th as an International Day of Prayer and Awareness Raising. Talitha Kum—the UISG international coordinating office led by Sr. Gabriella Bottani, CMS— played a significant role in promoting this international day.

By this stage the delegates from each Constellation will have explained to their members the **Strategic Planning** process being currently undertaken by the Executive Board of UISG. In this Jubilee Year, it seems important to invite members of UISG and others with whom we work to take time to evaluate UISG’s role and effectiveness and to look to the future with courage.

The new **Canon Law Consultancy Service** being offered by UISG was officially launched in February. This service is available to all UISG members who can contact a resident canonist at specific times of the year. Appointments can be arrangements for visits or for a phone/skype consultation. Sr. Mary Wright, IBVM (Australia), was available in February and Sr. Marjory Gallagher, SC (Canada), in March. Future opportunities will be advertised.

During the first week of March, the newly established **UISG Council of Canon Lawyers** met for the first time. This small committee of five religious women canonists representing different continents is being coordinated by Sr. Mary Wright, IBVM (Australia). The purpose of the Council is the provision of canonical advice to leaders of religious Institutes of women in Africa, Asia and elsewhere in order to strengthen the on-going ability of religious Institutes to provide valuable services in capacity building for the Church and society. Two important future gatherings are being organized: one for women religious canonists (November 2015) and another for General Superiors/Congregational Leaders just before the UISG Assembly (May 2016). Notice about these two meetings will be published shortly.

A very successful **International Vocation Conference (Rome)** organized by NRVC (US National Religious Vocation Conference) was held from February 23-27. The participants were largely drawn from countries experiencing what is been termed a “vocations crisis”. Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, attended on

behalf of UISG. It was a very positive meeting. It is clear from the different national reports that many different approaches to vocation discernment are being offered to “seekers”.

A Brief **Reflection on the Meeting of Delegates** in Nemi by Sr. Joyce Meyer, PBVM. ²

To participate in the Assembly of the Delegates of the UISG is always an existentially challenging experience. The plurality of faces, of clothes, of languages, is intertwined with the desire for communion, for comprehension, for communication. There is a familiar atmosphere, a beautiful religious family enriched by the many charisms that circulate, meet, illuminate each other in the interchange. The service that each of the Delegates carries on both in their own Institute and in their Constellation finds benefit from the contact with the reality existing in different parts of the world.

We are responding to one of the greatest challenges in human history: that of relating with each other freely, of thinking together, of listening to each other and planning together. Each of us carries with her the baggage of her own people, of her own experience, of her own journey. To put together all this, makes the Assembly of Delegates an *unicum* (something unique) in the world. Very slowly you come to understand not only its symbolic power but its real and inspiring strength.

Religious Life is moving beyond. The way it is expressing itself is in turmoil. Traditions are reconsidered according to the reasons that generated them. Today’s world moves to new fields of apostolate at the borders. There are common questions and problems affecting several Countries. In the meeting of UISG emerge the wounds that need to be healed; the stereotypes that require to be verified by local witnesses; the lack of humanity and spirituality in the Countries where we come from and that emerge in our dialogue, increasing the desire for a stronger commitment to heal all these wounds. To warm the heart, to invigorate the flame of the Spirit, to let us be challenged by reflecting together, by asking questions together, to be restless is beneficial for the mission we carry out in the world and in the Church. The progress that the UISG has done and is doing are a rich and blessed gift that is offered to all of us, that comes from the Gospel and from courageous women.

¹ Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 21, November, 2014.

² Sr. Joyce Meyer attended the meeting as a member of the Board of Directors of the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters.