



## **Conclusion of the XXI Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)**

Rome, 6-10 May 2019

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

From 6-10 May 2019, the XXI Plenary Assembly of the UISG took place at the Ergife Hotel in Rome. More than 850 Superiors General from 80 different countries explored the theme “Sowers of Prophetic Hope.” There were five main addresses presented by four women religious and a lay woman on the topics: the future vision of religious life, caring for creation (the implications of *Laudato Si'*), living inter-culturally and the call to engage in interreligious dialogue. During two round tables presentations, participants listened to moving testimonies on the emergence of hope in different contexts. During reflection time at their tables the Superiors had the opportunity to speak about similar challenges within their congregations. The *Superiors General* could attend a series of workshops on *Canon Law, Protection of Minors, Communication, and New Approaches to the Provision of Care for Children* before and after the Plenary. A total of 500 Superiors General participated in these workshops.

The participants were very pleased with the atmosphere of trust and collaboration which permeated the whole assembly. They appreciated the content and felt that the topics chosen responded to the challenges facing various countries. They were grateful for the honest sharing during the table conversations and for the quiet contemplative moments which allowed them to reflect deeply on what was being heard and experienced.

During the Assembly, the Executive Board updated the Plenary participants on the outcome of the two public statements issued by UISG condemning abuse of every kind, including the abuse of women religious. The first statement was issued in November 2018 by UISG and the February 2019 statement was developed with the Union of Superiors General. At the Plenary the Superiors General were alerted to the importance of being aware of the different types of abuses of power that may occur. They were encouraged to begin open conversations with the members of their congregations. The importance of formation was continually stressed so that sisters learn how to confront abuse of any kind.

Sr Carmen Sammut, outgoing UISG President, spoke about the need for new approaches in responding to abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in religious congregations and in the Church. She outlined four concrete initiatives that the UISG is currently exploring: 1) setting up a commission to focus on the multiple dimensions of “the care of persons”; 2) offering workshops on the care of persons and the creation of safe environments; 3) helping member congregations formulate and implement protocols, codes of conduct and safeguarding guidelines in collaboration with the Pontifical Commission on the Protection of Minors; 4) exploring, with Conferences of Religious, the establishment of listening groups of professionals who can offer accompaniment, through the various stages of reporting and healing, to those who have been abused in the Church.

The participants greatly appreciated the presence of Cardinal João Braz de Aviz among them and the time provided to ask questions on various aspects of religious life. The questions ranged from

information about the forthcoming document *Mutuae Relationes*, to the importance of the relationship between sisters and the Dicastery; the challenges connected with the restructuring of congregations, and the particular needs of diocesan congregations. As one of the questions posed to the Cardinal was related to women deacons. Sr Carmen Sammut, who was moderating the session, read the response given the previous day by Pope Francis to a similar question during the press conference on his return flight from North Macedonia.

On the final day of the Plenary, the Superiors General gathered within their UISG Constellation groups (UISG is divided into 36 units or constellations) to plan future action. Each Constellation was asked to choose a concrete action in relation to the UISG Sowing Hope for the Planet Campaign which had been presented during the Plenary. They were also asked to identify a second priority area being promoted by the UISG (inter-religious dialogue, anti-trafficking, intercultural living, protection of minors and vulnerable adults etc.) which they would implement in their region.

The 850 Superiors General met with Pope Francis on the morning of 10 May. Before the audience, the Pope launched the [“Nuns Healing Hearts” Campaign](#) in honour of the 10th anniversary of Talitha Kum, the international network of consecrated life against human trafficking. Pope Francis was visibly moved as he viewed and blessed a gallery of photos taken by internationally renowned photographer Lisa Kristine. *The photos reveal the faces behind this stark, hidden and unjust reality and demonstrate the efforts, sufferings and joys of the women religious involved in this work. The photos will remain on display at the UISG headquarters in Rome until 10 July 2019.*

After this event, Pope Francis entered Paul VI Hall, accompanied by Sr Carmen Sammut and Sr Patricia Murray. With a significant gesture, Pope Francis invited Sr Carmen to sit at his side on an identical chair facing the sisters. In her introduction, Sr Carmen thanked Pope Francis for the audience and *“for your solicitude toward those who suffer and for your desire to guarantee a safe environment to children and vulnerable adults in the Church. She said that the new norms published yesterday in the Motu Proprio demonstrate the seriousness with which the Church, thanks to you, takes this suffering.”*

Sr Carmen assured the Pope of the prayerful support of sisters worldwide as he leads the Church in response to the call of Christ, calling all to repentance and holiness. She thanked the Pope for his response to the question of women deacons adding that *“we bear a question in our heart. What ministries is the Church in need of today so that men and women can offer their specific contribution?”* She ended her introduction by outlining the various themes discussed during the Plenary telling Pope Francis that he is a source of inspiration and encouragement as he continually reminds sisters to live the Gospel call in a more radical way.

Pope Francis responded to each point raised by Sr Carmen. He then initiated an unexpected question and answer session. The first question regarded women deacons. Another sister begged the Pope to provide bishops to the dioceses in South Sudan who are currently without a pastor and asked him on her behalf and on behalf of many others in South Sudan to come visit her country. A third sister asked Pope Francis to speak about interreligious dialogue, an area in which many women religious are active, and finally another suggested that he be present at the next UISG Plenary so that he could *“truly touch the richness and the strength of feminine religious life”*. The audience ended with the Pope saying he would *“take seriously”* the invitation to be present *“in at least one part”* of the next UISG Plenary.

Sr. Carmen Sammut msola (Out Going President)  
Sr. Patricia Murray ibvm (Executive Secretary)

**On May 14 the UISG Delegates elected the new UISG Board for 3 years: 2019-2022**

**Sr. Jolanda Kafka**, Religiose di Maria Immacolata – Missionarie Claretiane

**Sr. Franca Zonta**, Figlie di Maria Immacolata – Marianiste

**Sr. Anabela Carneiro**, Hermanas Hospitalarias del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús

**Sr. Monica M. Ncube**, Suore Missionarie del Preziosissimo Sangue

**Sr. Licia Mazzia**, Suore Francescane dei Poveri

**Sr. Josephine Kane**, Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions

**Sr. Mary Teresa Barron**, Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles

**Sr. Monica Joseph**, Religiosas de Jesús y María

**Sr. Roxanne Schares**, School Sisters of Notre Dame

**Sr. Aurora Torres**, Suore di Maria Riparatrice

**Sr. Luigina Coccia**, Suore Missionarie Comboniane (Substitute)

**Sr. Mary Babic**, Sisters of Our Lady of Sion (Substitute)

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