

*50 YEARS OF UISG:  
BETWEEN PAST  
AND PRESENT TIMES*

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## INTRODUCTION

UISG 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is the leitmotiv of this final part of 2015 which will continue until the Plenary Assembly in the coming May 2016. In the light of these 50 years, we can today praise the courage of the women religious who undertook such a substantial feat which is UISG, engaged in current challenges and confident in the future with an active hope.

As an introduction, the first article on *50 years of UISG: between past and present times*, is an historical summary by **Sr Grazia Loparco** outlining the topics which animated the dialogue between Religious Life and the Church which - to a lesser or greater extent – are still object of meetings and reflections nowadays. The first theme focuses on women's role in the Church; besides progress achieved, there is still more to do, since women religious continue to serve and work without being involved in the decision-making process and keep remaining in a subordinate position and as substitutes. The second analyses the relationship between religious life and the Roman Curia; there are new forms of participation and encounter with the Congregation of Religious but there is still a request for a greater opening in line with modern times, going beyond simple rules and provisions stimulating a new creativity of religious life faithful to the Charism of its Founders. In conclusion, the relationship between Bishops must be of mutual collaboration and confidence to favour understanding and to value religious life as witness of Christian life in the local Community, permanently being renewed and adapted to the needs, being fully flexible.

On the same wavelength, **Sr. Josune Arregui** gives us '*A glance into the Past*', providing a critical analysis of the 50 years of UISG History running in parallel with the renewal announced in the Second Vatican Council highlighting the contrast between the braveness of women religious and immobilism of ecclesial structures. In the light of her experience as executive secretary for four years, Sr. Josune acknowledges the results UISG has conquered over time and the on-going renewal of women religious life that over the years, were aware of the need to provide a faithful and creative identity in order to be an evangelical witness in a changing world.

The following contribution by **Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko** presents the words of Pope Francis as a question: *Experts in Communion?* Although the Grace of Community life experiences its own difficulties, we are called to be welcomed, supported, involved, accepting the best the other can offer....it is

the best welcome one can offer, the same the Lord grants us in each Eucharist.

Today, migration and physical frontiers are questioning international and local organizations, but also families and all men and women of good will. **Sr. Pepa Torres** adds a further comment: *Is there a mysticism of frontiers? What frontiers is religious life called to cross?* Religious life cannot remain impassible before such reality close to us, it must cross every frontier; be involved, “dirty its hands”, accept criticism... and be present where human emergency calls for help, caring and forgiving gestures. Religious life can denounce such unacceptable human and social injustices, through its presence in the field, living “frontier” situations, going “towards peripheries” in the words of Pope Francis.



# UISG 50 YEARS: BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT TIMES

Sr. Grazia Loparco, FMA

*On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> UISG Anniversary (1965-2015) we have started an historical investigation on the first fifty years of the Union's existence. Such study was entrusted to Sr Grazia Loparco, FMA. Information will be gathered in a volume that will be presented at the 2016 Plenary Assembly. As preview of such study, we have selected three articles extracted by Sr Grazia's work which were published on the Osservatore Romano during this year of celebration.*

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*Original in Italian*

## **New Humanism. Religious women are a resource for a cultural revolution.**

*L'Osservatore Romano, May 7, 2015, p. 5*

**R**eading some yellowed pages, can be source of surprise about women religious. We have been inspired by Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, sj. His writings analyse the reasons why women are in theory, equal to men within the Church, according to the Gospel but Christianity in its contact with other cultures- has deprived women of their liberty and flexibility, acquiring a growing antifeminist approach. The Jesuit deplored the imbalance between the potential in terms of numbers of women religious compared to male clerics and their actual ecclesial contribution. Looking at the reasons is food for thought: unclear vocational choice; ignoring natural values and qualities of women religious due to structural circumstances of women religious life, with the result of halting personal growth; widespread insufficient cultural formation; lack of a vocational training and formation to adequately fulfill their tasks with negative consequences for both people and the mission. Moreover, omitting to provide a sound foundation to religious life not limited only to spiritual, moral and routine aspects; an individualistic vision about perfection and salvation encouraging pietistic or quietist attitudes, or conflicts and dichotomies; a serious lack of information about the world, its changes and issues affecting religious

life, convinced they are affected by them.

Some indications show a regular masculinization of women religious life: male-dominated foundations which strongly condition the concept of religious life: legal codes and acts which often transpose a male model, without integrating and including female traits. Moreover, retreats, spiritual guidelines, courses and studies only dominated by men, with no criticism; a predominant male decision-making and assets management, particularly in Congregations with two branches, where criteria, investments and procedures are simply duplicated; ordinary life activities such as unisex religious habit to community customs where women's values are sacrificed due to male-designed Asceticism; docile submission to rules in general (set by Spiritual Directors, Superiors, Bishops...) not so much for the rule's content but simply because imposed by a man (the same rule set by a woman has less value). The mistake is the submission of religious women and not of course because they collaborate.

The well established submission and passive attitude of religious women are now institutionalized and can be expressed through some indicators: the acquiescent acceptance of male hegemony; subtle disdain for women and for women religious in particular, appointing lower quality formators, since any level is suitable for women. In addition, a paternalistic or pseudo-caring approach expressed through small gestures, diminutives, commonplace phrases or on the contrary, rigid and authoritarian rules, refined forms of humiliation; permanent infantilism attributed to women religious, incapable of deciding, menilism attributed to ever and authoritarian rules using lower quality formators, since whatever level is fine for women managing, fulfilling important tasks; disregarding their opinion about problems, which explains why women are not involved in the ecclesiastical decision-making process regarding God's people and more precisely, in the concrete aspects of religious life. Instead, women religious are admitted only for practical housekeeping work since their services are often used for pastoral work, since they provide free or cheap manpower, with no old age protection which is not even mentioned. A static conception of cloister which associates convents with the sad image of women being marginalized by the Church.

The author points out also some promising signs of change: more advanced social mentality towards women; growing awareness of women religious; cultural and professional growth of many of them; theoretical evolution within the Church particularly after Second Vatican Council; inevitable practical change within the Church faced with the growing lack of operators, which lead to appointing women and women religious in particular, as replacements. The shift from a secular contempt to value women which is not always driven by the evangelical principle of equality but rather to a modern readjustment of male's hegemony. It shows clearly when sisters are obliged to act as substitutes in

parishes (catechesis, paper work, care...); in manipulating working groups so that men think and women act but bearing greater risks; in the difficult choice between involvement in the local Church and being available for the entire Church (in International congregations); in the laudatory style, typical of women which would induce them to continue accepting that men carry on their own business alone.

Father de Carballo's hope is to allow - also at Canon level - each Institute to freely express their Charism, avoiding uniformity; moreover conceiving religious institutes as specialized bodies in different fields would undermine their action while their existence is the greatest contribution for the Church. Focusing on the law-making process impoverishes the original inspiration. In addition to Dioceses, interested in action, also the Sacred Congregation for Religious could limit the life of the many who simply enforce their provisions. Owing to their nature, Congregations deal with operational, legal, judicial and functional aspects, therefore such priorities could retrench the specific role of each Institute in pursuing and perfecting its own Charism.

The renewal of women religious is linked to their evolution in terms of women in the Church and in the world. It involves rethinking community life: adults cannot be treated as minors; be aware on the one hand of centralizing authority and on the other, to an imbalanced democratization of obedience. Some congregations have adopted radical changes but for superficial aspects, while principles are still those belonging to older times and cultures leading to anachronistic pathologies.

As regards vocations, the Jesuit noticed that particularly in urban environments, young women become quite self-sufficient and independent from their families; University teaches them to understand reality which makes demanding, open, critical and disinhibited towards colleagues and authorities. This kind of young person would not fit in an environment promoting an old fashioned image of women. Occasionally, Institutes encourage "religious migration" of young people from different cultural settings, in order to support initiatives which should be discontinued. It is the primacy of work over the person. In developing countries, search for vocations can be done in lower classes, attracting inexperienced and obedient girls with the pretext of promoting them. In other cases, young women are not admitted to avoid disruptions, with the inevitable decline due to a kind of "vocational contraception".

A constructive approach is based on the theological-ontological analysis of the male-female relationship. To achieve equality and liberate women from submission, it is necessary to liberate men from their pretence of domination and hegemony. Such commitment requires collaboration, without falling in the trap of ungrounded feminist claims which expose the fragility of a type of feminism. Women religious life must take into account and project female dignity towards

new prospects in their mission and to support other women. It is not a question of turning women into men but simply to collaborate. Instead of the traditional well-known dichotomy between male and female tasks, responsibilities should be shared according to one's nature. Institutionalize the process of de-humanization linked to male progress, (eroding human aspects) could be rebalanced through the search for truly human forms of civilization. This would represent a cultural revolution and not women's revolution, with the full recognition of human nature. It would involve returning to the original Christian concept of woman, that men have hidden for a long time and which can instead renew both society and the Church.

Fortunately, such considerations shared with the Assembly of about 500 Superiors General (UISG) in 1975 are dated for several aspects but not for others, particularly when considering the International dimension of Congregations during the last decades. In some frameworks, it became reality but particularly where vocations are numerous and equal opportunities among men and women are less established. Fourty years later it should encourage us to reflect.

### **Women Religious in dialogue with the Roman Curia.**

*L'Osservatore Romano, May 29 2015, pg. 5*

The explicit request for an adequate participation of women religious in the life of the Church is not of recent years. Some of the requests presented forty years ago are now being implemented, others require further reflection and consideration. In the UISG (International Union of Superiors General) quarterly Bulletin N.31-32 of 1974, there is a detailed presentation of two full days of dialogue held on November 1973, between the members of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, represented by its Prefect Card. Arturo Tabera and by the Secretary, Mons. Paul Augustin Mayer, osb and the Triennial Assembly of Superiors General. The main question was: *What do Superiors General expect from the Sacred Congregation of Religious and what does the latter expect from the Superiors General?* It also represented the opportunity for a greater exchange of views in addition to what achieved through the monthly meetings of the *Council of 16*. Composed of 8 UISG Superiors General and 8 Sister Superiors General, the Council was created back in those years precisely with the aim to deepen the relationship with the Congregation of Religious, through the study and analysis of important themes for consecrated life.

Some Superiors General with great clarity, were hoping for a new form of *leadership* from the Congregation, aiming at receiving not only rules and regulations, but also spiritual and pastoral guidance; guidelines instead of restrictions in order to preserve the uniqueness and unity of each Institute, avoiding to conform to uniformity. There was hope to gain support in order to enhance the main aspects of religious life, lived in our current world. The Sister

Superiors were asking for a confidence-building guidance which would provide them with full collaboration. Sisters are asked to adapt to local realities and to remain open to changes, which requires a deeper knowledge and an unbiased assessment of local information. Sister Superiors were calling for a better communication with the Congregation of Religious which - at the time - was dominated by men: “One of the results of our present time is that sisters - faithful to the principles of subsidiarity and human dignity – are less willing to accept men- imposed rules in their fields of competence”.

In their contributions, sisters were asking for an adequate presence of sister religious within the Congregation, namely that a number of qualified sisters among them could be admitted and be in charge of aspects concerning sisters. Furthermore, they were asking to what extent and how were the sisters, working at the Congregation, being consulted: “Are they actively involved in the decision-making process?” Prior to appointing sisters, there was request for a preliminary consultation with Sister Superiors. Communication and consulting were considered the basic ingredients for a relationship of mutual understanding: it would eliminate misunderstandings due to unclear instructions lacking a proper explanation and particularly when translated.

It would also be desirable to consult sisters in the law-making process, taking into account real life situations as well as the implications of rules and their enforcement. Representatives of Sister Superiors would have wished to attend the Congregation’s Plenary Sessions and the preparatory meetings for the Bishops’ Synod.

In a nutshell, there was expectation for subsidiarity and collaboration through an open dialogue together with a theology based on the Gospel. Representatives of the Dicastery attending the meeting focused on the same topics and agreed to such requests. In the current spirit of renewal, there was great hope for an improved mutual communication to avoid monopolies which often existed in Congregations with the risk of fractures and separations among groups and communities. Women religious stressed the desire not to be confused with Secular Institutions.

In the group reports, the English group invited UISG to seriously discuss about the role of women, in view of the celebration of the International Women’s Year declared by the UN in 1975. A study on the theology of the woman was requested and the Church was asked to analyze in depth the invaluable contribution of women to its mission, which included also the potential loss of human resources when complementarity was not acknowledged. Father Paolo Molinari, sj. Assistant to the Union who acted as mediator between the Curia and the sisters, underlined the importance of a mutual listening not only with Sister Superiors but also with General Chapters aiming at renewing but not always able to identify the best solutions. He also stressed the importance to better enhance

the richness of theological visions and of experience. However, the new texts should not be read in the light of dated patterns and of a limited contact with reality experienced in the light of God, but rather through the direct and constructive contact with those in charge of such developments.

He pledged the Congregation to listen more attentively the Sisters which would lead to an effective collaboration in understanding the evolution of religious life and its theological meaning, since God's action is permanently evolving and it cannot be known beforehand. He underlined that it is not possible to refer to a legislation which has coded both primary and also secondary aspects. For that reason, the Church asked Institutions to review both their life and Constitutions in the light of the Gospel and of the Spirit of the Founding Fathers, source of their dynamism. The Church highlighted the importance to remain faithful to the Founders' spirit and not to the historical expressions linked to a local context. Indeed, a rigid compliance with forms could lead to be unfaithful to the spirit. Consequently, each Congregation should carefully analyze all information gathered after a process of consultation and of prayer with its Superiors, which could involve a process of search, anxiety and suffering. In parallel, it would be advisable to carry on a dialogue *in itinere* also in relation with the General Chapters and the decisions to be adopted.

At the same time, there was mention of the relationship between Constitutions amended according to Council decisions and Canon Law, which is undergoing revision that is not expected to end in the short term. The question is that the revised Canon law will have few rules concerning Religious Congregations allowing them for a greater leeway. An additional theme debated at the meeting was the relationship between the Congregation of Religious, that for the Evangelization of people and the Congregation of Eastern Churches which – in given situations - could involve decisions regarding sisters. The Archbishop P.A. Mayer clearly defined the competences of each Congregation and was aiming at enhancing understanding by convening the *Council of 16 and of 18*, linked to the Congregation of Religious and the Congregation for the Evangelization. The Dialogue inaugurated on the various concrete topics appeared promising.

## **Women religious and Bishops: expectations of yesterday and today**

*L'Osservatore Romano, October 7, 2015, pg. 5*

When referring to the renewal of religious life, there are a number of past considerations which are still telling and inspiring today.

The 1982 *UISG* Bulletin, in commenting the 25th anniversary of *Ecclesiae Sanctae* with the enforcement rules of *Perfectae caritatis* underlined the renewal

effort expected from apostolic communities. After the initial theological reflections, Sr Katherine MacDonald – spokeswoman of a number of Superiors – added her critical comments concerning certain relationships between Bishops and women religious with the aim to go deeper into *Mutuae Relationes*<sup>1</sup>. Although the document acknowledges the charism of religious life, women religious deplored the focus on the administrative role of the Bishop and the vague reference about bodies promoting dialogue and understanding in taking common decisions.

The meaningless experiences described by the protagonists concern the actual relationship in a period of search and of conflicts affecting various Congregations. When women religious expected from their Bishops an attitude of benevolence and indulgence towards the *good sisters*, towards the *poor Mother Superior*, avoiding to meet them as human beings, to share problems with them in order to identify solutions for the local Church, then the relationship was of mutual polite formality. On the contrary, when dialogue concerned Charisms and the Dioceses' Ministry, this would require a mutual conversion and ecclesial service. Occasionally, sisters felt to be neglected, because “Roman” or because they didn't wear the veil. Seldom the Pastor's tone was authoritarian.

Dialogue became more urgent in the delicate case of a withdrawal of communities from a Dioceses. In centralized institutes, sometimes the Bishop wanted to report only with the Superior General, bypassing intermediate authorities which would be the normal counterparts, while women religious were asked to accept faith-based mediation. In international institutes, the discernment on activities could require a change in the type of commitment, but the Bishop wasn't always in favour. Similarly, in Diocesan Congregations, women religious could be chosen for a given work but the Bishop could prevent a reinterpretation of the Charism in the light of current times. “Diocesan women religious are often kept secluded, on the grounds of protecting them, made worse by the lack of formation, as if their Charism would not grow under the action of the Holy Spirit acting in them.

On the other hand, Superiors acknowledged some positive existing experiences, of mutual understanding and participation at Diocesan reflection. Women religious were asking the Bishops to be more available for dialogue, to learn more about women religious life and inform priests and seminarians, to listen and respect their experience and opinion in order to jointly build the Christian community.

Common action fields were inter alia: 1. Do not consider past experience as a cave for lethargy, open up to new realities and leave behind certain obsolete traditions, since “tradition is a root but not a bond: to honour our traditions, does not necessarily impose to be restrained by their limits, but rather to be inspired by their expressions”. At present times, women religious no longer need to be

“protected”, as in the past, but listened; they need to feel confidence in their search to live the Gospel and to collaborate at the Church’s mission in the world. 2. The answer to Second Vatican Council not only required adaptation but above all renewal in the fidelity towards the original Charism. 3. The issue concerning the universal and the local Church required a mutual commitment. Bishops could not be opposed to communities’ mobility necessary to accomplish their special apostolic mission. Women religious had to understand the need for serious commitment and involvement in the local Church and Bishops had to understand their duties towards the universal Church.

In our contemporary world, it is important to witness fraternity among people, acting on a supranational level. Women religious need to be locally integrated, remaining independent, and simply conveying their vision (acquired in their international communities) to any parish, culture and nation where they work, On the other hand, they had to share with the universal Church the local vision of the people they were in contact with. In so doing, they were contributing to the growth of the Christian community locally but with a universal dimension.

Aware that interdependency is the key for development, women religious were asking for comprehension and reciprocity with the Bishops on a theme common also to their vocation. In conclusion, as regards the delicate issue of women’s role within the Church, according to the speaker, history and traditional theology are the cause for certain existing painful difficulties, for instance when women religious act or take initiatives which so far, were reserved only to priests. One must acknowledge: “We do not have reference models and we have the difficult task of having to invent new Ministries, based on our own vision and according to our level of commitment”. Consequently, they were left with many doubts, poor results and a terrible suffering which had encouraged many of them to give up. Episcopal and Religious Conferences which had studied the document *Mutuae Relationes* opened the way and gave hope that such movement would carry on with new initiatives.

Some of questions discussed by women religious are still topical and in the year of consecrated life, they call for a broader implementation of the Council’s precepts.

<sup>1</sup> Katherine MACDONALD, *The relationship between Bishops and Women Religious. Some experiences.* The *UISG Bulletin*, 1982, n. 59, p. 15-23.

## A GLANCE INTO OUR PAST

Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV

*Sister Josune, Carmelite of Charity- Vedruna, former UISG Executive Secretary between 2010 and 2013.*

*Original in Spanish*

It has been of great interest to read the three articles that Sister Gracia Loparco published in *L'Osservatore Romano* as preview of the valuable historical work on UISG she is preparing to celebrate the fifty years of the Union.

The above mentioned articles are snapshots of a few events in the UISG history which occurred 30 or 40 years ago. Similarly, when we look at old photos about family members or friends, we revisit past moments of people but we also discover what survives and is part of their present life; looking at such images makes us smile, but at the same time it enables us to enter a bit into the mystery of each person. One can enjoy a similar experience when reading these three articles.

The first article describes the 1973 Plenary Assembly focussed on analysing *the relationship between women religious life and the Sacred Congregation of Religious* whose representatives were extremely attentive in listening at the debate.

The second presents a contribution by Father Marcello de Carvalho Acevedo sj at the 1975 Plenary. Before an audience of 500 Superiors General, the Father reflected on *“the existing imbalance between the number of women religious compared to the religious and women’s actual ecclesial contribution”*. Today, 40 years later, his already crystal analysis appears even more clear.

The third is based on an article by Sr Katherine MacDonald published in the 1982 *Bulletin on the Relationship between Women Religious and Bishops* inspired by the *Mutuae Relationes* document she certainly appreciated but also felt that it was insufficient and obsolete even at that time.

Although the texts will be included in this issue of the *Bulletin* available to all, I was invited to share my interpretation of such articles. I will start with sharing my impressions, highlighting some aspects which drew my attention. I

will then try to compare the past situation with our present times and in conclusion, I will try to shed light on the very same UISG identity based on the snapshots provided.

## Impressions

It is worthwhile to go back to 30 or 40 years ago, to the Superiors General Assemblies convened by UISG, which at that time was young and motivated by the powerful spirit of renewal introduced by Vatican II. It brings us back memories of those days when we were dreaming of a new, more evangelical life better aligned to the world's needs. The spirit of renewal transmitted by the Council had permeated every single religious life Charisma. I am in admiration of the braveness and value of those Superiors General, governing the UISG, who struggled not only to properly guide the renovation process in their Congregations but at the same time - on behalf of the entire Union – they were confronted with the ecclesial immobilism rooted in organizations.

Although recalling those years gave me pleasure, reading about them was bittersweet. It is daunting to realize that already 40 years ago, representatives of women religious were asking the Church for more communication and dialogue, increased participation, reflecting on women's role within the Church, etc. It sounds like a refrain so often repeated and heard that one loses hope that the dream – of those days but also of today –will ever come true.

However, let's try to focus on some issues resulting from a transversal reading of the articles.

## Charisma and Canon Law

The renewal path outlined in *Perfectae Caritatis* prompted a “return to the sources”, to the Gospel and to Charisma, as well as opening towards a modern world and its new values. However, the initiatives proposed by Congregations in implementing such change were against the - yet to be reformed - rules of Canon Law, based on a monastic model of women religious life. In those post-conciliar years signed by inter-congregational conflicts, Superiors General engaged to preserve unity rather than a rigid uniformity imposed by Canon Law. They called to enhance the fundamental aspects of religious life encouraging renewed constitutions to better express the dynamism of Charisma in modern times.

At the 1973 Assembly, those women religious representatives dared to state the Mission of the Sacred Congregation of Women Religious by asking the Church for Evangelical guidelines instead of legal norms and restrictions. They professed the fidelity to the Spirit of the founding fathers and to their historical expressions since tradition is a source but not a chain constraining the free development of the Charisma's potential in meeting the world needs.

The Sisters opposed to those defining innovation as temporary “experiences” which after a while, should be transformed into new rules, by replying that God’s action is permanently renewed but nobody can foretell, it is therefore necessary to maintain a constant dialogue and “an ongoing renewal”.

## Relationship with the Curia and the Bishops

Over the past fifty years, it has been a recurrent theme which also indirectly appears in these articles. In 1973, the request to the Curia was for more dialogue and communication, a greater level of representation in the bodies and consultation on topics regarding women religious, be invited to attend preparatory sessions of Synods, etc., etc. Ten years later, when referring to the relationship with Bishops, their request was for less protection, kindness and benevolence but to be truly listened on an equal basis, to share problem-solving and to be more involved in the Church’s world mission. *Mutuae Relationes* tried to highlight and to smooth the relationship but women religious felt the need to keep progressing in new directions and approaches, as a natural result of their own experiences.

## Women in the Church

The underlying theme to the above said is the irreplaceable role of women that the Church didn’t – and still doesn’t – acknowledge as complementary. In a clear-cut manner, P. Carvalho Azevedo referred to it at the 1975 Assembly, underlying that the existing inequality was due to the insufficient, inadequate and “male-oriented” formation of women religious since the very beginning. Their problems were neglected due to their isolation from the real world which lead to a childish attitude of women religious which were denigrated within the Church, besides the theoretical recognition of their equality and dignity.

In his closing remarks, he stressed that to achieve equality and liberate women in the Church, it was necessary to simultaneously “liberate men from their pretence to dominate and to impose their hegemony”. He suggested a “cultural revolution” to give rise to a new humanity able to renew society and the Church.

The greatest provocation in my opinion, was declaring before an audience of 500 Superiors General gathered from the remotest corners of the world that the reaction perceived to such a discriminatory and marginalized situation was of passive submission to the alleged “male superiority”.

I wonder how the participants of that Assembly reacted to this analysis of women religious in the Church and to the proposal for a new humanity. Several probably agreed, in line with their claim; others instead were “shocked” by such an innovative interpretation since they had never thought about it, due to their institutionalized subordination; a few might have been shocked, reacting in the defensive to such a “destabilizing” revolution.

## Forty years later

It is quite inevitable to compare the situations described and our present time. These are more than well-known lyrics that we continue humming but unfortunately there has been no real change within the Church as regards women religious life although the situation is not the same as 40 years ago.

Undoubtedly, today the number of sisters “alert” or clearly aware of their marginal role within the Church is increasing, yet some groups still passively accept the alleged male superiority. Women religious formation is far more up to date and broader compared to those days, although in some Congregations unfortunately, it is limited due to the overburden of pastoral services requested and to the “male-biased” formation as already denounced then.

The growing awareness among male religious within the Church is doubly important. Certainly they are not the majority since it is not easy to take distance from a privileged situation, but history evolves together with the role of women within civil society speaking out loudly against the patriarchal stronghold within our Catholic Church.

Finally some of these “alert” men or more aware are joining the Congregation of Religious consequently, female presence, representation and consultation as well as dialogue are turning into reality. However, a radical change, the needed “cultural revolution” has not yet permeated at all levels. One must acknowledge a trend towards change in organizations which are always more reluctant than people. It is a slow process but besides the results achieved and hope, it is insufficient. The same Pope Francis declared that it “is a challenge which cannot be further postponed” and He asserts “the urge to open up new spaces for women in the life of the Church” (Feb. 7, 2015).

The events of these recent years between the US Bishops and women religious have been a clear example of the inadequate relationship which lead to an open conflict. Many among us women religious, identified ourselves and felt solidarity for LCWR. Their behaviour was evangelical, ecclesial and brave. Their stand has been testimonial and the current ecclesial authorities settled the dispute peacefully and in full mutual recognition. In my opinion, women religious “won”, the dispute strengthened them and left a positive footprint on this path along which we are slowly progressing.

## UISG Identity

It is custom to say that old photos unveil traits about people’s current life. Similarly, in reading these UISG articles, one can identify some traits of the Union’s identity.

## **Change**

We all know – and currently, we celebrate it with great joy – the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) was created 50 years ago, the same day of closing an ecclesial event: the Council Vatican II on December 8, 1965.

With such a special starting date, UISG carries in its DNA a thrust for change, a dynamic component aimed at driving the ecclesial renewal that the Holy Spirit promoted through the Council. UISG took on such renewal process as its own mission and during these fifty years, it has accompanied leaders of women religious life in guiding their religious families along the path of dialogue between the total commitment to Jesus and building the Kingdom in today's world. A “creative fidelity” according to the definition in *Vita Consecrata* (37).

## **Union**

Need was felt for a *Union* of all women religious congregation leaders, similarly to the existing one of men. Different settings were tested, at first with representatives of International Congregations residing in Rome and later extending to representatives of other continents. Years went by with the onset of the first “constellations” or union within the largest countries or neighbouring geographical areas, coordinated and animated by UISG delegates. Gradually, a powerful web was set up interconnecting some 2,000 Superiors General representing in turn the reality of one million consecrated women scattered throughout the world. Although figures are decreasing today, the Union is still a prominent International Sisterhood and its overt discretion holds an undisputable power.

The triennial Assemblies in Rome have testified over the years this journey as Ecclesial Union. All meetings have been inspiring and the themes debated encouraging and enticing. The mutual exchange of renewal processes became every day more enriching and increasingly necessary for those in the forefront. Each Assembly has sown seeds which grew into actual programs – in the various countries – and each participant became the sap promoting apostolic religious life sided with a strong, large International Ecclesial Group.

A simple *UISG Bulletin*, translated into six and recently, seven languages, has been over the years, a window case of the rich content of these meetings, accessible to many different people and trying to provide an answer to the new issues emerging in other continents.

Thanks to the general support, the UISG headquarters located at the heart of Rome allowed the Union to be an effective and visible meeting point opening its doors to several Committee meetings (JPIC, education, health, inter-religious dialogue), projects (Talitakum, Solidarity South Sudan), formation groups in different languages, meetings with conferences of different countries during their

visits to the Roman Curia, etc.

### ***Dialogue with the Church***

As testified in these articles, the Union made dialogue with the Church possible. The Roman Curia, already in contact with the Union of male Congregations (USG), felt the need to interact also with the overall apostolic women religious life and took the initiative and laid the ground for its constitution.

Dialogue has steadily been fruitful during almost 50 years. Shortly its organization was set up and entered the *Council of the 16* together with the male Union and allowed for interesting joint reflections and above all, people came closer and valued each other.

### ***To be in the world***

“To be in the world without being part of the world” is a trait of apostolic religious life which cannot be neglected although not directly mentioned in these articles; however the motto has always been part of UISG reflection and search. Canon law considered women religious life in the framework of the *monastic model* which was common also to the apostolic religious life. Returning to the sources and to understanding “events of today’s world” (PC 2), lead apostolic religious life to rediscover its charismatic opening to the world which required other “ways” of following not possible with the *fuga mundi*.

Tensions both within each Congregation as well within the Church, compelled UISG several times to go deeper into apostolic spirituality in order to keep to the *basic* principles while renewing *forms*. Be part of the world, giving particular attention to the poor, the compromise in favour of justice (the Synod on this topic was held in 1971) are recurrent themes in the meetings reflecting the constant search for new charismatic responses and UISG permanently testifies that its accompaniment is oriented towards *apostolic* women religious life in dialogue and at the service of today’s world.

UISG went through an extremely interesting stage of its existence with great loyalty. Now, it is called to follow a new path, in a new world, with a different geographical map of religious life, in the light of the dramatic decrease in figures in the West, faced with the relentless cries of new outsiders. In the light of this unforeseeable future, UISG will carry on with its renewed original vocation, intertwining relations between congregations, committed to faithfully follow Christ within the Church in a creative manner and to be at the service of today’s world.

## EXPERTS IN COMMUNION?

Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko, OP

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*Original in French*

**E**xperts in Communion<sup>1</sup>, that is what Pope Francis calls us to become ! The standard to reach is high : experts are people who are top masters in their field of competence and who are able to guide others since they are usually ahead of others in their field... Experts in Communion? We would rather describe ourselves as «walking towards communion», since we are aware that our religious life is a life-long learning about the real meaning of «loving» in truth... Is the Pope's request impossible or unrealistic?

In His very last prayer, heart-to-heart with the Holy Father just before his Passion, Jesus reveals us a key to enter the mystery of Communion : « That all people be made one, like you Father, Who are in me and I am in you »<sup>2</sup>. From all the eternity, the Father gives himself to the Son and the Son gives himself to the Father, the Father welcomes the Son and the Son welcomes the Father and the Holy Spirit is the fruit of this exchange of love. In contemplating this mystery, opening our minds to be « like », Communion is perceived as a supernatural reality, rooted at the core of our being, like a call : it is indeed our first vocation – made in the likeness of God the Trinity, we are completely fulfilled only when we live in his likeness, when we « abide in love »<sup>3</sup>... Love is a dynamic mutual giving and receiving – to which we are called to participate - which unites the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

One of the greatest paradoxes which is also one of the inner struggles common to most consecrated, is the difficulty to live such communion in our daily lives, beside our deep desire to follow Christ and to live truly Evangelical lives.... We know the theory, we meditate the Word, we meet to debate topics such as inter-culture and inter-generations, but often we resent being unable to understand each other, to wholeheartedly deliver us, we try to change the others rather accepting them as they are ; often individualism limits us; often we prefer to be involved in our ministry and fulfill our tasks rather than deliver us to our

closest brothers and sisters... Yet, as Mother Teresa loved to repeat, «love begins at home»<sup>4</sup>!

To penetrate the mystery of Communion, I believe, it is fundamental to truly focus on the dimension of acceptance<sup>5</sup>, since it is true that «love means giving all, giving one's self»<sup>6</sup>, without acceptance our gift might be shortsighted by being self-centered in our search: giving, being at the service and being useful to the others brings great joy even self satisfaction! Only who accepts with simplicity can give with humility. Without acceptance, our gift runs the risk of being one-sided, top-down for the person we want to help; without acceptance, our gift can even be transformed into an act of possession (*my cafeteria, my biblical group...*) Acceptance purifies our gift when it goes with opening our heart, ready to accept what the other can offer... The gift answers the question «What can I do for the others?» acceptance is like a velvet touch encouraging to ask «What can I do for you?»<sup>7</sup> but also «What would you enjoy doing for me?» concerned with putting the other first, giving the joy to please, to give and to love.

### « Yes, thank you ! »

It is so much easier and natural to say «no thank you»! Our motivations are many and legitimate, although often unavowed: I can manage; it is far easier to solve it myself rather than explaining what should be done; if someone else does it, in any case I will have to verify; I know things necessary to understand the situation; I *want* to do everything I *can still* do; you have so much work; etc... A panoply of reasons to put efficiency before Communion, undermining the credibility of our evangelical testimony and of love, thus of our life's fertility. A number of underlining ways to imply: «I don't need you». Besides the question of accepting the other isn't there also the happiness to need someone? Let's look at Mary, the most perfect among human creatures, how She needed Joseph and how Jesus, the Lord of our history and King of the Universe, needed his parents, friends, women following Him and how much He keeps relying on us today .... Could we imagine Jesus replying «no thank you» to Simon of Cyrene?

Having the possibility of living in community, is having the possibility to tell the world: I need my brothers, my sisters, but *not them indistinctively* but *each* of them. Not for their services – it would be utilitarianism, not acceptance – but for what he is, for what she is; because he and she are a gift of the Creator received to enrich me; because his/her point of view – different from mine – invites me to open up my heart; because more people think better than one; because we do not interpret the message of Jesus Christ in the same way which encourages me to constantly investigate, to further penetrate the Mystery of

Love... Therefore, to become experts in communion, let's learn to say more often « Yes, thank you! » Yes I accept your help; Yes, I welcome the idea you suggest; Yes I appreciate the time you devote to me... Each *yes* is a sign of trust, each *yes* is way to value the other: I give up a little bit of myself, to leave you more space, to grant you the joy to give; each *yes* is a way of loving because it is like saying «I need you» and because it allows us to mature in humility. There are three degrees in love: love need, love service and love self-esteem<sup>8</sup>. Communion resides in the latter, since esteem is both gift and acceptance – I give my trust and I accept you as you are, not as I would like you to be...

### The cactus example

Entering into such logic of acceptance, allows us to gradually understand that even in a situation of dependency love can be abundant: it is not only linked to offering one's dependency (offering is also a gift) but to dependency itself, as such. Often, people declare: « I don't want to depend on anyone», « I pray not to be bedridden»... Although such concern is understandable, I believe it is never too late to «accept/come to terms with» dependency, which must be viewed as part of love and not as an optional aspect. In other words, dependency should be considered as acceptance in its purest state, with whatever it implies in terms of trust and rely on others... Let's not be afraid to accept and to be dependent on each other! When we will no longer be able to run, when our mental condition will no longer allow us to give, our heart will always be able to welcome... like little children<sup>9</sup>. Let's train our heart to be open ! If we live the communion, we will not be caught off by illnesses and old-age dependency, but it will be our way of loving to our last breath. Since our novitiate, we are well aware that holiness is more the result of *letting do* than *doing*: one must not aim at perfection, but let God act through us... But it takes a lifetime to learn the difference between what we know and accept to rely on others !

We all remained surprised when some bad-tempered people, become an example of patience and kindness when bed-ridden... I wonder whether such docility isn't the result of a lifelong intimate struggle, which lead them to fully accept their difficulties in abandoning themselves to Mercy. They had to bear with daylong unpleasant remarks in house, they felt the humiliation of being fingered as « Watch out, cactus! » and to constantly ask to be forgiven for their ups and downs... They also wondered why life seems so easy for «everybody else»... They silently cried in their prayers, they beseeched God to free them from their temper and they were heard « My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness»<sup>10</sup>. They kept their thorns but at the same time, they remained faithful to their vocation for and against everything, well aware that every cactus hides in its core an invaluable drop of water which flows from God and returns to God... They understood that this drop of water

originates from their heart-to-heart with Mercy, the source of their lives' fertility – fertility hidden from human eyes, but vitally true in the Communion of Saints. Once they are deprived of their ability to *do*, once powerless, paralyzed and dependent, they can only let themselves go, as they have always secretly done beyond their surly appearance. Their weaknesses disclosed them the Grace: they welcome care in the same way they welcomed Mercy...

## Accept difference or a Symphony Orchestra

Recently at an international meeting, a Sister told me in confidence: «Difference is often considered source of richness, well personally, I am proud to admit I feel more comfortable with people like me ! Difference upsets me and wears me: I want to promote the richness of similarity». A provocation? Clearly. However, should we simply sweep it aside? Isn't it rather an open assertion of what many think in themselves? What about the saying in popular wisdom «birds of a feather flock together»?

It is a fact that instinctively people do not like difference. It is disturbing. It means living with people we haven't chosen, who have a different approach to reality, who think , act differently, people from other generations or nationalities, with a different education or theological formation... Such variety is destabilizing since it questions our way of looking at things. Simply by looking around us (and our communities), when faced with someone different, often the first reaction is to dominate the other –the weakest must surrender through segregation –let's keep the other at some distance; or eliminate the other – since you upset me, you must be quiet and vanish.

Is it therefore impossible for different people to live together in communion? The image of a symphony orchestra, often mentioned<sup>11</sup>, would prove the opposite... Impossible, No. Difficult, Yes. Communion, like harmony is the fruit of a long, demanding and persistent effort... The Gospel is our symphony; Christ is both the composer and the director – even more He is Music personified; each of us plays one's partition (at His place which belongs to Him); the quality of the ensemble is not only the result of an individual effort but of the love we all have for music, of the desire to follow our Director, aiming at achieving symphonic beauty. If a musician wants to play louder, or does not listen to the other, if a triangle envies the role of an oboe, if a piano spends more time in criticizing the others instead of playing or if the first violin (= the principal, the one guiding the movement) is convinced to be the director... there is no hope for a successful symphony!

It is interesting to stress that one of the most frequent comments made at the end of our Chapters or Assemblies is: «What unites us is more important than what divides us». We underline the fraternal atmosphere, the mutual

listening, the search for a common good, the quality of liturgy, our devotion to our Charisma, our joy to be consecrated... Such gatherings among us are privileged moments of Grace since we can go back to the source of our vocation and live a strong moment of communion, regardless of our differences... At last we go back to what is essential: the symphony we are called to play all together. They represent an opportunity to question us once more on what do we *really* want to do in our life: a journey of individual ambition or a *sequela Christi* where we invite the others to join and walk together towards eternal communion?

### « Duc in altum »

The invitation of Pope Francis to become experts in communion brings us before the magnificence of our vocation, with its full beauty as well as all its demands. We are called to live in depth, in the inner core where Trinity resides, where we are surrounded by Mercy and where the Spirit of Love overwhelms us with its gifts... To live in depth, means to overcome what's upsetting, impulsive reactions, prejudices, sensitiveness, to dive deep into our will, where we *decide* to love. It implies a permanent decision to renew, just as we regularly reconfirm our *yes* to consecration. To live in depth means to understand that we are only ones who must change and who must take seriously the daily call to conversion, to listening He Who is «gentle and humble in heart»<sup>12</sup>. To live in depth, implies being convinced that «absolute similarity is sterile. Exchange is creative. Otherness is fundamental to live in communion. Wonder involves difference»<sup>13</sup>. God intentionally *made us* different in order to need the others and thus live in communion<sup>14</sup> : let's keep this in mind when we pray « thy will be done» ! God's will is my holiness, my brothers and sisters' holiness, it is our endless happiness in communion... Let's progress « into deep waters »<sup>15</sup>, and let's sincerely accept each other, not simply by preparing a local dish on a Birthday or to include in our liturgy a folk dance at offertory...

We can ask ourselves, for instance: which is the level of communication among us? Some communities are happy with a mere exchange of information concerning their daily organization. Being familiar with life in common, we mutually respect each other, roles are assigned according to individual skills and affinities in order to avoid invading others' field of action which allows us to move forward with limited frictions...but it is by no means a life in communion. To live in depth, implies taking the risk of expressing our thoughts or feelings, aware that we expose ourselves to disagreement, misunderstanding or being judged by our brothers and sisters. It is an essential risk to live in communion, since expressing our thoughts and feelings is a way of giving ourselves to our brothers and sisters and by listening to what they want to share about themselves, is a way of accepting them. It requires great freedom (therefore humility); an open spirit, availability to exchange views; an open

heart to understand and relate; it requires full mutual trust, which must be rooted in prayer – under the look of Who chose us and united us – It requires a heart in peace to look at others with that true love which makes him live and grow, the look of wonder before God's work on us. Peace of heart comes from the absolute certainty that we are infinitely loved for what we are: certainty based on listening the Word of God, which penetrates in the prayer of adoration, nourished with the Eucharist...

For a supernatural reality, supernatural means ! Communion is a gift from the Above: let's invoke it in praying *Our Father*; let's daily invoke the Spirit of Communion forcefully and with persistence<sup>16</sup>, to teach us to love; let's follow the Virgin Mary, our Lady of Welcome in being humble and available... In order to become experts in Communion, let's be open to renewal, to rediscover the Grace of our religious consecration, let's further open our hearts to the free and merciful Love of our Lord, in order to transform our lives into the Eucharist, in other words, into both a gift of all ourselves as well as a constant thanksgiving.

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic letter to all consecrated*, 21 November 2014, § 1.2.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 21.

<sup>3</sup> See. Jn 15, 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do... but how much love we put in that action".

<sup>5</sup> Strangely enough, papers on spirituality are abundant while few are those on acceptance studied as an integral part of love. Curieusement, alors que les ouvrages de spiritualité sur le don sont très nombreux, rares sont les études consacrées à l'accueil en tant que dimension intégrante de l'amour.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *Poetry*, Cerf DDB, 1979, p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> Lc 18, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A Carthusian, *Towards Spiritual Maturity (Vers la maturité spirituelle)*, Publisher de la Renaissance, 2002, pg. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ps 131 (130), 2 ; Mt 18, 3.

<sup>10</sup> 2Co 12, 9.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance the *Speech* of Pope Francis before the participants at the 37th National Convocation of the Renewal in the Holy Spirit at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on June 1, 2014. In early centuries, well before the existence of orchestras, the Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Ignatius of Antioch and Saint Athanasius had compared communion within the Church to harmony among choir singers.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 11, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Noël Bezançon, (*God is not alone Dieu n'est pas solitaire*, Paris, DDB, 1999, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Saint Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, n. 148.

<sup>15</sup> Lc 5, 4.

<sup>16</sup> "Walk by the Holy Spirit... This is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5, 16.22-23.) Let's not pray the Spirit only when taking decisions or during our gatherings !

IS THERE A MYSTICISM OF  
FRONTIERS?  
WHICH FRONTIERS SHOULD RELIGIOUS  
LIFE CROSS?

Sr. Pepa Torres Pérez, Ap.C.J

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*Original in Spanish*

*To survive at Frontiers one must live without frontiers  
and be a crossroads. (Gloria Anzaldúa)*

**T**he debate on frontiers cannot be abstract or neutral but must be centered on their actual role and in particular, on those who jeopardize their life in trying to cross them. Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to reinforce our motivations in the inter-congregational commitment against frontiers and to go beyond their definition as a mere physical, geographical or political reality. Indeed they are also a privileged "locus" which can generate new identities: frontier identities.

### **Frontiers and its meaning. A Frontier as identity**

Frontiers are a tangible, both physical and political reality which separates. While many view them as an insurmountable obstacle, others consider them a great opportunity. They are places of death and where Human Rights are violated as is occurring in the Mediterranean, its depths are the biggest world mass grave. They are also a powerful example of capitalistic perversity, which allows for the free movement of goods but not of people. They are abandoned to their fate in deep

waters, by denying them both hospitality and humanitarian aid, as unfortunately occurs every day<sup>1</sup> and by destroying illegal camps where people organize themselves to cross frontiers, as is the case at Mount Gurugu in the Southern border of Europe<sup>2</sup>

Frontiers are also a business, not only for mafias but for governments too as denounced by the French journalist Claire Rodier in her book *'Xenophobia Business'*<sup>3</sup>. There are *visible borders* such as the 14 km separating Tangier and Tarifa or Ceuta as well as the Melilla border fence with its twists and turns but there are also *invisible borders*, just as effective in terms of perversity and control, such as the criminalization of migration stigmatized as a threat to the European fortress or as scapegoat for the crisis. A powerful invisible border is institutionalized racism fueling racist roundups, or healthcare exclusion and granting *first class* citizenship to locals and *second or third class citizenship to migrants*<sup>4</sup> even when they are nationals, as declared by Hiba, a friend from Morocco who has been living in Spain for 20 years: 'When do you stop being a foreigner? Invisible frontiers which daily oblige women to migrate and be exiled as happened to the many asylum-seekers like Maria Zambrano<sup>5</sup>, a philosopher from Malaga:

*"...I knew beforehand that upon entering a city, however merciful are its inhabitants, however benevolent is its king's smile, we would not be given the key to our house. Nobody ever approached us saying: 'this is the key to your house, just come in.*

*There were people who opened their door and invited us at their table, to enjoy and plenty more. We were invited and were guests. But we were not asking for this. We were asking them to allow us to give, since we brought something they did not have. It is something belonging only to who has been uprooted, is a vagabond, who suddenly remains empty-handed on this land, who has felt the weight of the overarching sky"*

However, frontiers are also a place where one can transgress and disobey an unfair order, a place of resilience and creativity producing melting pots, building complicity and creating alternative ways of living. It is a place where God is revealed, proclaiming that *love exists* and is incarnated, descending into human hell similar to what frontiers are in many ways. Indeed, borders are also the cry of God before the unfair structural disorder of our world. Hence, the Christian God is a border God as declares the theologian Mercedes Navarro: *"I believe in a border God Who at night is on both banks in Madrid, Paris, Rome and New York, the Rwandan or Bosnian, the Muslim or Palestinian border God..."*<sup>6</sup> and I add, *the God encouraging and supporting us in the fight against*

*borders because no human being can be illegal.*

Therefore, when accepting this confession of faith as religious life, we become *citizens at frontiers* not to legitimate them, but rather to abolish them as enclaves of suffering, of ‘institutionalized’ injustice and violence, like Jesus did – paradigm of a frontier identity.

## **Jesus: a Frontier Identity**

The Gospel of Matthew narrates how Jesus and his family were forced to migrate to Egypt in order to escape a genocide prescribed by an unfair law (Mt 2,14-15), just as occurs to many families today worldwide. Jesus spent his life permanently traveling, crossing borders but not to legitimise them but to overcome them and to proclaim the universality of the Gospel’s Good News and to convert borders into *bridges and meeting points*. This life experience leads us too in crossing borders and being crossed by them.

Some years ago a Basque friend taught me the meaning of the word “mugalari” in his language: it refers to those men and women who assist in crossing borders at night, who build bridges instead of raising barriers and walls. But in order to build a bridge *one must act where the divide is deepening thus increasing separation*. It is also necessary to experience the vertigo caused by the challenge of diversity and of discernment between legality and justice and *to go beyond the politically and religiously correct* since at stake are human dignity and the plentiful lives of the poor among the poor, as the Spanish Bishops defined migrants in the document ‘*Serving the poor*’. Therefore, to build a bridge one needs solid concrete, an identity lived and acknowledged not as an iron cast reality but rather open, nomadic identities aware that what we are is not enclosed and that human dignity comes before enforced laws and that the *right to have rights*, independently of the birthplace, is a way to claim and experience love’s political and civil dimensions.

Jesus is the *mugalari* par excellence, the mediator: “*He, Who transformed two into One, knocking down with his own body the dividing wall of hostility; setting aside in his flesh the law with its provisions and rules, thus creating in Himself one new humanity out of the two. Consequently, nobody is no longer a foreigner or a stranger but a fellow and consecrated citizen among the people of God (Ephesians 2, 14, 1)*. Therefore, welcoming immigrants is one of the distinguishing traits of Christian faith since Christ identifies Himself with them (Mt 25, 41). Hence, frontiers are more than a simple place. Frontiers represent an identity which gradually converts us into a “*passage*”, a “*bridge*”, “*approaching banks and differences*

and which configures us. According to José Luis Sampedro<sup>7</sup>, when a frontier is seen as a human metaphor, one can identify two lifestyles or even two identities: a central and a frontier one.

According to this author, the frontier identity refers to the unknown, to what is different sensed as an opportunity and a challenge to the extent of putting at stake one's life. Indeed, however high, frontiers do not prevent ignoring what is beyond them nor remaining indifferent. Whereas, the central stand, "one's own belly" becomes the only world. A frontier identity is mainly ambivalent and on the edge because it swings between the original source and what's new. Also when drawn towards the center it remains borderline which explains its openness and dynamism towards what's different and unpredictable. Conversely, a central identity is more stable, reluctant or even against such mobility, because it feels it can undermine the overall essence, of which it is the traditional guardian. When its authority loosens and surrenders to the temptation of crossing borders, the only aim is to extend its jurisdiction and to impose its perspective and cosmic vision. Its dynamism aims more at preserving rather than at changing and often it prefers injustice to disorder.

On the other hand, looking at both reality and at the metaphor of frontiers from a female perspective, adds to it new powerful symbolic and political meanings, due to the consequences suffered in the bodies of those who venture to cross them<sup>8</sup>. However, since Postcolonial Feminism, frontiers are viewed as testbeds and "warehouses" which challenge us to overcome fear towards the "impure" and melting pots, fear to "be crossed" and to cross. As a consequence, walking through frontiers and actively residing in them, induces us to violate its law of exclusion and to open up to its liminal innovation as crossroads of ideas, cosmic visions, feelings, struggles and complicity common in life. Along these lines, authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa refer to "frontier identities"<sup>9</sup> when describing the situation of the many women living at cultural, social, gender, race, sex and class frontier crossroads and the need to open our mind and lifestyle to a new insight into differences, not to isolate but as source of new tactics and strategies to combat patriarchal authority, racism and economic oppression.

In the Church too, religious life begins with a frontier-based vocation. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and of human liberty to serve the Kingdom at the world borders, where there are human divisions and to be the humble expression that in God's heart there is no inside or outside, nor peripheries. This is our origin and fundamental meaning. For this very reason, frontiers are the vital background of religious life

and can also gradually transform our identity into a *frontier identity*. Jesus is the quintessential frontier identity. The universal love experienced and received in His identification with the Father (Abbá) and stretched to the physical (geographical, political) as well as religious and symbolic frontiers of His time in order to cross them. During this journey, He often meets women who challenge Him to cross borders, due to their condition of outcast and of outlaw: the Samaritan (Jn 4,5-24), the haemorrhaging woman (Mt 5,21-43), the Syro-Phoenician (Mt 15,21-28), the woman of the perfume (Lk 7, 36-39; 44-50) etc. With these women, the wall of lawfulness and of “politically and religiously correct” comes down and Jesus too is affected by this new crossing, but they become the icon of the universal merciful love of God. In particular, through the Samaritan and the Syro-Phoenician women, we can discover some fundamental aspects to live a mysticism from the borders.

### **Crossing over borders with the Samaritan (Jn 4, 5-42)**

The striking aspect of this text is the intention of Jesus to cross Samaria, a cultural and religious borderline that no good Jew should ever cross to avoid becoming impure, while Jesus does not fear to expose His faith and His cultural identity to dialogue with different cultures, on the contrary, he goes for it. Diversity is not viewed as a threat but rather as an opportunity of encounter and of contact. In so doing, Jesus breaks with taboos and prejudices against those who were considered enemies of Faith or who deny the cultural identity of Israel. His look goes beyond the prevailing stereotypes and captures the intrinsic mystery of human dignity which lays deep into the human heart and is at the root of cultures. Nor is He afraid to simply show His own Truth and vulnerability by revealing his needs: *...Jesus, tired and seated by the well, addresses the Samaritan woman and tells her ‘give me water’ which corresponds to saying “Help me, I need to quench the thirst for Justice and Fraternity in our world”* and He is confident, talking to a woman *as one’s equal*, with no superiority, no discrimination based on race, religion or sex, unconcerned by her opaque past. It is an unbiased treatment: the relationship dives deep, based on listening and respect, which discloses to the woman her deepest truth unveiling unknown aspects of herself and of mystery to the extent that she dares to ask: *How can I truly worship God?* Jesus’ reply dismantles all religious and cultural exclusivism: God is worshipped in Truth and in Spirit, where authenticity and transparency lie, where truth shines, where the most genuine and deep traits of human beings reside. There are no privileged places or spaces but rather a fundamental attitude and way of living :

*live in Truth and in Spirit* is at the reach of all human beings, civilizations and cultures in the world. This experience of encounter radically transforms the woman and she becomes the cradle of God's mercy with mankind.

The encounter between Christ and this woman reminds us about a first barrier pending to be crossed in religious life: the border between our personal, Western world that we consider the best and only human one and the other with its diversity (different religion, culture, continent and race) that we view as a threat or as subordinate. In other words, we live together in separate worlds, isolated, instead of *a world which embraces many worlds* – as defined by the 'Zapatistas' and where everything is interdependent.

This frontier is also related with building what is in common from what is different. In other terms, it entails widening our horizon to melting pots, to different ways of being and acting. One should adhere fearlessly to the *-inter* culture for the pleasure of being in communion, which is not equal to what is identical, but rather *to weave communion starting from our human differences*, being brothers at the image and likeness of God, as individuals with opportunities, responsibilities and rights, regardless our birthplace where no life has more value than other.

The Lord of Jesus is the Lord Friendship, the Communion of Love. Therefore, proclaiming and following the Lord throughout history leads us to welcome diversity, as expression of His Epyphany, as players in *the vital dynamics of Inter-:* intercultural, interreligious, intergenerational, intercongregational etc. and to progress into new ways of life and mission shared with other men and women i.e. to *jointly* listen to God's whisper in the most forlorn people and cultures. Those of us who are following this path in their life realize that our identities are not watered-down; on the contrary, they are enriched and broadened by adding new features and aspects through our dialogue with the other which also makes us more humble and grateful for the gifts received.

### **Crossing over borders with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mt 15,21-28)**

Jesus encounters this woman crossing borders: at a geographical border, an existential border (the anguish for her daughter's illness), a religious and cultural border (she is pagan and woman while Jesus is Jew and man). Jesus shares the same values as his people in coping with reality, for this reason, at first, He finds unacceptable the behaviour of this woman imposing herself and demanding to heal her ill daughter.

Jesus is disturbed since the way she approaches was a transgression at that time. The woman's behaviour is unacceptable under the Jewish religious, cultural and androcentric standards and Jesus is induced to believe and declare: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" (Mt 15,21-28). One could venture to affirm that at first, Jesus did not understand the woman's request: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" "(Mt 15,26), which explains his harsh reply. He replies with a unconscious introjection, a cliché, a typical manner within that ethnocentric society.

However, besides this first spontaneous reaction, the actual reality of this woman in body and flesh: her dignity, her suffering, her bluntness and genuine awareness testify that the Good News belongs to God and cannot be the monopoly of any given culture, religion or gender, on the contrary it belongs to everybody and it broadens the world's horizon. What this encounter teaches us about Jesus of Nazareth and about ourselves is that no identity is enclosed but that we are "identities in-progress" "metamorphic identities" changing at every encounter with those who are different and namely the outcast.

The reading presents us Jesus changing, learning, adapting his way of understanding reality and salvation. His identity is not enclosed, on the contrary, it is constantly being forged by reality and through His encounters with people, during which the Father (Abba) reveals new traits of His mercy. The convincing arguments of this woman with her dignity and suffering as well as the way she copes with it and searches for alternative solutions, *put to test* Jesus' way of understanding and his models. In Matthew's Gospel, the encounter of Jesus with this woman marks a before and an after. It breaks with Israel's monopoly. Thereinafter, texts underline a new order Jesus has introduced as an order which dismantles every barrier and eliminates elitism including religious ones.

In both texts, Jesus crosses religious, cultural and gender borders but in full respect, acknowledging *the other*, in this case in particular, *the other women*, as *counterparts on an equal footing*. It is not a self-referential monologue but rather a dialogue and within such dialogue, it is fundamental to listen and be affected by the reality of others. Jesus' approach is not to assert a dogma but rather to be influenced and involved in the mutual encounter. Jesus' fraternal reaction is moved by the suffering of people and their desire to be liberated, by the broken dignity of brothers and sisters, the inner law of charity ( Rm 13,8.10). The only law for Jesus is the Commandment of Love. His entire life testifies His obedience to a God Who is Love and through incarnation became *disobedient to the lack of love, violence and injustice*, His *Yes*

is the result of many *No*. By following Jesus, we say *Yes to love* and this requires to say *No* and to disobey unjust civil laws.

The meeting of Jesus and this foreign pagan woman urges us to place a person's dignity before any rule or regulation, any monetary, political and business interests, since seldom the legal framework is just and because *no human being can be declared illegal or can be considered an alien*. In conclusion, it is urgent to recover the political dimension of love and in concrete terms, we should welcome, be hospitable and share our food from this very same perspective. We must join forces through social networks by sharing our life, struggles, dreams, bonds and affinities with those crossing borders and denouncing their violence.

Prophetic voices such as the one of Monsignor Agrelo, Brother and Bishop of Tanger, resound from frontiers, reminding us that

*"Believers are called to experience the dehumanized perversion of a frontier and to side with victims. The Grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit urge us -witnesses of a new humanity- to take on our responsibilities before the poor and before the Gospel which we received for them. Perversion at these borders is not episodic, just as injustice, violence, exploitation and arrogance which have turned borders into places of death. Our borders are cementaries which never close; one simply does not know who or how many will be the ones to be added at its list of deceased."*<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, we cannot be indifferent to the dynamics of violence and injustice in our world, but act as Pope Francis<sup>11</sup> encourages us to do. The Church and all its member Communities are called to overcome frontiers and proclaim the maternal and caring love of God for the entire Humanity. Although, *caring, protecting, assisting, alleviating pain* in the Samaritan way, are the mission of religious life at frontiers (Lk 10,25-37). Other tasks are also included such as denouncing, demanding, claiming that freedom, human and social rights are not the property of a few while the majority are left with crumbs. Consequently, as the Syro-Phoenician woman, we too must go beyond the politically correct and engage in the ministry of indignation and prosecution because no human being is illegal and citizenship is a universal right. Indeed no barbed wire however spiky its spires are can stop people from being hungry or struggle for survival. In crossing such barriers, God appears to us as the "newly incarnated".<sup>12</sup>

I conclude with a poem we chose to end a city rally against Repatriation on the spot held in Madrid on December 2014. It must be interpreted in the framework of disobedience to the 'Mordaza Law':

*We will welcome  
those coming from the sea or jumping the fence  
Jeopardizing their lives in the attempt.  
Lost, hurt, beaten,  
before the global indifference of those playing golf,  
unperturbed, inhuman...  
Before lawmakers or law enforcement agents  
who pretend to turn us into new slaves.*

*We will welcome  
as defiant accomplices, embracing  
those arriving with a bewildered look , but with a compass  
in their sleepless heart  
and standing straight in spite of all....*

*One by one we will caress their scars  
And their pain and our memory will be forever  
for those who will never return,  
drown in the waters or fallen under the blows,  
while far away  
the arms remain empty after so much waiting.*

*We will welcome  
Those who arrive and bear dreams of a borderless world,  
just like for us on this side ....  
So that there will be only one side.  
And our hug will be complicit and stronger than barbed wires  
because at the shout of "Bossa" we will dismantle them forever....*

<sup>1</sup> After the conclusion of the Mare Nostrum Operation on November 2014, the Triton Operation managed by Frontex gives priority to protecting frontiers rather than saving human lives. See *Report on Human Rights at the Southern Borders, 2015*, Human Rights Association of Andalusia.

<sup>2</sup> Additional information to be found in *Vidas en la frontera Sur*, a Report of the Migrants' Jesuits' Service, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Claire RODIER, *El negocio de la xenofobia, ¿Para qué sirven los controles migratorios?*, Clave Intelectual, Madrid, 2013.

- <sup>4</sup> Read documented information in the *III Informe de las Brigadas Vecinales de Observación de los Derechos Humanos (2012-2014)*, at <http://brigadasvecinales.org> y por la plataforma *Yo si sanidad universal*, en <http://sanidaduniversal.net>
- <sup>5</sup> María ZAMBRANO, *la tumba de Antígona*,
- <sup>6</sup> Mercedes NAVARRO, *Siete palabras de Mercedes Navarro*, Madrid, PPC, 1996, 92.
- <sup>7</sup> I am following in these reflections, the ideas of José Luis Sampedro in his admission speech at the 'Real Academia de lengua', [http://www.rae.es/sites/default/files/Discurso\\_Ingreso\\_Jose\\_Luis\\_Sampedro](http://www.rae.es/sites/default/files/Discurso_Ingreso_Jose_Luis_Sampedro)
- <sup>8</sup> Sonia HERRERA, *Atrapadas en el Limbo. Mujeres, migraciones violencia sexual*, Writings on Christianity and Justice, 187, Barcelona, 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> Gloria ANZALDÚA, "Los movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan", in AAVV, *Otras inapropiables. Feminismos desde las fronteras*. Madrid, Traficantes de sueños, 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> Santiago AGRELO, *Con Cristo contra las fronteras*; in <http://www.vidareligiosa.es/blogs/guantedeseda/>
- <sup>11</sup> "Iglesia sin fronteras, madre de todos". Message of the Holy Father at the World Day for Migrants and Refugees, 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, Santander, 1990.

## UISG PLENARY ASSEMBLY 2016

May 9-13, 2016

**Location: Hotel Ergife, Rome**

**Theme: Weaving Global Solidarity for Life.**

1. Global Solidarity for life..... for the Planet
2. Global Solidarity for life.....with those living on the margins
3. Global Solidarity for life.....through our collaborative living and witnessing as women religious

*During the Plenary Assembly we will celebrate the Jubilee of UISG and have an audience with Pope Francis*

***We look forward to welcoming you to Rome.***

## UISG Jubilee 1965-2015

UISG is celebrating 50 years of international service of women's religious life. On the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1965, as the Second Vatican Council was coming to a close, the Council Fathers and the Sacred Congregation for Religious (SCR) recognized the need for an international forum for women religious who were beginning a process of renewal. Since its onset, UISG aimed at establishing an international forum to promote dialogue between women religious, the institutional Church and international organizations.

The Jubilee will start on **December 12, 2015** with a Eucharist at the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome, celebrated by the Prefect of the Consecrated Life Ministry, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz. The Jubilee will conclude at the UISG General Assembly, which will be held from May 9-13, 2016 in Rome. We have designed a logo for the Jubilee Celebrations and we ask you to use it on your websites, publications etc. We are also preparing a history of the journey of religious women as experienced in UISG. This is a time of celebration and thanksgiving and a reminder of the prophetic role of UISG and its members.

### **“A new visibility for UISG”: A Communication Desk**

On September 1st, we warmly welcomed a new UISG staff member, Patrizia Morgante, who has taken up the position of communication officer. Her task is “To make UISG more visible in the Church and the World”. Patrizia is a lay woman, an educator and counselor, with a Baccalaureate in the Social Sciences and a STUDIUM Diploma (a two-year course on consecrated life). She has been working in the religious life world since 2000, mainly in the field of communication with a special focus on the consecrated life of women religious.

Communication today is an integral part of our mission as consecrated women: it is important for all of us to learn how, where and through which channels to disseminate our message outside of UISG but also within our organization. The aim is “*to build bridges overcoming gaps, borders and frontiers and allow members to communicate among themselves, to create communities and to live in communion.*” Among its first challenges the Communication Desk will organize the UISG Jubilee (1965-2015)

and the next Plenary Assembly which will take place from May 9-13, 2016 in Rome.

Your opinion as UISG members will be very helpful to help us to make our communications more effective; we therefore kindly invite you to answer a few questions and to send your replies and suggestions to the office by email:

1. In your opinion, what could improve exchange of information between UISG members?
2. What do you expect to find on the UISG website?
3. We are looking for a few words to summarizing the identity of UISG: can you suggest 3 words which are significant for you?

Thank you for your collaboration!

If your Congregation, has a sister in charge of communication or a particularly skilled person in this field, we kindly ask you to send us her name in order to streamline communications between our office and yours.

To access Patrizia Morgante, at the Communication Desk, please email her at: *communication.uisg@gmail.com*; or phone at: +39 0668.400.234, +39 3280722672

## **Social Networks attractiveness: UISG has a Facebook page**

We have opened a UISG facebook page as a first step to interact with our various audiences. There will other means of communication, but for the time being, it allows us to track reactions from our readers to any news posted. The message we are hoping to convey is that our mission as religious has inter-congregational, inter-cultural and international dimensions.

This is the facebook address:

*www.facebook.com/UISGInternationalUnionSuperiorsGeneral.*

If you have a personal facebook profile, you can click on LIKE to automatically receive updates or you can simply read news published. We ask you to invite the sisters in your Congregation to follow the facebook page and to share the UISG news through your various communication channels.

## **French Language Section**

We are very pleased to welcome a new staff member to the French

language section of UISG. Sr. Laurence Zaninka AP from Rwanda, a religious of the Society of Helpers, has lived in Italy for many years. She has a Licentiate in Science with particular focus on formation in a religious life context and in moral theology at the Theological Faculty of Italia Settentrionale (Milan). She has written her thesis on the education of younger generations in living the virtue of chastity, as well as the juxtaposition of chastity/sexuality in contemporary female religious life.

Sr. Laurence has for many years accompanying religious women, in collaboration with the Centre for Vocations in the diocese of Milan. She has visited Africa, during the past 10 years, helping various congregations to set up processes for the formation, education and accompaniment of new candidates in religious and priestly life and to accompany religious men and women and communities. She has also been involved in the formation, accompaniment and supervision of formators in some African countries and in Italy. She has collaborated with the Jesuits in Italy in giving the Spiritual Exercises.

### **UISG Migrants Project: Sisters on the Road**

It is with the great joy that we have welcomed ten sisters (from different countries, cultures and charisms) to serve in the UISG Migrants Project. They will represent the UISG's first inter-congregational, inter-cultural and international community in Sicily. The Community will be divided into two, present in the Dioceses of Agrigento and of Caltagirone. This community will act as a "bridge" between the local community and migrants. The group is attending a two-month formation programme in Rome before leaving for Sicily in December 2015. The programme is centered on various aspects including community building, Italian and English languages, the characteristics and causes of migration and the local Sicilian reality. Sister Elisabetta Flick, UISG Migrants Project Coordinator explained the focus of the project as follows: *"Cardinal Montenegro has invited us to provide special care to the homeless, to be closer to them, to work and build a bridge between the foreigner and local people to weave a relationship of communion and contact. We are asked to set up international communities to favour relationship with migrants, not simply to help with first aid, because we must move one step further to be mutually enriched and acknowledge other cultures. A community is a testimony that we can live together despite our differences"*.

Three Women Religious, representing UISG, attended the Synod on the Family (October 4-25 2015) as auditors.

Pope Francis choose three women religious to represent UISG at the Synod. They are as follows: the UISG President, **Sr. Carmen Sammut**, msola (Malta) ; **Sr. Maureen Kelleher**, a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (USA) and **Sr. Berta Maria Porras Fallas**, a Tertiary Capuchin from Costa Rica. The three women religious brought the voice of consecrated women to the Synod and shared their unique missionary experience in various fields - education, inter-religious dialogue and human rights. On October 26<sup>th</sup> Sr. Carmen shared her reflections on the Synod giving her perspective from the back bench! The audio file of Sr. Carmen's talk is available. Please contact [communication.uisg@gmail.com](mailto:communication.uisg@gmail.com) for information on how to download the file.

### **The UISG-USG Health Commission**

The UISG/USG Health Commission held an important meeting “Laity and Religious: Beyond Needs- Transmitting Charism” on October 7. About fifty lay people and religious, who are all involved in different roles in the field of Health Pastoral Care attended. The meeting aimed at listening to relevant experiences in transmitting charism to lay people and the practical steps taken to implement this development. Key elements of such experiences were presented to encourage others to replicate them in a creative way. Don Pino in his opening speech declared the following: “Among the various common problems affecting religious life today, for us as health care workers, is the challenge to transform our activities into means of evangelization and not allow ourselves to be limited to providing social services.” For more information and contact with the Health Commission contact the following email: [dgiusti2008@gmail.com](mailto:dgiusti2008@gmail.com)

### **Talitha Kum: Against Trafficking in Persons Project of UISG**

“Little girl, I say to you, arise”. Sr. Gabriella Bottani, coordinator of Talitha Kum project of UISG, gave a talk during the International Symposium on the Pastoral Care of The Road/Street, held in Rome in September. “Talitha Kum is a powerful phrase. It calls to mind the transformative power of compassion and mercy. It awakens us from the slumber of passivity, resignation and indifference. The Talitha Kum project was also presented during the World Meeting of Young Consecrated Persons, held in Rome for the Year of Consecrated Life. Volunteers ran workshops in different languages on Trafficking in Persons for nearly 400 young consecrated people on the effects, causes and characteristics of an increasing phenomenon which destroys the dignity of human beings. The Religious

women who work in Refugees Centers or Prisons shared with participants the suffering of trafficked people they had met and the marvelous witness when some of them are able to build a new life.

Sr. Gabriella can help you join other religious in the Talitha Kum network in your part of the world. If you

are interested please contact her at the following email:  
[uisg\\_talithakum@yahoo.it](mailto:uisg_talithakum@yahoo.it)

## **The UISG-USG Commission on Inter-Religious Dialogue**

The Commission held its third dialogue event on October 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Generalate of the Passionist Fathers in Rome. The speaker was Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald who spent many years as Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. The title of his talk was *Nostra Aetate: A Guide for Ongoing Dialogue*. He presented the origins and content of the document *Nostra Aetate*, and then went on to present the work of the Pontifical Council set up to promote the new vision embodied in this document. He also focused on other documents produced by this dicastery for dialogue. Drawing on his immense experience in this field, Archbishop Fitzgerald spoke about the importance of dialogue at many different levels and suggested that “relationship building” might in fact be a more helpful term when referring to the many ways in ordinary daily life that people of different faiths live and work together. A copy of his talk is available in English at the UISG office: [uisgital@uisg.org](mailto:uisgital@uisg.org).

## **Other News from UISG**

The Executive Secretary, Sr. Patricia Murray ibvm, and members of the Executive Board of UISG attended a number of meetings of religious during these past months. These included the CLAR Assembly (Bogota); the LCWR Assembly (Houston); the European Catholic Chinese Colloquium (Warsaw); the conference on “The Global Call of Religious Life Today” at the Centre for the Study of Religious Life (Chicago). These were all important moments for reflecting on the various ways in religious women and men are living out the prophetic nature of their vocation in different contexts.

## **Farewell to Sr. Jacinta**

Sister Jacinta Schoenmakers JMJ, died on Monday, October 26, 2015. For thirty years she has been one of the collaborators and the translator

for the Dutch language at the UISG in Rome. Sr. Jacinta was 84 years old and she suffered from bone cancer. We remember her with great affection and gratitude and we pray God to embrace her in his endless tenderness.

## **Important UISG Staffing Update**

Recently the Executive Board of UISG completed a strategic planning exercise and a review of staffing needs. On the inside of this bulletin you will see a list of the current staff with their areas of expertise and their email addresses. We invite you to contact these staff members directly with any queries that you may have with regard to the bulletin, archival materials, communication, finance etc. **Any queries or questions with regard to UISG membership should be sent to Rosalia Armillotta.** You can also contact directly the persons responsible for the various language areas with any general questions which you may have. We hope that this restructuring will help provide a better service for you - the UISG members worldwide.

**Staff UISG**

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<b>Sr. Nadia Bonaldo, fsp</b>	Webmaster Vidimus Dominum	<i>n.bonaldo@paoline.it</i>

**Please note that staff emails will change in the foreseeable future when we launch our new website – so please check for changes when the website is launched and on the next Bulletin.**