

**THE EXPERIENCE OF "SORORITY"
IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD**

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PRESENTATION

In this issue of the Bulletin, we wanted to deal more closely with a dramatic aspect of the phenomenon of forced migration in our time: the care for *unaccompanied foreign minors*.

The Church and Consecrated Life are at the forefront in *Protecting children and vulnerable adults*. The care for *unaccompanied foreign minors* fits into this broader context and is a very topical phenomenon. We believe it is very important to know and understand this phenomenon, starting with the causes that determine it and seeing the different perspectives from which it could be studied and addressed.

As women, we have the natural instinct to protect children, and being consecrated we are called to live our lives as “*the presence of Christ’s charity in the midst of humanity*,” to sow hope, and to bring new life in the contexts of poverty and marginalization that our globalized world places before our eyes.

As consecrated women, we, therefore, have much to offer to our suffering humanity, and we do this together, by creating “*sorority*”, forming networks of communion and collaboration that will give us incisiveness and strength, and keep us from falling prey to the temptation of staying away from the wounds of Christ:

“Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people.” EG 270.

Dr. Angela Rinaldi

The migratory experience and human development of "unaccompanied minors"

In terms of human development, the migration of *unaccompanied minors* can be described as a profound educational process. A real awareness of this can lead the people who find themselves dealing with this phenomenon to understand the multifaceted nature of the process of minors’ development. It is a matter of a real “transition from less than human conditions to truly human ones”, as Paul VI affirms. Migration represents this “movement” from less humane to more humane conditions at a physical, psychological, and social level. This concept of development has a strong impact on the person and on all the areas of the social structure, to the extent that the social actors, freed from the “scapegoat” mindset, are able to contribute to their own development and to that of the society in which they live.

Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM

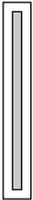
Imagining leadership in a global community

Our communities and congregations are nodal points of a much larger canvas of cultural, historical, and economical dynamics. What happens in one part of the world, or in one congregation or in one part of the congregation, reflects the whole and speaks on behalf of the whole. With that global perspective we begin to realise that the “luxurious diversity” within religious life and our connectivity across the world can make a significant impact. The networks and inter-congregational projects that are emerging today speak prophetically of the oneness of humankind. Many times, in South Sudan the local people - though very grateful for the many ways in which their needs were being met – repeatedly ask the religious living among them “how do you from so many different tribes live together?” This is why it is important to work together and with others in order to learn how to live interculturally, to confronting prejudice and racism and our ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours.

Sr. Anna Sanchez Boira, MHSFN

Sisters in sororal communion in and for the world in the 21st century

Sororal communion in the feminine apostolic religious life is a prophetic sign. The charisms in communion are an expression of the wealth of the Gospel, of the mystery of Christ that each Institute is called to spread by the grace of the Spirit. God evangelizes with us and through us. Now, this is the challenge of apostolic life: to live in the world as sisters and brothers while, in the communion of charisms, announcing the Gospel and making it credible for our time.



THE MIGRATORY EXPERIENCE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS. THE PHENOMENON VIEWED ON THE BASIS OF RENÉ GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY

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Original in Italian

1. Introduction

The problem of *unaccompanied minors* (subsequently also *separated children* or UM's) is an important aspect of the forced migrations taking place today. These are minors who migrate on their own without adults as their points of reference and who come from a multiplicity of countries and have personal stories that are different and extremely complex. They decide to emigrate because of war, poverty, discrimination, and violence, and they wish to reach the developed countries in the hope of being able to construct a better future for themselves.

To introduce the phenomenon, it might be useful to cite excerpts from some documents of the United Nations dealing with the subject of *unaccompanied minors*.

The first is the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which in its preface affirms "that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding [...]" and "that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the

ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity [...]”.

On this basis, the United Nations also gives an official definition of *unaccompanied minor* in the *General Comment No. 6* of 2005 on the *Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin*: an *unaccompanied minor* is a “child [...] who [has] been separated from both parents and other relatives and [is] not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so”.

Therefore, the subjects that we are concerned with are minors who are vulnerable on account of the conditions of their life either in their own countries of origin or in the course of their migration. They migrate either *alone* or in the company of adults who can show themselves to be violent and take advantage of their vulnerability and loneliness.

Moreover, given that the international community recognises the importance of the care of minors and *unaccompanied minors*, it may also be useful to take note of certain ethical principles and practices expressed by the United Nations in the *General Comment No. 6*: the legal obligations of the states party, the principle of non-discrimination, the principle of *non-refoulement*³, the right of minors to express their own vision freely, the right to life, to survival, and to development.

All of these principles can be summed up, so to speak, in the principle of the *best interest* or *superior interest of the minor*, which is set forth in article 3 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being [...]”⁴.

At this point, given its ethical and social importance, this phenomenon ought to be studied from a multiplicity of perspectives, so as to contribute to an enrichment of the scientific discussion and offer new material for reflection for those who deal with these questions in the various countries so as to make possible an action that is at last free from every form of violence.

In view of the political significance of this phenomenon, it might be useful to focus on aspects and controversies of this sort. However, the aims of the present work focus attention on the possibility of proposing a short scientific study of the phenomenon of UM that makes use, among other things, of the mimetic theory of René Girard for the sake of observation. That will suggest an analysis enriched by some fundamental ethical principles to be discussed subsequently.

Of the various theoretical approaches possible, René Girard’s theory of mimesis can in this instance prove to be of use, even though it has been and continues to be the object of criticisms by various scholars, who will not be cited

here in order to make it possible to answer the above-mentioned objectives of observing this phenomenon. We propose to find a link between some aspects of Girard's theory, which have also been highlighted by Michael Kirwan, and the stages of the migratory process of UM.

Moreover, remaining focussed upon the principle of the "right to life, to survival, and to development", which expresses in practical terms the principle of human dignity, we can affirm that migration for *unaccompanied minors* takes on immense significance as a process of human education, the integrity and complexity of which needs to be taken into consideration.

Therefore, it is possible to go forward in this work keeping in mind the principle of human dignity as regards the migratory experience of UM. In so doing, we consider intimately linked to this subject the human development of the person in the terms employed by the social teaching of the Church, especially in Paul VI's encyclical letter of *Populorum progressio*. Moreover, the use of Girard's mimetic theory can be enriched by reference to the principle of the integrity of human development as an ethical basis for the present study, together with certain theories of the social sciences that are able to offer elements important to a better understanding of the process of development of minors.

2. Unaccompanied Minors and Mimetic Desire

For a proper understanding of the phenomenon of unaccompanied minors, it is necessary to focus first of all on the reasons for their migration and to analyze them in relation to a basic component of Girard's theory (*mimetic desire*), which is dealt with in the work *Violence and the Sacred*.

At the root of the migratory process there are the so-called *push and pull factors*. The first of these lead migrants to leave their own countries and families: war, conflict, poverty, discrimination, and social disintegration. The latter transform the country of destination into a "magnet"; for example, UM's who arrive in the "wealthy continent" can contribute to the departure of yet others by sending positive feedback on the "better life" that they lead – and in some cases think they are leading – in the new country⁵.

This theory of push and pull factors had its origins in the 1960s, when Everett Lee developed his Theory of migration, for which in the study of the causes of migration four kinds of factors need to be examined: factors linked to the areas of origin, factors linked to the areas of destination, possible obstacles, and personal factors. All of these act differently from person to person, because every person can exhibit different reactions under different conditions⁶.

When we look at the phenomenon of European migration, we find that the UM's who arrive in Europe pass through Italy, the island of Malta, Greece, and Spain, and they come above all from the countries of Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, e.g. Egypt, Nigeria, Albania, and Afghanistan. They are driven by motivations of different kinds.

a) Egyptian minors set out for Europe because of conflicts and poverty. In 2010-2011, Egypt experienced the “Arab spring”, which brought gave social, political, and economic instability that was worsened by restrictions regarding freedom of expression and association, by arbitrary arrests, and by economic crisis and poverty⁷. All of this resulted in a high rate of scholastic dropout as well as a large number of movements of Egyptian minors towards Europe with the objective of finding work that would enable them to provide financial assistance to their families who had remained at home.

b) Nigerian minors are primarily female – girls and young women – who in the majority of cases fall victim to human trafficking. In recent years, Nigeria has experienced a profound economic crisis, which has been accompanied by a humanitarian crisis, a pronounced insecurity of food, and a high mortality rate. *Unaccompanied minors* from Nigeria come from the more rural parts of the country, they are virtually illiterate, and they suffer various abuses and violence perpetrated by those exploiting them, who are often members of their very own families⁸.

c) The UM’s from Albania leave on account of the breakdown of society and the political and economic insecurity that they experience in their country. According to *Amnesty International*, the measures taken to protect women and girls who suffer abuse in their families are inadequate. Many are victims of trafficking for the purpose of prostitution, and “many unaccompanied minors and families with children are detained in holding centres for irregular immigrants who await deportation”⁹.

d) The Afghan minors are victims of terrorism, war, discrimination, and high rates of malnutrition as well as an extremely low level of instruction and social security. For these reasons, many Afghan families leave en bloc upon the first segment of the migratory route for neighboring countries such as Pakistan. Even there, however, the discrimination is extremely harsh. For example, in Pakistan, Afghan children are denied access to the higher levels of instruction on account of their ethnic group, and, for this reason, they are constrained to emigrate towards Europe – especially England, Germany, Belgium, and the Scandinavian countries – where groups of their fellow-countrymen already reside and are able to offer them significant assistance in the integration of minors, aside from the fact that access to instruction is available without discrimination¹⁰.

Another part of the world to witness the movement of unaccompanied minors is that of the Americas. The minors coming from certain countries in Central America attempt to enter the United States by crossing the border with Mexico. Among these countries figure El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

a) The minors from El Salvador are fleeing from a very violent context, where the homicide rate is the highest in the world and organized crime is very strong. In many cases they do not manage to complete their journey because they are sent back from Mexico or at the border with the USA. Many children set out in order to flee criminal gangs and in the hope of being able to go to school in the United States¹¹.

b) The UM's from Honduras are forced to leave because of the high number of crimes committed, in particular by the gangs of organized crime and also by the security forces during election campaigns. For this reason and on account of the endemic poverty, minors leave – either on their own or with their families – for Mexico and the United States, in search of a better future¹².

c) The minors of Guatemala likewise leave their country on account of the high crime rates, social inequality, and corruption. According to *Amnesty International*, between 2017 and 2018, the group of UM's from Guatemala was the most numerous of those to be turned back at the border with the USA¹³.

A problem that the Guatemalans have in common with the other groups from Central America listed above is the lack of rules and good practices for repatriation. Very often the *unaccompanied minors* turned back at the border of the United States are detained or repatriated with the use of force and without any assistance for their return journey and reintegration in their country of origin.

These practices are at odds with what is foreseen by the European Union: at least on paper, over the years, the EU has established rules for the so-called *Assisted Voluntary Repatriation*, which takes place subsequent to a thorough investigation of the family that illustrates the possibility for the minor to reunited with the family and also assisted with the process of reintegration in the country of provenance.

Moreover, in the Americas, just as in some countries in Europe, the obligation not to detain minors is not respected. According to a report by UNICEF, in 2015 “around 35,000 minors – more than half of them *unaccompanied* – were held in centres of detention in Mexico and the USA¹⁴”. UNICEF reports that in 2014 the United States implemented detention policies for migrants that include women and minors who were in effect detained for various months in the centres specially created, thereby increasing the risk of violence, rape, and abuse for infants and children. For minors there also exist centres and procedures for being able to make a request for asylum. However, these steps take a long time and do not guarantee minors, especially when *unaccompanied*, a positive reception that aims at their actual integration in the country that takes them in. Even in this case, there is an increased risk that they will be expelled from the centres and fall victim to abuse and violence¹⁵.

In addition, in those instances in which UM's awaiting expulsion are allowed to take part in a legal process that might allow them to make their case, it is not always possible for them to be represented by a lawyer. There are lawyers and experts who offer their advice *pro bono*, but with an actual representation in court the possibility of avoiding deportation is extremely slim¹⁶. The American system is effectively saturated to the point that often minors must wait years in order to have a chance to appear before a judge. During that time, in accordance with American law, many of them are not guaranteed access to health, public services, and education¹⁷.

After this brief digression regarding the specific situations of the countries of provenance, we can ask ourselves: how is it possible to explain the *mimetic desire* of UM's? According to Girard's theory, mimetic desire is something that arising as a more or less unconscious imitation of desire for the other, which is in turn taken as a model as well as a mediator between the individual and the thing desired. We can say that the *unaccompanied minor* begins the migratory process by imitating – at first unconsciously – those countrymen and coevals who have already departed and have communicated they have found in the new country everything that they were seeking. Without giving a qualitative judgement regarding this imitation – which is neither positive nor negative for Girard – but focussing on what the UM's imitate or do not imitate, we can observe a “positive imitation” owing to their decision to imitate their countrymen by pursuing the much desired better living conditions that have been reached by the others. For example, in the case of minors fleeing from war and terrorism, it is possible to discern a “positive imitation” of UM's looking for circumstances favorable to survival, which the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* assumes as a basic right of minors. If we look at those *unaccompanied* minors who migrate for economic reasons, it is possible to see their immense effort in imitating parents, who have transferred to their children the weight and responsibility of taking care of the family. Thus, the UM's arrive in the affluent continent – Europe or North America – and they begin to work even in conditions of exploitation so as to be able to send money back to the families remaining in the country of origin.

Another sort of imitation exists between the victims of trafficking and occurs because of the fact that often, unfortunately, the children who travel unaccompanied have as their sole reference point the person exploiting them. In the case of the exploitation of Nigerian girls, some of the older victims of prostitution exploit the “new victims” in order to earn more and pay off their own debt with their exploiter more quickly. In effect, they learn to become exploiters themselves by imitating the traffickers.

Two types of “negative imitation” also need to be noted. The first concerns the process of integration in the country of destination. Indeed, where the systems that they function and are capable of assuring the rights of minors, the UM's decide to respect the rules – for example, the obligation to attend school and have valid documents – and not to imitate to imitate their fellow nationals who opt to enter the circuits of exploitation to earn more money instead of attending school and integrating themselves in the host society.

The second concerns those fellow nationals who, remaining at home, lose the chance to emigrate to a more affluent country. Observing the situation more closely, it is possible to note the refusal of many UM's to remain in their own countries. It is possible to affirm that many of them do not wish to adapt to flawed systems of social and political life, where basic rights are not respected in terms of human, family, and social security. The minors decide not to imitate the system, unlike the others – family, friends, and fellow nationals – who end up remaining in their country.

It might be worthwhile to conduct an empirical study to discover whether there exist (and if so, what sorts) true rivalries among the UM's, interviewing some of them on the subject of their relations with their countrymen and friends. However, if it is true that the question of *unaccompanied minors* concerns many countries, for the present it might be useful to focus on those people especially involved in exploiting *unaccompanied minors*: the traffickers and everyone involved in this system. It is possible to study in more depth collaboration and rivalry as relations between actors who act contrary to the well-being of minors during their migration and upon their arrival, insofar as they are part of the educational process that the minors experience while making their journey towards human development.

According to the data of the United Nations, in 2016, of the total of the victims of human-trafficking, the percentage of children who were victims was around 30-23% for girls and 7% for boys¹⁸. Moreover, there are different kinds of exploitation to which minors are subjected: trafficking for sexual exploitation, trafficking for labour exploitation, trafficking for other purposes such as organ harvesting. According to the United Nations, 72% of the girls were victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, 21% for forced labour, and 7% for other reasons; 27% of the boys were the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, 50% for forced labour, and 23% for other purposes (2016)¹⁹.

In addition, the situation of minors who are the victims of human-trafficking is aggravated by the fact that they are often bound to their exploiters by family relations and ties. That has disastrous consequences for the life and development of these minors.

For all of these reasons, it is important to focus also on the identity of the traffickers, so as to know better the phenomenon under discussion. In the publication *Young Invisible Enslaved. Children Victims of Trafficking and Labour Exploitation in Italy*, the NGO *Save the Children* illustrates the "profile of the European exploiter": two out of three are men, on average aged 35 years; 30% come from Romania, 29% from Nigeria, 16% from Albania, 16% from Italy, 9% from Bulgaria, Serbia, China, and Morocco²⁰. Moreover, according to the NGO, there exists a veritable "production chain" that arises thanks to the existence of a large number of clients in the European countries. The stories of minors who are the victims of trafficking confirm that each person has a particular role to play in this chain, which effectively becomes a proper system.

For example, the criminal network that has arisen between Nigeria and Italy has been organized according to different phases characterized by the presence of individuals with a precise role in the system:

1. "Recruitment in Nigeria": the key figure is that of the "recruiter", who more often than not belongs to the group consisting of the victim's relatives and organizes the initial phases of transferral in Nigeria and Libya.
2. "Transport to Libya": the so-called *boga* and *trolleyman* sell the victims to criminals of different nationalities and shut them up in houses for sorting.
3. "Passage of the victims to the *maman* from Libya to Italy": the *maman*

purchase the victims in the sorting houses and organize their journey to Europe.

4. “Arrival in Italy”: the *controllers* and *lieutenants* are located in the ports of disembarkation, “they notify the traffickers of the victims’ arrival” and they teach them to evade check during the identification process.
5. “Interception by the lieutenants of the *maman* in the reception centres”.
6. “Induction to escape from the structures” so that the victims become invisible and untraceable.
7. “Transferral to the cities planned for exploitation²¹”.

From what has been said thus far, and from what can be read in the various official reports of the agencies of the United Nations, institutions, and the NGO’s, the system has evolved a sort of business where all the actors have a key role that fundamental for the success of the operations of exploitation and for the survival of the entire system. We can speak of *black-men*, facilitators, *passeurs*, abusers, traffickers, and boatmen. For these reasons, since they are parts of a *business*, the various actors can be enemies or competitors among themselves, aiming to be called to be an ever more important link in the chain.

All of this can also have to do with the minors themselves. As said before, the underage victims of human trafficking can obtain a role in the chain of production: “the girl exploited on the streets [can] see the career of her *maman* in the trafficking chain as a valid possibility of economic independence and success²²”. Thus, those who were previously victims now become the ones doing the exploiting, re-investing the money gained in the criminal *business*: “[they] become mini-*maman* [...], controlling and managing girls on the streets for the same organisations that exploited them²³”.

The theme of UM’s is fundamentally important at the social, cultural, political, and economic level. The challenge is to learn more about the phenomenon and to study it with scientific rigour and without prejudice.

3. The mechanism of the “scapegoat”

Investigation of the various problems tied to unaccompanied minors offers a never-ending series of opportunities for political discussion in a public context, especially in the countries of destination. Often the arrival of immigrants and their systematization in structures are defined in the context of the “emergency”, so as to lead public opinion and politicians to perceive the phenomenon of migration not as an opportunity, but rather an ineluctable problem. Nonetheless, in some countries, the prevalence of political parties that encourage nationalism contributes to the creation of a public opinion adverse to the presence of foreigners. There are instances in which the citizens have been led to feel that they are threatened by the “misleading big numbers” of migrants, who end up being unjustly considered as deleterious to the well-being of society.

Indeed, immigrants are often associated with illness, filthiness, crime, labour

problems, and criminal networks. Because of all these problems, there is a widespread conviction that the presence or absence of immigrants is intimately tied to the social well-being of a nation. Often public opinion and the candidates for public office foment what is known as “hate speech”, which unfortunately proves useful in electoral campaigns. As noted above, the problem of immigration is a “political problem”, so much so that that often electoral campaigns make use of these issues and the degree and manner in which they influence the construction of public opinion.

At this juncture, we can stop for a moment to observe the phenomenon by considering the mimetic theory of Girard. Indeed, a second component of this theory is the mechanism of the scapegoat: on account of the rivalry between the actors that is due to the limited nature of natural resources, as above considered with regard to the traffickers and exploiters of the victims of human-trafficking, there begins a battle of everyone against everyone that threatens the peace and daily life of the community. We can observe these dynamics even as regards that which involves the process of forming public opinion with respect to immigrants.

Many scholars have investigated the manner in which public opinion is constructed. It can be “deformed” by means of a distorted idea of the migratory phenomenon as well as “educated” by means of political rhetoric. In this respect, in the light of recent political events in Europe and the Americas, it might prove interesting and useful to examine in depth the actors and political groups that contribute to the formation – or deformation – of public opinion. However, as noted above, such an investigation would go well beyond the limits imposed by the objectives of the present work.

Walter Lippmann studied the dynamics of the creation and deformation of public opinion starting from the fact that it has a cognitive basis: the leaders of public opinion judge people starting from preconstituted categories and their own interests²⁴. However, public opinion is “the consequence of representations or mental schemes that people form in relationship to their social reality on the one hand²⁵” and on the other hand characterized by distorted representations of reality, viz. stereotypes, that impede the formation of public opinion by in fact deforming it. Indeed, more often than not foreigners are viewed through a lens that is limited by stereotypes and detached from reality.

The idea of the immigrant as a scapegoat might evolve in connection with the questions regarding national security, nourishing the idea that a smaller number of immigrants corresponds to greater security. We are faced with what Pope Francis has called “the globalization of indifference”, which is defined as the product of contemporary individualism. In the Pope’s words, “in this scenario, immigrants, refugees, evacuees, and the victims of trafficking have become the visible manifestation of exclusion²⁶”.

As a result, even though immigrants and underage immigrants are not responsible for the crisis of national security, public opinion is disposed to view them as a scapegoat: once they are excluded from the community, peace and

serenity can return. According to public opinion, they are to blame for threatening social peace, because they depress the labour market and take places at school and resources from citizens. They are different and foreign, and for this reason they must be removed from the community. As Pope Francis affirms, “they are often invested with a negative judgement that considers them to be the cause of social evils²⁷”.

The consequences of this attitude are not insignificant. At the social level, it impedes the real and positive integration of *unaccompanied minors*, who ought instead to be viewed as a resource. Even if public opinion “thinks” that the entire social situation would improve if these minors were removed from the community, the reality is different. It is good to ensure that the processes of integration for minors (and immigrants in general) proceed together with human development.

Moreover, as René Girard says, there is an important aspect that concerns the new “violent peace” which is reached when someone is excluded. It is violent because constructed on the basis of lies regarding the guilt of immigrants and because, both at the physical and at the socio-psychological level, it crushes the minors and subjects them to a further victimization. The UM’s see their agency destroyed by this attitude of public opinion. If the minors are not accepted socially, their human development turns out compromised.

Through the mechanism of the scapegoat, the community is led to term itself “good” in contrast with immigrants, which are considered “bad” on the basis of ideologies characteristic of nationalism and ethnocentrism. In other words, there is that “evaluative attitude [...] according to which the criteria, principles, values, and norms of the culture of a specific social group, which is ethnically defined, are considered by its members as qualitatively more appropriate and authentically human than the customs of other groups²⁸”.

Labels exert a negative influence on the development of the personal identities of minors. Children do not possess a strong sense of human agency, but instead learn much from their life experiences²⁹. At first the process of development of a minor is characterized by a series of action that the minor does not necessarily know; subsequently the child “recognize[s] that [it] can make things happen and [it] regards [itself] as [the] agent of [its] actions³⁰” and is therefore able to contribute to its own human development through conscious choices.

The movement towards the development of personal identity is sequential:

Personal identity refers to self-characterizations of what one is. The continuity of personal identity resides more in psychological factors and the experiential continuity of one’s life course [...]. As an agent, one [...] construes oneself as a continuing person [...]. Through their goals, aspirations, social commitments, and action plans, people project themselves into the future [...]. Personal identity is therefore rooted not only in phenomenological continuity, but also in agentic continuity [...]. Personal identity is partially constructed from one’s social identity as reflected in how one is treated by significant others.³¹.

Insofar as it is a scapegoat responsible for social insecurity, the *unaccompanied* minor sees its own *agency* neutralized and its process of development as a social actor impeded, with the result that it is subjected to experiences that have a negative effect on its human development and to which it is clearly vulnerable: exploitation, discrimination, violence.

The process of integration cannot work under these conditions, and the UM's are forced to lead lives of isolation in social, psychological, and human terms. An Afghan child described his experience thus to the aid workers who helped him:

I ran away in Iran [...]. The police started pursuing me [...], I hurt myself when I fell down and I lost consciousness. I woke up in room, hanging by one hand [...]. They handed me the Koran and told me, "If you learn this by heart, you will be able to leave early. You will depart for Syria and protect the holy sites from the terrorists" [...]. I captured a female sniper and when I handed her over to the Syrians, they ran over her with a bulldozer. That was the worst moment [...]. Millions of times I have wanted to die. When they gave me permission to return to Iran, I stayed there for a month, in a trance, and then I joined a family that wanted to leave for Europe [...]. There are many children at the refugee camp. Sometimes they laugh among themselves, but I am always on my own. Forgive me if I don't know how to smile. I simply am unable to³².

Here, along the same lines, is the Italian experience of a Nigerian girl who was the victim of human trafficking:

After joining her aunty, Faith refused to enter the prostitution circuit. Her aunty was furious. She wouldn't accept Faith's refusal and beat her repeatedly, leaving her without food for days. Exhausted weakened, Faith ended up on the streets, knowing that the only way to save herself was to escape³³.

At this point, the extent of the psycho-social and physical violence is clear and can reach extremely high levels during the entire process of migration. Minors are persons in the process of developing, and, for this reason, the various processes of growth and identity construction turn out profoundly marked. UM's experience a sort of "accelerated development" – especially at the human and psycho-social level – and they are forced to "grow up in haste": they show signs of a physical and social vulnerability that neither can nor ought to pass unobserved.

4. "Revelation" and the migratory process

It is possible to assert that public opinion does not appear to have a real awareness of the "scapegoat mechanism" to which UM's are subject during the migratory process. For Girard, this state is made clear thanks to Christian revelation, which allows people to turn their attention to the perspective of the person who is unjustly victimized as well as towards the culture that derives from such a paradigm. A conversion in the general *forma mentis* allows people to arrive at a greater understanding of the phenomenon with the aid of the social sciences, preparing a process in which people take note of the presence of the spiral of

violence that nourishes the mechanism of the scapegoat.

Thanks to the contribution of numerous theories of psychology and sociology – such as those of Bronfenbrenner and Bandura, to which we shall refer – it is possible to observe and study the phenomenon of migration by minors and its characteristics unfettered by the mindset of the scapegoat and therefore able to arrive at a more profound knowledge as well as the certainty that the concept of human development concerns the entire life of the person.

First of all, we should note that *imitation* is not merely a passive process, but an active evolution that is peculiarly human and educational. It is part of the process of the human development of *unaccompanied minors*. We can explain this concept rapidly with the theory of the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, which offers a holistic approach that asserts that an individual evolves as an integrated and dynamic entity that enters directly into relationship with the environment in which it lives³⁴. This relationship is reciprocal: the individual influences the environment and vice versa, and the environment is also shaped by all the links between the various contexts.

In general, it can be asserted that the social structures act upon and influence the subjectivity of the minor by means of enablements and constraints³⁵, which are able to facilitate or hinder the process of construction of the *agency* or human ability to act in a conscious manner on the social structure in which the human being lives and becomes a social actor.

Nonetheless, the ecological system of the development of Bronfenbrenner “is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next. These structures are referred to as the *micro- meso-, exo- and macrosystems*³⁶”. A microsystem is characterized by relations with family, friends, and schoolmates. The mesosystem includes relations between two or more contexts where the person participates actively³⁷. An exosystem includes the contexts in which minors are not involved directly, but in which events have an influence on the environments where the minor has an active role. A macrosystem refers to the “consistencies [...] that exists, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies³⁸”. If the first two subsystems are directly connected to the social life of minors, the other two are tied to the policies put into effect and to the culture of a specific country. They all exert a strong impact on the life of the minor.

Reflecting upon Bronfenbrenner’s study, we can observe that, while the UM’s move between the different ecological spaces, their subsystems are subject to profound changes. Most importantly, the family environment of the country of origin comes to be flanked or substituted by another “family environment” that is a component of the microsystem. This may be: the structures of hospitality, where there are people capable to take care of minors (e.g. psychologists, professionals, judges, psychotherapists, linguistic and cultural mediators); the friends in the countries of origin and those hosted in other countries; the new scholastic

environment frequented in the host country. As a result, the mesosystem likewise undergoes changes. Through migration, and insofar as they are guests in another country with policies and a culture different from their own, the exosystem and macrosystem for UM's change radically.

Moreover, Bronfenbrenner introduces the concept of "ecological transition", which occurs "whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both"³⁹. Migration can be viewed as an example; as previously asserted, UM's are forced to grow up more quickly than normal and to enter into a phase of their development in which they are no longer children, but not yet adults. They grow up in a manner that we could label as "not natural". During migration they experience all of these processes, which lead them to construct their own lives, to give form to their own personal and social identity, and also to obtain their own role in the social structure. Therefore, they cross the phases of their human development in a manner that is not natural. Indeed, Bronfenbrenner defines human development as "the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities"⁴⁰.

Therefore, unaccompanied minors live a process in which they bring to maturity their own *agency*, which is intimately tied to human development, and they do so in light of the ethical principle of the natural disposition of the human being to establish relations.

UM's believe strongly in their ability to depart, to reach their peers abroad, and like them, to write their own future, demonstrating they are capable of constructing their own identity on the basis of a migratory process that has been successful for them as for their peers. Their imitation is not an end in and of itself. They show us they wish to undertake a process for the maturation of their own *agency*, which allows them to leave home, to construct a valid migratory project, and to take decisions on their own as regards their own future life.

It is a matter of a creative action, by means of which the UM's show that they "have a say" and can be a force for change in the social structure that hosts them.

With reference to what Bandura asserts in *Toward a Psychology of Human Agency*, the child begins life without an awareness of being a social agent: "The developmental progression of a sense of personal agency moves from perceiving causal relations between environmental events, through understanding causation via action, and finally to recognizing oneself as the agent of the actions"⁴¹. According to Bandura, children begin to understand their *capacity as agents* by repeated observation of what happens, of how others act towards them, and last of all by learning that their actions allow certain things to take place. Therefore, the development of the sense of *agency* occurs when the child begins to feel itself an actor responsible for its actions.

With the awareness that they are an integral part of the social structure and able to influence it intentionally as well as being subjects that in the process of maturing, unaccompanied minors can develop four fundamental properties of human *agency*⁴²:

1. Intentionality: the children set out on their own with ideas and strategies for changing their own future;
2. Planning: they travel toward countries of immigration with the aim of moving according to their own aspirations;
3. Self-reactivity: the minors react autonomously to what happens to them, they choose a route, they change it, they establish relations with the people they encounter – unfortunately, also with the traffickers – and they try, in their own way, to give shape to the course of events.
4. Self-reflection: this is based on the minors’ aspirations and the results achieved. Even when faced with negative experiences such as exploitation, the UM’s continue to construct their own identity by reflecting on their experiences so as to find solutions and adapt as they think best.

At the end, in terms of human development, the migration of *unaccompanied minors* can be described as a profound educational process. A real awareness of this can lead the people who find themselves dealing with this phenomenon to understand the multifaceted nature of the process of minors’ development. It is a matter of a real “transition from less than human conditions to truly human ones⁴³”, as Paul VI affirms. Migration represents this “movement” from less humane to more humane conditions at a physical, psychological, and social level. This concept of development has a strong impact on the person and on all the areas of the social structure, to the extent that the social actors, freed from the “scapegoat” mindset, are able to contribute to their own development and to that of the society in which they live.

5. Change in thinking a precondition for the growth of UM’s

After having studied briefly the migration of UM’s and aware of the presence of other important elements that cannot be examined at present, we might arrive at a first conclusion that all the sectors of a social structure – institutions, churches, and civil society – are able to get involved and offer facilitators for the human developments of *unaccompanied* foreign minors in the human educational process that they pursue towards their *best interest*.

On this subject, the social teaching of the Church affirms: “It is in full conformity with human nature that there should be juridico-political structures providing all citizens in an ever better fashion and without any discrimination the practical possibility of freely and actively taking part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community⁴⁴”. In this citation from Vatican II, we can find certain fundamental ethical principles: non-discrimination and the equality of all human beings; social justice; subsidiarity; freedom and self-determination of the human being; responsibility for actively contributing to the

common good; awareness of the rights and duties of the person as a social actor. All of these principles could constitute the ethical basis for the realization of *best practice* implemented by the social, religious, and political actors so that it is possible to guarantee respect for the *superior interest of the minor*.

This means that assuring the well-being and care of minors is the responsibility of the entire community and of every individual. However, as Girard recognizes, on account of the “lens of sacrifice” that is typical of the scapegoat mechanism, “the group does not recognize that it is responsible for its violence, but transfers it onto the victim⁴⁵”. At this point, the UM’s truly become victims not only at the physical level, but also at the human, educational, and social levels. They can be abused, manipulated, and subjected to social isolation, all dynamics that are gravid with extremely negative consequences for their human development.

In the same way in which violence strikes and has repercussions on the entire life of the individual, human development, too, is a whole and concerns the whole person, its protection, its personal growth, its security and physical well-being, its rights and duties, its role in society, and its human and social responsibilities. Taking up the message of the *Populorum progressio* of Paul VI, Benedict XVI affirms that “authentic human development concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension⁴⁶”. For this reason, when it is a matter of underage subjects, according to Francis “thrice vulnerable because minors, because foreigners, and because defenceless⁴⁷”, it is essential to recognize the immense responsibility of every social actor to guarantee for minors the respect of their rights and a positive process of human development:

proper attention [should] be given to minor migrants who need a social environment that permits and fosters their physical, cultural, spiritual and moral development. Living in a foreign land without effective points of reference generates countless and sometimes serious hardships and difficulties for them, especially those deprived of the support of their family [...]. [A]dolescence constitutes a fundamental phase for the formation of human beings⁴⁸.

Therefore, even from an ethical perspective, it is possible to assert that the educational component of human development can be discerned in the *unaccompanied minor*’s migratory journey. The children – individuals in the process of development – arrive in their countries of destination at a special moment in their growth, they lack those points of familiar reference left in their country of origin and they are led – or forced – to give shape to their identity and personality in a foreign land. Everything that they encounter or experience has an impact on their development, their educational processes, and the individual journey that they make to adulthood. At this point, aside from the basic principles of dignity and full human development that directly concern minors and the phases of their growth, there emerge ethical principles regarding the practical life of the actors who are mutually responsible and the social environments that revolve around these children – the above-mentioned subsystems – that contribute to the texture of the social structure: solidarity, subsidiarity, cooperation, reception, care for the weakest.

According to the level of individual and societal internalization of these principles, the community becomes more or less attentive to the well-being and care of subjects that are vulnerable and in trouble. Where this attentiveness is high, the violence inflicted on *unaccompanied minors* – which implies a high degree of indifference as regards human suffering and is tied to the scapegoat mechanism – can be exposed and the community made to recognize its responsibility as regards violence exercised against children.

Thus, in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II speaks of an “option or preferential love for the poor” as a special form of the primacy of Christian charity and affirms:

It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities [...]. Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future⁴⁹.

In this passage there are two important elements that ought to be highlighted: (1) the above-mentioned responsibility of social and political actors as regards minors, and, for Christians (2) their mission of imitating Christ in their own lives, which leads them to have a positive attitude and to offer help to those who are hungry, who are needy, who do not have a house or hope for a better future, such as the UM's.

In order for the change of vision to become possible, the community needs to be shaped in ethical, political, and social terms so that the awareness of all the actors can be increased. On the basis of the above-mentioned principles, public opinion is to be guided – and not distorted – towards the real priorities of the community, which concern a true social peace and the common welfare. Indeed, as Paul VI affirms, development is the new name of peace, and “extreme disparity between nations in economic, social and educational levels provokes jealousy and discord, often putting peace in jeopardy⁵⁰”. Peace is the responsibility of everyone – people of goodwill, politicians, and philosophers. The whole of the community is involved in the construction of that peace that can only be attained through development⁵¹.

There, a change of mindset is needed, and this must be founded on the fundamental ethical principles mentioned above. With a community that is attentive to the problems of children and made up of people aware of their responsibilities, UM's can be educated in a complete manner and encouraged to make their voices heard, their *agency* recognized, and their awareness of their own rights and duties realized. Thus, they are able to make a free and active contribution to the development of the communities and countries that take them in.

6. Concluding remarks

As we have seen, the mimetic theory of Girard is capable of offering a viewpoint from which to observe the phenomenon of the UM's and it can facilitate the study of the migratory process, which encompasses all of the physical, psychological, and social experiences of *unaccompanied minors*. If adequately supplemented by other theories of the social sciences, it can be useful in investigating certain dynamics of the migratory process: *imitation*, the scapegoat mechanism, and revelation. Moreover, under these conditions, it can help the scholar to focus attention on all the actors and factors of migration. According to the objectives of research, it is possible to speak of minors, public opinion, social actors, traffickers, and political subjects.

However, as far as reference to religion (and Christianity in particular) is concerned, it is necessary to remember that what is under consideration is a point of view from which to analyze the social phenomenon. If one wishes to study it from an ethical perspective and pay attention to principles, the theory of Girard is not enough, since it was not created for such a purpose.

Even the principles that derive directly from lay ethics (e.g. the dignity of the person, the superior interest of the minor, solidarity, the principle of non-discrimination), which often coincide with Christian ethics, show themselves to be extremely useful in analyzing a phenomenon as complex as that of the migration of *unaccompanied minors*. This phenomenon's study cannot be exhausted by reference to monolithic theories and disciplines, but needs instead to be elaborated by investing in a dialogue that is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary.

From a Christian perspective, the social teaching of the Church offers various interesting points of departure for study and action. In the documents of the Catholic *magisterium* on society, we can find certain principles and guidelines for interpreting the phenomenon as well as a point of convergence with Girard as regards a change in mindset from a "lens of sacrifice" to a "lens of pardon". In other words, the social teaching of the Church can also be of assistance in converting people's way of thinking, so as to contribute to the full human development of minors and the construction of real social peace and security in our communities.

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- 2 Committee on the Rights of the Child. 2005.
*General Comment n. 6. Treatment of
unaccompanied and separated children
outside their country of origin*, 17 maggio –
3 giugno, p.5.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-10. *Non-refoulement*: according
to Art.33 of the *Geneva Convention*, a
refugee cannot be refused entry to a territory
nor can he or she be deported, expelled, or
transferred to territories where his or her life
or liberty would be threatened (Open
Migration, *online glossary*).
- 4 *Agreement on the Rights of the Child*, Art.3.
- 5 European Migration Network. 2009. *Minori
non accompagnati: aspetti quantitativi e
politiche in materia di accoglienza,
rimpatrio e integrazione. Analisi del caso
italiano per uno studio comparativo a livello
comunitario*, p.7.
- 6 Cfr. Lee, E.S. 1996. "A Theory of migration"
Demography III, pp. 47-57.
- 7 Save the Children. 2017. *Atlante minori
stranieri non accompagnati in Italia. Prima
di tutto bambini*, pp.84-86.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.72.
- 9 Amnesty International. 2018. *Albania 2017-
2018*.
- 10 Save the Children, *Atlante minori stranieri
non accompagnati*, pp.88-90.
- 11 See UNICEF. 2016 *Broken Dreams. Central
American Children's Dangerous journey to
the United States*, pp. 6-8.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 See *Amnesty International*. 2018. *Guatemala
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- 14 UNICEF. 2016 *Broken Dreams*, p. 8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes.
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- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
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- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Lippmann, W. 1922. *Public Opinion*. San
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- 25 Grossi, G. *L'opinione pubblica*, Lecce:
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- 26 Pope Francis. 2019. "Messaggio del Santo
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- 28 Remotti, F. 1993. "Etnocentrismo." In
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- 29 Bandura, A. 2006. "Toward a Psychology of
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- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 32 Save the Children. 2017. *Atlante minori
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di tutto bambini*, p.88.
- 33 Save the Children. 2017. *Young Invisible
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and Labour Exploitation in Italy*, p. 27.
- 34 Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of
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and Design*, p.16 Londra: Harvard University
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- 35 Archer, M. 2003. *Structure, Agency and the
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Cambridge University Press.
- 36 Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human
Development*, p. 22.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 41 Bandura, A. 2006. "Toward a Psychology of
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- 42 *Ibid.*, pp.164-180.
- 43 Paul VI. 1967. *Populorum progressio*, n. 20.
- 44 Vatican II. 1965. *Costituzione pastorale sulla
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et spes*, n.75.
- 45 Hamerton-Kelly. 1992. *Sacred Violence:
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- 46 Benedict XVI. 2009. *Caritas in veritate*, 11.
- 47 Francis, 2016, Message for the *World
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- 48 Benedict XVI. 2009. *Messaggio per la
giornata mondiale del migrante e del rifugiato
2010*, n.2.
- 49 John Paul II. 1987. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*,
42.
- 50 See Paul VI. *Populorum progressio*, n.76.
- 51 *Ibid.*, n.83.

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Important dates of UISG meetings

Council of Delegates:

6-13 November 2020 in Nairobi

Plenary Assembly:

9-13 May 2022 in Rome

Council of Delegates:

16-17 May 2022 in Rome



IMAGINING LEADERSHIP IN A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

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This Keynote has been addressed to the Assembly of the “Leadership Conference of Women Religious” (LCWR), entitled “Imagining Leadership in a Global Community”, held from August 13-16, 2019 in Scottsdale, Arizona, USA.

Original in English

Thank you for this invitation to be among you these days and to share some reflections on “imagining leadership in a global community.” I’m Irish as you can probably hear but I have been living outside of Ireland for over 20 years. As a practical theologian, when I reflect on leadership in today’s global community in the light of God’s word, I move into the world of the imagination. There memories and stories, symbols, and images, nourish my reflections. An Irish writer once described imagination “as something in her head that was singing.” Jesus awakened the imagination of people through stories, images and symbols, challenging his listeners to interpret them, to find the way that would lead to fullness of life. Someone has well said that “stories are data with soul.”¹ Therefore as leaders it is important to encourage storytelling, to explore anew our charisms, to retell our congregational stories, to re-examine our symbols, histories and traditions reinterpreting them in the light of today’s global life and mission. Today I will offer you some images and thoughts for your reflection as leaders but I will first look briefly on our world and religious life today.

Our Globalized World

We are living in extraordinary times. This is not just “an era of change but a change of eras.”² We see new technologies, passing information quickly around the world creating “economic, political, and strategic dynamics, never previously

conceived or suspected.”³ We live in a globalized interconnected world where millions of people are on the move within and across continents, fleeing poverty, war and famine, seeking new opportunities in distant places, struggling to build new lives in unfamiliar cultures and contexts. Our world is marked by pluralism, growing differentiation and complexity. While we feel closer to each other and better understand one another and our differences, there is a parallel rise in xenophobic and racist attitudes that are often exploited for political gain. We have seen many incredibly sad events when people act out of these beliefs. There is the daily struggle for the basics of life all around us. I have seen homeless people foraging for food in cities and women walking for 4 hours to the nearest well for water. A recent article in the New York Times spoke of the scandal of an ice cream sundae costing \$1,000 and a hamburger \$295 while 25% of the world’s children have stunted development because of malnutrition. This is the world of detention and holding centres along borderlands. We have seen rape used as a weapon of war and child soldiers conscripted by militias. We witness destruction of life and livelihood in local wars and conflicts. Millions of people are trafficked worldwide; others live fragile lives in refugees’ camps where women foraging for firewood are fearful of being robbed or raped. Life on our planet is threatened with extinction through myriad forms of contamination, pollution and destruction while human life is being devalued from birth to death.⁴ This global scenario tests the very meaning and purpose of our consecrated life and the commitments we make at General Chapters. It tests the honesty of our solidarity with the poor and with the planet, the excluded and those whose right to life is threatened.⁵ It challenges each of us to confront our lifestyles with the demands of the Gospel. It invites us to examine how our living, our mission and ministry should respond today.

Who are we as women religious in today’s world?

The face of Consecrated Life has changed dramatically. It has become culturally diverse in its members and in the charisms that the spirit gives.⁶ I am privileged to have an overview because of the 2,000 congregational leaders who are members of UISG. We sisters number over 500,000. They say that not even the Holy Spirit knows how many we are! We belong to different charismatic families, have different spiritual roots and traditions. In these past years however we are discovering that beneath the diversity, we share what might be called “the charism” of vowed religious life, rooted in our passion for Christ and our passion for humanity. Pope Francis has expressed his hope “for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes,” calling us “to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels.” This he says “would make for a more effective prophetic witness.”⁷ He invites us to be “part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance”⁸ reaching out globally to people of other faiths and of no faith. Using new means of communication, religious life has become a transnational network with a global identity. We are pilgrims in a globalised world seeking new ways to express our

life and our mission. The Irish poem TRASNA⁹ meaning CROSSING expresses some aspects of the leadership journey that we are undertaking.

*The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones,
In the mountain gap, Behind them stretched the roadway they had travelled,
Ahead mist hid the track.
Unspoken the question hovered:
Why go on? Is life not short enough?
Why seek to pierce its mystery?
Why venture further on strange paths risking all?
Surely that is a gamble for fools.....or lovers?
Why not return quietly by the known road?
Why be a pilgrim still?
A voice they knew called to them, saying:
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Choose. Go back if you must,
You will find your way easily by yesterday's road,
You can pitch your tent by yesterday's fires.
There may be fire in the embers yet.
If that is not your deep desire,
Stand still. Lay down your load.
Take your life in your two hands,
(,,,you are trusted with something precious)
While you search your heart's yearnings:
What am I seeking? What is my quest?
When your star rises within,
Trust yourself to its leading.
You will have light for your first steps.
This is TRASNA, the crossing place.
Choose!
This is TRASNA, the crossing place.
Come!*

How then to imagine leadership at this crossing place, as members of a global community? I would like to offer some images and reflections to spark your imagination because we know that we do not just see images “but we see through images.”¹⁰ How then might these images speak to you today as leaders?

- 1. Widen the tent of our hearts**
- 2. Be present at the borderlands**
- 3. Embrace vulnerability**
- 4. Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity**
- 5. Engage in web-watching and web-weaving**
- 6. Listen to the long notes**

1. Widen the tent of our hearts

The prophet Isaiah said: “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.”¹¹ This is a helpful image for religious life today because it speaks of both flexibility and rootedness, unbounded hospitality and secure identity. We are invited not to hold back, to stretch wide but at the same time to “strengthen our stakes,” by ensuring that what holds the tent in place goes down deep. This verse invites us to make space in our hearts, for Christ and for those who live on the margins of life. In this time of rapid change and challenge, we need to ask ourselves again: Are we really grounded. “Is Jesus really our first and only love; as we promised that he would be when we professed our vows.”¹² Have we embraced the vision and values that inspired our founders and foundresses? The Gospel was central to their vowed life “a concrete expression of (their) passionate love.”¹³ Our charisms, are the fruits of their response to the call of Christ. Our founders translated the Gospel into a particular way of life¹⁴ which responded to the needs of their times. How are we being challenged by the Gospel? How is our charism being stretched and enlarged today? Does it expand our minds and hearts into radical and sincere living? Do we have the passion of our founders? Are we also close to the people, sharing their joys and sorrows, seeking to understand their needs?

The responses needed today are often not found in the big initiatives of the past but instead are like tiny mustard seeds - a word of hope, a listening heart, a compassionate presence, a healing glance. This mysticism of encounter happens everywhere – it is “far reaching, personal and outgoing.”¹⁵ We have seen this mysticism in action in our communities at sick beds, on city streets with homeless people, on the borders with separated families, in refugee camps, in hospitals and parishes with people who are struggling– in fact wherever we are. While the needs of the world are complex and extensive, do we believe that it is the small, the hidden, the unknown acts of kindness and love that will transform our world. It is the quality of our presence individually and in our community living, that matters above all, so that people can see the presence of God in us. Pope Francis speaks often about a revolution of tenderness reminding us that “God’s tenderness brings us to the understanding that “love is the meaning of life.”¹⁶ We are called to pour the love we receive from the Lord back into the world – into our communities, the Church and wider society. Through this revolution of tenderness and love, the pope is proposing a humble way to move continents and mountains.¹⁷ This is the Christian revolution that we are called to lead. It is a revolution in the true sense of the word - the return to the origin of the Gospel as a way forward, a revolution of mercy.¹⁸ But in order to be capable of mercy we must quiet ourselves to listen to God’s word and to contemplate his mercy. Then we need to reach out with this *mercy* love first to ourselves as leaders – for we are often hard on ourselves - and then to become mercy to our brothers and sisters.

The image of the tent reminds us of the story of Abraham and Sarah and their hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre¹⁹ which we reflected on recently.

Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent. Jewish sources recount that the tent was probably open on four sides, therefore Abraham could see anyone approaching. He was probably not feeling his best self; it was the hottest part of the day and to complicate matters God was standing right in front of him and then there were these three strangers arriving.²⁰ As leaders, doesn't it sound familiar - everything happening at the same time! We are told that when Abraham looked up, he saw the strangers and rushed out to greet them. He brought water to bathe their feet and invited them to refresh themselves while he went to get them something to eat. He offered them food in abundance and then stood near them under the tree while they enjoyed the food. When the strangers asked Abraham where his wife Sarah was, he replied that she was in the tent. One of them said that he would return in a year's time and that by that time Sarah would have a son. Sarah who was by now at the entrance to the tent, just laughed, she thought to herself that this was simply impossible since she was well beyond child-bearing age and Abraham too was old. When asked why she had laughed, she became afraid and denied that she had done so.

Yet we know the happy ending to this encounter at the tent in the desert – Sarah and Abraham received the gift of new life. The visitors, sent by God profoundly changed their life, creating a future of which they could never have dreamed. We notice that with the arrival of the strangers, Abraham appears to have ignored God, yet he did exactly what God would have wanted, because of his deep relationship with the living God. This is part of Abraham and Sarah's journey in faith. It can perhaps help us to reflect on the meaning of our life as religious today. We can ask ourselves as leaders of our communities: Is God standing before us? Because if he is not, there is a danger that the love which animates us could grow cold.....and the "salt of faith" could lose its savour. To keep our gaze fixed on Jesus Christ "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"²¹ is our challenge. Today we meet people arriving through the four sides of our congregational tents - people of all ages who want a listening ear, migrants and refugees, those who have lost their jobs, been trafficked, the depressed, the downhearted, those who are "searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world."²² Some are strangers, others known to us; still others are not physically present but we hear about them, read about them and their struggles in others parts of the world. When they pass by or come to ask for sustenance or just for a moment touch our lives from afar, "what do we have to offer them?" "what is the nourishment that we can give?" "what is the unbounded generosity and (tender)love that is an essential part of our.....community witness."²³ We must provide the practical things needed at that moment but we are called to give more – a radical prophetic witness, of having a global heart; "of being a pilgrim and prayer presence" ever watchful, "making intercession, firm in faith," with God and with the world on their behalf.²⁴

What then is the new life that is to be born in us, the transformation that is happening, unknown to us, in and through these multiple encounters? Have we like Sarah sometimes lapsed into a certain cynicism, thinking that giving birth to

something new is impossible? Or like Abraham will we stay near the strangers who come, listening to their questions, engaging in conversation, feeling called to new responses. During these past years I have had extraordinary conversations with young entrepreneurs, graphic artists, young people, families and others who are all seeking creative ways to live their faith. Religious life, like the Church itself, is living through difficult times, “the heat of the day.” Far from becoming irrelevant it would seem that consecrated life is perhaps “assuming a new and unexpected role” by showing how to accept and live “the difficulties of the present day with faith and even with joy.”²⁵ In addition we are being invited to join our small efforts for change with other parts of the world. This coming October during the Synod on Amazonia, REPAM (the Ecclesial Network of Pan-Amazonia), is constructing a Tent in Rome to represent the Amazon: Our Common Home. This will be a space of welcome near the Vatican for all who come to attend the Synod but especially to welcome members of indigenous communities; a place to get to know one another, pray together, exchange experiences. At UISG we will try to create this space digitally to help worldwide participation and invite all to “widen the tent of our hearts.”

2. Be present at the borderlands

Pope Francis talks about an outgoing Church, a Church “in uscita,” which needs to move out onto wounded landscapes, to the borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa used the metaphor “borderlands” or “la frontera” to refer to different types of crossings – between geopolitical boundaries, between places of social dislocations and the crossings which must be made to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts.²⁶ Borderlands are everywhere: in our local neighbourhoods, at national and international levels and very close to home within our religious communities. For Anzaldúa borderlands are important places not only for the hybridity that occurs there but also for the perspective that they can offer to those who live there. Living in borderlands produces a certain knowledge, that of being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider. We have to cultivate this “borderlands” heart and mind. Seeing through “the eyes of others” is essential to gain a deeper understanding, an empathy and compassion, than is deeper that what can be achieved by staying within one’s own social milieu.

“Borderlands” is a rich metaphor. It represents the multitude of places and opportunities where people from different cultures and contexts cross over to one another in order to learn and grow together. This happens through the building of relationships that gift one another and lead to mutual transformation. This is not merely about surviving side by side but it is a process of building deep connections, celebrating and appreciating difference, committing to collaborate together. When Cardinal Montenegro invited the UISG to send sisters to Sicily as thousands of migrants were arriving on its shores, in outlining his expectations, he was very clear about what he wanted. He said: “I don’t want another project, there are many good projects already. I want sisters who will walk the streets, get close to the

people, be present among both the local people and the migrants, sisters who will be able to build a bridge of understanding enabling each group to cross over to the other.” Being truly present to one to another, being open to a mutual encounter with the Other who comes as stranger, is a prophetic act in today’s divisive contexts. Today the local people call the sisters in the UISG communities “Le Suore del Mondo” – the Sisters of the World – perhaps that is our new calling?

Today more than ever our presence is vital at the many borders and frontiers that block and separate people. They can be political or physical borders or invisible borders that control the inclusion/exclusion of peoples. The Spanish theologian Mercedes Navarro reminds us that the Christian God is “a frontier God” and that “*to survive at the frontiers one must live without frontiers and be a crossroads.*”²⁷ So in our contemplation, in our prayers, in our outreach, we need to constantly inhabit frontiers and borderlands; we need to live prophetically in the in-between space where we can carry people across the divide of culture, religious, gender, race and ethnicity. We need to be people who stand at crossroads physically and spiritually, watching and waiting. The concern of our hearts, the power of our prayers and our advocacy can support those sisters who are at physical frontiers in different parts of the world, because in our global sisterhood where one of us is present, all of us are.

Can we ask ourselves: “What does it mean to live without frontiers and be a crossroads today? How can we be present physically and spiritually in today’s borderlands?”

3. Embrace vulnerability

A glance worldwide at developments within religious congregations’ points to a life cycle moving through the stages of birth, maturity, loss and diminishment, leading in some cases to conclusion. We are living the cycle of passion, death and resurrection at personal and organizational levels. The majority of congregations worldwide have fewer than 200 members. Many congregations in the Global South, struggle to provide for their members and their ministries, yet believe radically that God’s presence will provide and sustain them. Congregations in the Global North are entrusting their institutions into the hands of lay leaders in trusts, foundations and other entities, with the demanding administrative challenges which these processes involve. It is as if we are all arriving together in the same sacred space, where we are experiencing a greater fragility and vulnerability. In a profound way, this makes us more relevant than ever; it places us in communion with the people of our time and place especially those at the peripheries. While we can be justly proud of past achievements, we also have to acknowledge our past blindness and negligence especially where we failed to protect the most vulnerable among us. This calls us to a deep humility that creates space for conversion and change. We are called to face the future with the same courage and conviction of our founders and foundresses, convinced what matters is our presence among and our encounters with the people of today and their needs. Pope Francis reminds us

that “we are heirs to those who have gone before us and had the courage to dream.”²⁸ These dreams were often born in times of great social need with scarce resources. We have only to read our archives to connect with their founding experiences of vulnerability and fragility.

The Scriptures describe desert or mountain wildernesses, where God’s people discover liminal places. They seem to be continually forced into the desert – to take the harder, more onerous and hazardous route – as an exacting exercise in radical faith.”²⁹ It is here in the desert, that people are fed, five thousand at a time and a new community takes shape. We are constantly reminded that “the place of scarcity, even death, is revealed by Jesus, as a place of hope and new life.”³⁰ Richard Rohr describes “liminal space” as “the crucial in-between time when everything actually happens and yet nothing appears to be happening.”³¹ It is the waiting time. Today we religious seem to be in this waiting time where we are being called to be patient, to allow time and space for the new to break through. In this liminal place we can share our insights with one another and listen deeply as we share how we feel that God is calling us; these conversations can reveal the whispers of the Spirit.

The spiritual writer Belden Lane, reflecting on the death of his mother writes that the “starting point for many things is grief, at the very place where endings seem so absolute.”³² While many of us as religious are living in the place of endings.....faith reminds us that that “the pain of closing” is often “the antecedent to every new opening in our lives.”³³ We know that our experience of weakness, confusion and searching, places us among the men and women of our day. What we have to offer to people today is above all our experience of vulnerability, fragility and weakness and our profound belief that God’s grace seldom comes in the way that we might expect? It often demands “the abandonment of every security” and it is only in accepting the vulnerability that grace demands that we find ourselves invited to wholeness.”³⁴ It is through our own limitation and weaknesses as human beings that we are called to live as Christ lived. The profession of the evangelical counsel of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience is “a radical witness to the power of the Paschal Mystery” as we surrender everything to the one who offers eternal life.

Can we lead conversations about fragility and vulnerability? Do we believe that God is preparing the way for something new in our own lives? In the life of the world?

4. Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity

The recent document *New Wine and New Wineskins* notes that many religious congregations have passed from almost entirely monocultural contexts to the challenge of multiculturalism. Donald S. McGavran speaks about “luxurious human diversity” and Sr. Marie Chin RSM has referred to “the labyrinth of cultures in religious life.”³⁵ How then to exercise leadership amid this growing diversity

both globally and locally? We need to ask ourselves a bigger question “How can we as religious congregations, as institutions with a purpose, a charism, bring a positive contribution to the challenge of global intercultural living? How can we as leaders serve this larger purpose?” The question certainly has its relevance in a world impacted by globalization. Now is perhaps the time for religious congregations to demonstrate a new way of relating with the “other” in our communities, that embodies a hopeful perspective for future life in the world. We know that the only way forward for humanity is to transform the planet into a more open and inclusive place, based on the values of solidarity, justice and dialogue. The Spanish theologian José Cristo Rey García Paredes writes that: *Our identity is planetary and global. We are citizens of the world... How are we to transform (this) vision into some deep and fundamental convictions, assumed by each and every one of the members who share the mission?*

Our communities and congregations are nodal points of a much larger canvas of cultural, historical, and economical dynamics. What happens in one part of the world, or in one congregation or in one part of the congregation, reflects the whole and speaks on behalf of the whole. With that global perspective we begin to realise that the “luxurious diversity” within religious life and our connectivity across the world can make a significant impact. The networks and inter-congregational projects that are emerging today speak prophetically of the oneness of humankind. Many times, in South Sudan the local people - though very grateful for the many ways in which their needs were being met – repeatedly ask the religious living among them “how do you from so many different tribes live together?” This is why it is important to work together and with others in order to learn how to live interculturally, to confronting prejudice and racism and our ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours. We have begun this journey within some of our congregations but it is one that we must continue and deepen. Perhaps we could partner or twin with a congregation in another part of the world in order to embrace this challenge?

Can we ask ourselves where are we on this inter-cultural journey within our congregations, within society?

5. Engage in web-watching and web-weaving

The Mennonite theologian and peace activist John Paul Lederach has much to teach us about processes of leadership in today’s world. He uses the term “moral imagination” to describe something “which calls people beyond things that are immediately apparent and visible.”³⁶ He describes moral imagination as “the capacity to give birth to something new.”³⁷ A person with moral imagination seeks to uncover possibilities not yet dreamed of. Reflecting on his work as a peace-maker, Lederach realized that the use of a “web approach” enabled the process of change in many difficult contexts. The lines, connections and knots which we see in a web provide insight into what Lederach calls “a relationship-centric approach.”³⁸ The art of web-weaving means that we should look at relationships through “the lenses of social crossroads, connections and interdependence.”³⁹ Webs of relationships

create the social energy necessary to provide new purpose and direction. Leaders Lederach says, need to learn the skills necessary for web-watching and web-weaving. They need to be able to identify social crossroads where connecting links can be established with others in order to strengthen society's sense of interdependence. At LCWR you have certainly been doing this.

Lederach presents a number of important concepts which can help us be part of leadership at a global level. He speaks about weaving webs, noticing turning points, being yeast and establishing platforms. These concepts have a Scriptural resonance. **Turning points** are those moments of conversion that turn people in another direction. They are moments, pregnant with new life which often arise from barren ground. Here "new things come into existence, old things are reshaped and our ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking and so forth are transformed."⁴⁰ For Lederach, yeast, is usually a small group of people who are in the right place at the right time. They create a pull in an organization or in a society. They are willing to risk; to step out and venture into unknown territory "without any guarantee of success or even safety."⁴¹ Lederach sees risk as a vocation that involves a mysterious journey that allows imagination to rise up and "carry people towards a new, though mysterious and often unexpected shore."⁴² It means being able to embrace vulnerability and fear. Finally, for Lederach, platforms are relational places which keep groups of people in creative interaction.

In many emerging global religious life initiatives, we can see these elements at work. I'm thinking in particular of the Solidarity with South Sudan project which emerged at the end of decades of civil war because a small group of people wove a web of local, international, inter-agency and inter-faith relationships. Many of your congregations are part of this initiative and indeed played a very significant role in enabling this project. A second example, are the training programmes currently being offered to sisters, priests and brothers who accompany the victims of sexual violence in conflict situations in Central Africa. These programmes link religious with governmental personnel, local and international NGOs and trauma and healing experts. The religious who have been trained are now a source of hope and healing for many in their countries. In addition, they have formed other networks and so are creating new webs of support within their countries. Another example are the 42 anti-trafficking networks led by women religious worldwide including the new network that was established by Talitha Kum in June involving an inter-faith group of women in Lebanon and Syria which includes Catholic sisters and women from 5 other faith traditions. And finally the "Laudato Si" UISG initiative inviting religious congregations worldwide to join the Catholic Global Climate Movement to make "Laudato Si" known and lived at local level.

I believe that now is the time for us as religious individually and as congregations to join webs and platforms including those created by others. We can focus on issues which resonate with our respective charisms and bring a faith perspective to these relationships. Together we speak about our concerns to

Church leaders and leaders at national and global levels. We make the voice and perspective of women religious heard. Perhaps this is a contemporary way of expressing the parable of the Vine and the Branches. We can be part of “yeast” groups that aim to make a change. Think of the young Swedish student Greta Thunberg who called on students worldwide “to strike for climate” or Malala Yousafzai who campaigns for girls’ education worldwide. We can engage in web weaving when we connect with others near and far – through webs of prayer and action.

Can we encourage our members to seek out these generative possibilities? What networks does your congregation belong to or has helped to create? As web-watchers what initiatives should we join or strengthen as congregations? As LCWR?

Finally, we need to...

6. Listen for the Long Note

In conclusion as leaders we have to listen to the long note. A few summers ago, I participated in a seminar on Creative Leadership in the Burren School of Art in the West of Ireland. The Burren itself is an extraordinary geographical landscape. One of the important karst/limestone regions in the world, there is a certain mystical quality about the place. We were a very varied group of people from different walks of life and from all over the world. We had many good conversations about leadership. At the end of each session, a poet, or a musician or an artist responded capturing the essence of each conversation with a poem, a symbol or a musical response..... because the leader is truly an artist. At the end of one session Martin Hayes, a traditional Irish fiddle player played a piece which ended with a long-extended note. I realized that as leaders, we have to learn to hear and identify these long notes which play out in daily life and which point us to what is happening at a deeper level, calling us to discern how to respond.

St. Ignatius of Loyola asks us to imagine the Trinity looking down on the world and to place ourselves there contemplating the complicated messiness of unredeemed humankind. We can almost hear the Trinity saying “let us work at the transformation of the whole human race; let us respond to the groaning of all creation.”⁴³ The meditation invites us “to descend into the reality of the world and become involved in it, in order to transform it.”⁴⁴ Asking ourselves “How can we be part of the divine plan for the Missio Dei, for the redemption of the world? Who are we called to be as women religious, as congregations and as individuals?” Going deeper touches the mystical-prophetic depths of our lives from which all our action flows. The answers lie in being open to engaging in simple acts of encounter and communion with those who are near and those who are far away. We can do this in any place, at any time and at any age. Encountering the other and being in communion with others is at the heart of our leadership as we call ourselves first, then members of our congregations and others to:

Widen the tent of our hearts; Be present at the borderlands; Embrace vulnerability; Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity; Engage in web-watching and web-weaving and finally Listen to the long notes

Encounter calls for a profound openness to God's mission in the world. Our faith is "firstly an encounter with Jesus, and then we must do what Jesus does: encounter others."⁴⁵ Living the *mysticism of encounter* calls for "the ability to hear, to listen to other people; the ability to seek ways and means"⁴⁶ of building the Reign of God together. Across the world we sisters as a community of missionary disciples seek to move forward, boldly taking the initiative, going out to others, searching for those who have fallen away, standing at the crossroads and welcoming the outcast.⁴⁷ We are called above all to be a contemplative presence in the world, discerning how to respond to changing landscapes; telling one another what is happening wherever we find ourselves, how we feel called to respond and inviting support from one another.

We need to have these global conversations. We have the communication tools to connect with one another worldwide. Recently at UISG we united sisters worldwide with the sisters in Washington who engaged in an act of civil disobedience to bring attention to the inhumane conditions, especially for children, in migrant detention centres. We could affirm and support the recent letter sent by 62 enclosed communities of Carmelite and Poor Clare sisters to the President and Prime Minister of Italy deploring the treatment of migrants. We know that the presence of God is all around us and that we are connected to each other through ties both visible and invisible. We are being invited "to walk the journey of our lives tenderly holding each other's hands (together with the hands of the least of our sisters and brothers) knowing all the while that it is Christ who is our veiled and shining companion."⁴⁸ Living in Rome gives me a window seat at the life and times of Pope Francis. His is a leadership of global transformation. He shows us⁴⁹ how to blend our personal journey through life in this world with the simultaneous journey of humanity moving towards God. He holds in balance many of the elements presented this morning. He witnesses how the leader must be immersed in the world with eyes open to its joys and sufferings, with a heart broken from sharing the everyday struggle of the people, while at the same time withdrawing to contemplate the face of Jesus. Pope Francis knows himself deeply, acknowledges his vulnerability as a person, as "called but flawed" constantly asking for the support of our prayers. This support enables him to transcend his limitations in service of others with tenderness and mercy. Finally, he demonstrated that leadership involves a creative interplay between past, present and future where "the memory of our roots" gives us "courage in the face of the unknown"⁵⁰ - a courage that understands fidelity as "a change, a blossoming and a growth."⁵¹ Ultimately, as leaders you and I are being called to lead "communities of change... faithful to the ongoing and unending quest for God in this changing place and time."⁵²

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- 43 Fr. Daniel Ruff, SJ, *Bulletin of Old St. Joseph's Church in Philadelphia*, Advent 2008.
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- 47 EG, #24.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads The Way He Leads – Lessons from the First Jesuit Pope* (Loyola Press: Chicago 2018).

⁵⁰ Pope Francis quoted in Robert Moynihan, *Pray for Me: The Life and Spiritual Vision of*

Pope Francis: First Pope from the Americas (Image Press: New York, 2013), 209.

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⁵² Joan Chittister, OSB, *What Are You Looking For: Seeking the God Who is Seeking You* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 2019), 11.



SISTERS IN SORORAL COMMUNION IN AND FOR THE WORLD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Original in Spanish

Approaching the Term Sorority

The concept of *fraternity-sorority* appears in the writings of the classical philosophers. For example, Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, defines friendship between brothers as doing to the others what I want them to do to me. Centuries later, Saint Thomas affirms that since "the other" is different from me, I must offer him what is mine and become his brother.

From another perspective, Hanna Arendt argues that what is personal must be situated within the collective reality. The objective is to move from the solution to a problem, to the solution of social problems; therefore, social plurality requires entering into a pact with women and increasing their influence in the world.

In 1980 Elizabeth Lovatt-Dolan¹, a laywoman engaged in the Church and with women, already referred to women in the Church with reference to the unique vocation that unites them but implies different ways of living it out. Aware or not of the term "sorority," she proposes the union of women believers as a new paradigm of collaboration: "*All of us have the same vocation to serve God and one another; but the living out of this vocation depends on our own particular gifts and charisms and on our readiness to respond to the Lord (...) Today, many*

of us are beginning to think more in terms of the complementarity of vocations and to be aware that we have to face many of the same problems and many of the same challenges. We are beginning to be aware also that we can help each other to cope with these problems and challenges—aware in fact of how much we need each other.”

Mercedes Navarro points out that the relational need of women must be taken into account: *“If you separate a woman from the relational structure, you rip away not only a core of identity, but you cancel her as a person. Relationships are her habitat, her basic experience, her structural axis.”*² Today, the sense of the community of women, of association, of the group, has been extended in some countries to speaking, sharing, mutual helping, empowering, praying, celebrating... To strengthen her personal and social identity, a woman needs to interact with other women.

In religious life, Eleonora Barbieri recalled, in 1998, the work of women religious in different social fields intended to empower women and promote change: *“For centuries, Sisters have been working in silence, many times doing for the society what others do not want to do”*³.

Enrica Rosanna says that women are creating networks, sororal groups, as they become aware of their status as women and of the sense of their responsibility towards others. The new paradigm strengthens the development of personal resources through authentic reciprocity: *“For this reason, different women have—individually and in association—reinforced their mutual solidarity (...) They have asked for justice with the intention of not fighting only for themselves but for all, men and women alike, regardless of age, nationality, or religion.”*⁴

More recently, Janet Mock, has proposed that, with imagination and creativity, the congregations are called to establish links because *“they are part of a larger sisterhood, and there is no greater investment in the future than to place our resources together to assure that we have spiritually formed, intellectually prepared, psychologically mature women religious to face the challenges that lie before us in the world. We must find a way to do together what many communities cannot do alone in order to secure religious life in the future. Unless you as leaders find a way together to provide this kind of preparation across communities for the women who are entering today, they will be unprepared for the leadership role of women religious in the future.”*⁵

Following this same line, Pat Farrell underlines the opening that religious life is experiencing because the *“future is uncertain. We can only create it together (...) To do so you must learn to be led and to listen deeply. there is a new urgency now to deepen our capacity to hear and follow the guidance of collective wisdom (...) The future is drawing us beyond the personal toward communal transformation.”*⁶

The idea/meaning of the term sorority-fraternity is taking shape, but it is still not commonly used in castellan Spanish or the Spanish spoken in Spain—or indeed much more, in Hispanic—, just as is the case in other languages of Latin origin.

Conversely, the English language uses the term *sisterhood*, and even that of *sorority*. *Sorority* comes from the Latin *soror*, *sororis* = “sister.” It refers to the mutual relationship between women characterized by solidarity, friendship, and the creation of alliances, that is, a “twinning in the feminine way of being”.

The Mexican anthropologist *Marcela Lagarde* is one of the promoters and diffusers of the concept in Spanish and refers to the “*mutual support of women to empower all. It is an alliance between women that fosters trust, reciprocal recognition of authority, and support. It implies organizing certain things, in a limited and timely manner, with increasing numbers of women. Adding and creating ties. Assuming that each one is a link to meeting many others.*”⁷

Sororal communion in the feminine apostolic religious life is a prophetic sign. The charisms in communion are an expression of the wealth of the Gospel, of the mystery of Christ that each Institute is called to spread by the grace of the Spirit. God evangelizes with us and through us. Now, this is the challenge of apostolic life: to live in the world as sisters and brothers while, in the communion of charisms, announcing the Gospel and making it credible for our time.

Religious Life in the Key of Sorority

For religious life, sorority means recognizing a great family on earth and in heaven; feeling that, wherever you are, the sisters of the congregation—and beyond the congregation itself—are your family. It implies knowing that we form a community in the Lord who sustains and helps us through our sisters. Joan Chittister writes: “*they do all come out of one heart.*” Jesus is the one who unites us—in one heart—as sisters in one Father; this is the mystery of sororal communion.

The women of the Gospel follow Jesus, stay with Him when He is on the cross, and are the witnesses of the Resurrection; they remain united, as sisters, friends, and confidants (Mary and Elizabeth). Life with the Lord is a community experience that calls us to live together and sends us to the mission. The apostolic religious life is called to be a community that goes out to meet others. Felicísimo Martínez writes: “*fraternal or sororal love is the core of Christian life, the substance of the Kingdom of God and its justice.*”⁸ All are called to live it from their own vocation. Jesus leaves us the commandment of love: “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15:12). With Jesus, the Trinity revealed in the family of Nazareth brings us closer to a human family model of reciprocal love. Sorority-fraternity is learned from the love of the Trinity, the Triune God, of the Father who in His Son gives us his love that stays with humanity through the mystery of the Spirit.

Sororal Communities

St. Augustine understands *koinonia*—the monastic fraternity—as an environment favorable for living in friendship. As a model, he presents Jesus’ request to the

Father in the priestly prayer: *“that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us”* (Jn 17:21). This union is reached by grace. The brother-friend is *“the brother of my heart”* (*Confessions* 9.4-7), *“my other self”* (*Letter* 20.1). The sororal relationship of the sisters or the fraternal relationship of brothers is inspired by the Spirit: *“When our friendship is a friendship in Christ, then there is room for everyone, the friend is unique, although he is not the only friend! (...) Whoever loves according to the heart of Christ, can go through the streets, loving everyone in the infinite space of love that he has received from God and that makes him capable of welcoming everyone to take them to God.”*⁹

The sororal community is a prophecy of a new life in Christ, the proclamation of the presence and the action of God who daily reconciles and unites, amid the inevitable difficulties of common life: *“It is wonderful to succeed in making a religious community into a prophetic sign inserted in a hospital, in a school, in a neighborhood, etc., and that is what it will be if it is a prayerful, fraternal, open, generous, apostolic, and missionary community.”*¹⁰

Sororal life in community puts us side by side, next to each other, where God occupies the center. The community is dynamic, concrete, in constant recreation and celebration; it invites us to give, admire, respect, and renounce to the point of disappearing. Sororal life favors the development of personal gifts and arouses true solicitude for the most fragile and weakest sister because in her we see Jesus fragile and weak.

The letter *Proclaim* recalls that the fruitfulness of apostolic religious life depends on the quality of the community relations: *“Fraternal life in community, lived in simplicity and joy, is the primary and fundamental structure of evangelization.”*¹¹ However, it is necessary to be convinced of its testimonial strength: *“Live the fraternal and sororal alliance, live as brothers and sisters in the Lord (...) It is a way of showing, through life, what following Jesus means, what the evangelical life is, the abundant life that Jesus wants for all mankind. Community life is a practical way of announcing the Gospel, of acclaiming it and making it credible. Because it is more than a proclamation; it is a practice capable of showing that the Gospel is already being lived out: this is one of the fundamental missions of religious life, to show through community practices what evangelical life consists of and how evangelical life can be lived.”*¹²

We need to humanize our relationships, to feel that we are sisters, friends in the Lord, where the sister’s face is transparency of the face of Christ himself. Pope Francis, in his abundant reflections on the consecrated life, insists on caring for the community: *“Closeness! Who is the first neighbor of a consecrated man or woman? The brother or sister of the community. This is your first neighbor.”*¹³

Sororal communities are characterized by sharing the mission because strength, wealth, and testimony reside in the group; by creating the warmth of a hearth, welcome, affection, where one is simply at home. In the sororal relationship, *empathy* moves on to action, to the commitment to take care of the other sister,

to be attentive to her, to look after her. This means looking with sisterly love and sharing the other's feelings, consoling when tears flow and bringing hope of a new life. This is what Pope Francis says: "*the brother and the sister given to me by God are a part of my history, gifts to be cherished.*"¹⁴ Sororal and fraternal relationships push us to create bonds of communion so that everything human has an echo in our hearts.

The core of this community is a committed human and spiritual relationship that bears hope. Let us not be afraid to be humanly vulnerable communities; Christ gave his life out of love for humankind: "*Our identities do not belong to us, but we are trustees of what has been poured into them. They are only fruitful when we offer them up to the end, without making propaganda for them, but rather when we make them available to others.*"¹⁵

Towards Universal Sorority

Jesus made the Twelve into a community. Jesus called himself the brother and sister of humanity united in the same Lord and claimed justice for all. It was not political, but he kept questioning the powerful people of his time... Why should it not be like that today too?

Simone Weil, in her last letter to the Dominican Fr. Jean-Marie Perrin, writes: "*Today it is not enough to be a saint, the holiness that the present moment demands... a new and unprecedented holiness is needed (...) Where there is a need, there is an obligation.*" Many religious travel in their daily lives for the needs of our world; diversity has revealed the sororal creativity that revives the experience of Pentecost: "*turning the world of people into a space of true fraternity.*"¹⁶

Today's religious is the sister of the people; as one of them, she continuously spreads Christ's: healing wounds and ailments, empowering people, mediating conflicts, accompanying the art of reconciliation; she generates life like Jesus, who wants no one to be bent or enslaved but desires a free humanity standing on its feet. Elías López calls us to "*jump into the world's wounds to become a healing ointment*"¹⁷. The wounds hurt, and sometimes the long period of their healing supposes much sacrifice and pain. Unless we embrace the world's suffering, we will not be witnesses of redemption. The religious life in the peripheries manifests a universal sorority, in which we are all children of God, where no one is excluded, and where the only privilege of Jesus' sister and brother is service: *washing the feet* of the marginalized and *carrying the cross* of our history.

Religious life is a charism that collaborates with universal solidarity; if we are women and men of the Spirit, this commitment is a priority in a dispersed world. The sororal community is the first seed of the universal community: "*The life of communion becomes a sign for the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ. In this way, communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission.*"¹⁸ The community is a school of sorority-fraternity: "*It is through the fraternal life that one learns to accept others as a gift from God, accepting their*

positive traits along with their differences and limitations. It is through the fraternal life that one learns to share the gifts received for the building up of all."¹⁹

Religious life is a way of living this *sorority* around the world because today congregations are scattered in the most remote and unexpected places. The feminine apostolic religious life, which represents one of the largest collectivities of women across the planet, is called to extend the global sorority that is rooted in the Love of Christ and calls the others brother and sister. We live in a universal key when we are convinced that we are all part of the same universe that God continues to create.

New Forms of Mission: The Creation of Alliances

The awareness of being a part of the same creation and of humanity itself is the first step towards meeting and participating in a common project. In this third millennium, networking to collaborate and take part in initiatives that contribute to social good and justice is not a trend or a fashion; it is rather the result of a new way of relating that the new technologies and the media have favored and that places us on the global level. The determining question is what unites these networks: is it a solidary humanity that feels the pain of others or a caring humanity that feels the crucified Christ in the pain of others?

The network of religious life is rooted in the reality of being a single heart in Jesus to which nothing human is alien. The universal sorority-fraternity bursts into the mystery of the Incarnation, in a woman who gives us her Son, our elder brother. Jesus teaches us to love as brothers and sisters so that we may form one human family. The networks in religious life are solid because they are woven and moved by an unconditional oblation love. Networks make it possible to unite efforts and improve the performance of resources (both material and personal). However, the union of the networks, the testimony of personal and community dedication is more important than the benefits and achievements of our goals. Today, the networks have become universal and their organization is complex. The media have favored and promoted networks of solidarity and interdependence; now, it is our responsibility to make them into channels of humanity through which the Good News circulates. Interconnectivity broadens and enriches our worldview, strengthens the bonds for common action, and provides a sense of belonging and co-responsibility.

Networks are the testimony of unity in a very divided or fragmented world. The strength of our networks is in the bond that is established: the communion of charisms that does not try to unify, but rather strives to share, exchange, and recreate. The mission is shared when life is shared. The intercongregational model is gaining ground. The common mission, which goes beyond action, implies our mutual relationship and the recognition that we are a gift in reciprocity. No one can appropriate the charism of consecrated life, but the "instinct of universality" should be promoted.²⁰

Prayer of Intercession

When the Spirit bursts in, everything is possible because it is simply surprising. The praying community prepares us to see God's presence in people, to look with the eyes of God's love; communion changes how we look at our sisters and brothers. Henri J.M. Nouwen points out that solitude disposes us for God; there, we empty ourselves for God and, at the same time, we open ourselves to others and let God "touch" the world through us: "*a great space opens up in which we can welcome all the people of the world (...) In true solitude, there is unlimited room for others (...). In solitude, we are so absolutely poor that we can enter into solidarity with all human beings and let our heart be the place of encounter not only with God but through Him, with all people*"²¹.

Metz refers to the "*historical solidarity of the praying (...). Those who pray are embedded in a great network of historical solidarity*"²²; you cannot pray with your back turned to those who suffer, but you must pray for and with them.

Sororal-fraternal communion is a *theological space* where the mystical presence of the risen Lord is lived. To enter into the logic of the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit implies loving one another, where love is renunciation for love's sake, in a circular movement between the three persons. From this perspective, the religious community contemplates the love of God that it is called to reflect. People who are so different cannot live together stably, if not because each of them is united to the Lord.

The center of the communion is the sacrament of the Eucharist. Jesus, before entering into communion with humanity, entrusted it to his disciples, saying "*do this in memory of me.*" He also entrusts it to us. What is this "task"? To distribute the broken bread, share it, and commit oneself; today, it is still a prophetic sign, the anticipation of the definitive love in Christ. Consecrated life actualizes the self-giving on the cross of Jesus who loved us to the extreme. In the Eucharist, we commune with Christ and in love with Him, we commune with the poorest and neediest—with human drama—in our service of love in Christ.

Towards a New Humanity

To build universal sorority-fraternity, we must cross borders and so perhaps find ourselves on dangerous ground; many sisters do this. The border is not a limit, but a point of passage to life with the most disadvantaged. Charity is not an option. In our secularized society, religious life will be credible if its projects are human and humanize. Are Sisters merely a drop of water in the ocean? Yes, of course, they are only a few and anonymous among many, but by contact, as by osmosis, good is spreading. Their voice must make itself heard with the serenity and firmness typical of women. Their presence from below brings them closer to the world's truth. Creating ties means "*offering life,*" formation, speaking out, dignity, overcoming marginalization in order to become part of society with one's own voice. Sisters must choose to be a prophetic minority, resituate themselves,

courageously assume—in some cases, to the point of martyrdom—their dedication to humanity, and so be a sign of the Spirit that inspires strength.

Trinitarian communion is a communion of love to the point of *kenosis*. Where is the *kenosis* of religious life? Descending and going to the last, personal and community exodus to the promised land is the only way of salvation. Religious life implies dying. Visiting the history of our founders and foundresses leads to discovering countercurrent men and women, visionaries who made courageous decisions. This is *missionary imagination* attentively listening to the Spirit and going beyond daily events, intuiting God's gaze on the world, and opting for a different value system, for new attitudes towards life: "*Dialogue is a powerful instrument for mutually becoming brothers and sisters, and perhaps also friends, beyond the differences and the multiple problems of daily life. Religious life, when opened to dialogue, becomes a path of friendship that tells, better than words, who the God we celebrate is.*"²³

Being disciples means living communion in Christ, by holding each other accountable as sisters and brothers, so that no one gets lost. Today, the mission does not go along spectacular and even less popular roads; the mission puts us on the sidelines because Jesus stood at the margins; only there does it become fruitful; but accepting this is not easy and often uncomfortable. Religious life—located on the roadside, where love and mercy become especially urgent since that is where life and hope are most threatened—is prophetic.

Conclusion

Christ has made us a people of sisters and brothers. Jesus tells us: "You are all brothers" (Mt 23:8). We are called—as women—to express the joy of walking together, as sisters with our sisters and brothers: to offer God's love to the world and the world to God. Religious life is called to draw near to the others, to love them, to understand them, and to alleviate their suffering; to be the place where God is experienced, revealed in the world today. Joy emanates from the encounter and communion; it is not enough to point the way, you have to walk on the path with the others and, guided by the Spirit, be a seed of hope.

The feminine religious life is called to manifest its "originality" by its words and gestures, its tenderness, simplicity, delicacy, care, attention, kindness, and closeness. In a woman's heart, the passion of love is also expressed by tears of pain in the face of injustice, violence, and suffering.

God's love is not exhausted. Let us remember the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. Our task, as a Superior General said, is to "contribute my loaves and my fish"—the Lord will do the rest. Is this not what the Spirit asks of us? We are called to be sisters and that is all; it is a mystery of the person who lives fascinated by Christ. At profession, we place ourselves in the hands of our older sisters in the faith; being sisters is the fruitfulness of the measureless love that creates bonds, makes us accomplices, and turns the community into a provocation,

sharing gifts, life, prayer, out of love for the world! Sororal communion is an eschatological sign of God's family, reconciled and reunited.

It is time to create and multiply generous forms of sorority also at a distance. The world has grown close to us: sick sisters and brothers, prisoners, the abandoned, poor, and humiliated... of the entire world are part of our prayer of intercession. Prayer and mission come together in projects of action on the local level and in the global dimension. In our days, extensive networks have been created around human trafficking, immigration, child exploitation, begging, prostitution... we have the means, resources, and professionals to alleviate the pain of many people, to bear witness to Christ who has come to free them from slavery and humiliation. Religious life has decided to organize itself in a new, flexible, inclusive, and creative way that favors other apostolates. Increasing numbers of religious are raising their voices in international institutions in defense of the rights and dignity of the person. From these platforms, their proclamation also becomes a credible and prophetic sign of the Kingdom.

Going out on the road together, in community, with other sisters and brothers, with other institutes, with laypeople... we are religious life in sororal communion and the world is our home; we have deep roots that give us identity but no fixed homeland, as we advance towards our final home. It is urgent to let ourselves be encountered, to become visible, not as protagonists or by distinguishing oneself, without being heroes or just martyrs, but as Jesus told us: "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Mt 7:20). Coming to be present, going out into the street and in the square means making oneself available to others and letting oneself be involved by human misery; being sensitive and simple, crying with and for the world will turn our heart of stone into a humble and human heart of flesh. Only our humanity brings us closer to humanity. Jesus of Nazareth became a man, and mankind cost him death on the cross. Following Jesus means following a man who did not have an easy life. But it is possible to follow him because our strength comes from the Spirit of the Lord.

The dream of religious life is a sororal universe. Its mission is located where Christ is still crucified in our suffering sisters and brothers. Today, the apostolic feminine religious life is the bearer of good news. The fruits of the Spirit begin to be seen: hope and joy are perceived in the way it is present in the world and creating communion.

Religious life believes in the God of the Covenant with the human family, it is part of humanity and loves its brothers and sisters. Pope Francis calls us to "rescue" the best of humanity: "*God created mankind to be one family; when any of our brothers and sisters suffer, we are all affected.*"²⁴ The mission comes from God who continues to call us and who works very discreetly through us: *May we let God be God.*

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- 2 Mercedes NAVARRO PUERTO, "Trinidad y mujer: el problema del lenguaje," *Testimonio* 5 (1993) p. 53.
- 3 Eleonora Barbieri Masini, "Religiosas, constructoras de un futuro alternativo, caminando en nuevas solidaridades," *UISG Bulletin* 108 (1998) p. 31.
- 4 Enrica Rosanna, "El don de ser mujer. Algunas sugerencias para la reflexión en vista de la educación y de la formación de la mujer," *UISG Bulletin* 119 (2002) p. 19.
- 5 Janet Mock, "Surprised by Joy: Springs of the Great Deep Illuminating Religious Life," LCWR Assembly, Houston, Texas 12 August 2015: https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/janet_mock_csj_-_keynote_address_-_lcwr_assembly_-_august_12_2015_0.pdf.
- 6 Pat Farrell, "Leading from the Allure of Holy Mystery: Contemplation and Transformation," LCWR Assembly, Atlanta, Georgia 2016: https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/lcwr_2016_assembly_keynote_-_pat_farrell_osf.pdf.
- 7 Marcela Lagarde, Conferencia: Sororidad. Fuenlabrada (Madrid) 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CKCCy6R2_g
- 8 Felicísimo MARTÍNEZ DíEZ, *La frontera actual de la vida religiosa. Bases y desafíos de la refundación*, San Pablo, Madrid, 2000, p. 75.
- 9 Michelina Tenace, "Col cuore di Cristo sulle strade del mondo," *Vivere in Cristo secondo la forma di vita del Vangelo* (PC 2). *Formati alla vita consacrata nel cuore della Chiesa e del mondo* (Sequela Christi 2015/02), CIVCSVA, Rome, 2015, p. 46.
- 10 Eduardo F. Pironio, "La misión profética en la Iglesia y su expresión en la vida religiosa," *UISG Bulletin* 73 (1987), p. 9.
- 11 CIVCSVA, *Proclaim* 29.
- 12 Felicísimo Martínez Díez, *¿Adónde va la vida religiosa?*, (Sígueme, 20), San Pablo, Madrid 2008, p. 98.
- 13 Francis, Address for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy for Consecrated Life, Rome, 1 February 2016: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160201_giubileo-vita-consacrata.html.
- 14 Francis, Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 22nd World Day for Consecrated Life, St. Peter's Basilica, 2 February 2018: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.
- 15 José Cristo Rey García Paredes, "Profecía de la Vida Religiosa hoy, Una forma de vida luminosa," CONFER 2010: http://www.dominicananunciata.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/wdomi_pdf_4776-EiazlXZNP1nO0fv3.pdf.
- 16 Salvador Martínez, "La experiencia de la de carismática de la renovación del Espíritu Santo," *Ecclesia*, nos. 1-4, vol. 27 (2013) p. 84.
- 17 Elías López, "'Religiosos-reconciliadores' dispuestos a ser 'daño colateral'." Cordero de Dios que cargas con la violencia del mundo," in CONFER, no. 199, vol. 52 (2013) p. 401.
- 18 CIVCSVA, *Proclaim*, 50.
- 19 CIVCSVA, *New Wine in New Wineskins*, 16.
- 20 Aquilino Bocos Merino, "Una fecunda y ordenada comunión eclesial," *Vida Religiosa* 90 (2001) p. 298.
- 21 Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Soledad y comunidad," *UISG Bulletin* 48 (1978) p. 53.
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- 23 Jean-Claude Lavigne, *Perché abbiamo la vita in abbondanza*, Qiqajon-Comunità di Bose, Magnano 2011, p. 364.
- 24 Francis, Speech in the Mòria Refugee Camp, Lesvos Saturday, 16 April 2016: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco_20160416_lesvos-rifugiati.html.

From the desk of the Executive Secretary

In the current issues of the UISG Bulletin the presentations from the Assembly are being published. The Assembly was a great success, thanks to the participation and support of so many Superiors General/Congregational Leaders. This report will summarize the UISG activities for the second half of 2019. Obviously this was a time of initiation for the new President and Executive Board of UISG. It takes time to get to know the mission and outreach of UISG. The number of Board members has been increased to ten members with two substitutes although all 12 members attend board meetings and other events. Already we can sense the difference it makes to have additional members on the Board. In 2020, the Board intends to facilitate the participation of the UISG worldwide delegates in our meetings through the use of our excellent technological system which enables us to stream meetings with translation provided. This wonderful resource has also been used by several congregations.

We were delighted that Sr. Gabriella Bottani's tireless efforts to end human trafficking were recognised by the US Government who honoured her as a Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Hero at a celebration held in Washington in June, 2019. At the end of July, Sr. Gabriella and myself travelled to the United Nations in New York where the Vatican inaugurated Lisa Kristine's photo exhibition "Nuns Healing Hearts" This was a collaborative venture with the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The event was a great success, using photos to highlight the work of Catholic Sisters against many different forms of human trafficking throughout the world. Above all it pointed out that another world is possible, a more human and more equal world, when we work together. This was a very important year for Talitha Kum. The 10th Anniversary celebrations was held at the end of September in Rome during the 1st International Assembly. There were 86 delegates present from 48 countries and the final declaration names clear priorities for 2020-2025 and identifies communication, formation and networking in Asia and Africa as focus areas. Check the Talitha Kum website to read about these and other events and to receive more information: www.talithakum.info. UISG invites sisters working against human trafficking to become part of their local networks in order to strengthen our collaboration and hence our effectiveness. The map on the website indicates where the networks are located and we encourage sisters to join together across congregations to strengthen our efforts in this important ministry.

In May I attended the annual Assembly of COREW (Conference of Religious of England and Wales). The themes of "Encounter" and "Communion" were explored together for a second year in order to develop an action plan. In August I attended the LCWR Assembly which was held at Scottsdale Arizona and made a presentation on the theme – Imagining Leadership in a Global Community. The focus on global challenges at various Assemblies call us to discern how best to respond as we live "glocally" at the intersection of the local and the global no matter our context. During the month of September at the Conrad N. Hilton Convening in Los Angeles I had the opportunity to present an adapted version of the LCWR presentation as well as to speak to the staff of the Foundation on the work of sisters against human trafficking. This latter provided an opportunity to thank those who work behind the scene to support the work of Catholic Sisters.

There were many meetings during this final quarter of the year. The focus of many of these meetings has been on the protection of children and vulnerable adults. There have been several meetings with the Commission for the Protection of Minors and several inter-Dicastery meetings at which UISG and USG were present. Both Unions decided at recent Assemblies to focus on the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, and to create a new joint Commission for the Care of Persons which will obviously focus on prevention and safeguarding issues. In order to move forward, a working group was established to discuss the terms of reference and the scope of such a commission. The UISG has decided, with the help of the GHR Foundation, to create an office which will focus on this work with congregations of women religious. The office will focus on the general area of the care of persons – with particular reference to safeguarding and protection. It will also work specifically on the question of orphanages. The 2017 Vatican statistics identify 9,813 orphanages and 31,182 “other institutions” besides all the schools, hospitals, dispensaries, clinics, nurseries, special education centres, age care homes and centres for people with special needs which are run by the Catholic Church. The particular challenge with regard to orphanages is that research determines that 80% of children in orphanages have parents or a parent or an extended family who could care for them with support from elsewhere. There is a worldwide movement presenting new models of care and support and as sisters we should be in the forefront of such initiatives.

Significant events took place in Rome during the months of October and November which involved the staff at UISG. We were invited to nominate 10 sisters to participate in the Synod on the Amazon. In collaboration with CLAR we identified sisters from different parts of Amazonia who brought many different qualifications and pastoral experiences to enrich the Synod itself. This was a particular highlight, since at the previous synods on the Family and on Youth, UISG had 3 representatives. All the sisters attending the Synod were invited to UISG before the opening and many were interviewed during the Synod itself. . We were blessed at UISG to share many moments with the sisters and other participants and through “the Amazon – Common Home” initiative which organized many different events and exhibitions in Rome. We also tried to connect the members of UISG worldwide with the Synod during that period. The canonization of Cardinal John Henry Newman was obviously a significant event as it was a celebratory moment for both the Catholic and Anglican Churches yet four others were canonized on that same day, October 13 – three of them religious sisters: Sr. Marian Thresia (Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family-India); Sr. Dulce Lopes Pontes (Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception - Brazil); Sr. Giuseppina Vannini (Daughters of Sr. Camillus - Italia) and Marguerite Bays (Consecrated Virgin – Switzerland). The diversity of their backgrounds and their saintly service in many different contexts remind us of Newman’s words: “God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life but I should be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.” May each of us experience this same sense of vocation and communion in our service of others.

Finally in 2019 we sadly said goodbye to two UISG staff members. Firstly to Sr. Cecilia Bayona, OSA, who concluded her time at UISG after many years of dedicated service. In recent years she was the familiar face of UISG, to all who visited Ponte San Angelo - welcoming visitors and responding to their many needs. She was responsible for the archives and was meticulous in organizing the filing system.

She was also a member of the team that dispatches the Bulletin to UISG members – not a small task. We are deeply grateful to Sr. Cecilia for the many ways in which she served the members of UISG with such loyalty, dedication and commitment.

Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA, has also concluded her years of service at UISG. She has been the intrepid pioneer of the UISG Migrants Project in Sicily which was recently extended to Lampedusa. Establishing an inter-congregational initiative is challenging but Sr. Elisabetta was convinced of the importance of the witness of this new type of collaboration within religious life. She was also a wonderful resource person for many individuals and congregations. Her tireless commitment and dedication and her love of religious life has been a witness to us all. We thank her for her generosity, kindness and wisdom during her years of service to religious life at UISG. We will miss them both.

Other News...

UISG YouTube Channels

For almost three years UISG has been offering seminars and online meetings, thus making it possible for us to create a well-furnished video library of material for the formation of Sisters.

Below are the addresses of lists of the available videos:

<http://bit.ly/VideosSinodoAmazonia>

<http://bit.ly/SowingHopeForThePlanet>

<http://bit.ly/UISGFormation>

Newsletter through WhatsApp: +39 349 935 87 44

At the 2019 UISG Plenary Assembly, we inaugurated a WhatsApp Newsletter in 4/5 languages for more direct and immediate communication with the Sisters. We are preparing a WhatsApp Newsletter for Superiors General. The news we send is mainly concerns the online formational initiatives promoted by UISG, but other specific information is also given.

If you would to subscribe to the WhatsApp Newsletter, please carefully fill out the online form at this address: <http://bit.ly/WhatsappUISG>

Meeting with the New Superiors and General Counsellors

In the last year, several UISG Member Congregations have held General Chapters. Consequently, we organized for the new General Governments a meeting, both online and presential, which took place on 11 December 2019. There, UISG presented its projects and services. It was a moment of exchange but, above all, a space for strengthening our sense of belonging to feminine religious life.

If you were not able to participate, you can request the recorded videos at this address: comunicazione@uisg.org.

Does “burn out” exist in religious life? Are we prepared to respond resiliently?

We held our first one-day workshop on the theme of “Burn Out” (emotional exhaustion related to work) and Resilience, with the valuable contribution of Sr. Maryanne Loughry, Sister of Mercy and psychologist.

The dictionary of psychology defines Burn out as “a work-related state of emotional exhaustion that depletes interest in work, personal success and effectiveness, in which the person is no longer able to make decisions.”

Women Church World

Since its creation, the magazine *Women Church World* (available in Italian, English, French, and Spanish) has good collaboration with UISG, because it is very interested in the Voice of Sisters in the world. Several times the President and other Sisters have contributed to the magazine.

For more information: <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/section/women-church-world>

Sisters Appointed in Vatican Dicasteries

Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, UISG Executive Secretary, has been appointed a consultant of the *Pontifical Council for Culture*, along with two other Sisters: Sr. Mariella Mascitelli and Sr. Dominica Dipio.

In 2019, Pope Francis also appointed other Sisters to Vatican Dicasteries.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA) has appointed as members of the Congregation six Superiors General:

- Sr. Kathleen Appler, F.D.C., Superior General of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent of Paul;
- Sr. Yvonne Reungoat, F.M.A., Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Auxiliatrice (Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco);
- Sr. Francoise Massy, F.M.M., Superior General of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary;
- Sr. Luigia Coccia, S.M.C., Superior General of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, “The Devoute Mothers of Africa”;
- Sr. Simona Brambilla, M.C., Superior General of the Consolata Missionary Sisters;
- Sr. M. Rita Calvo Sanz, O.D.N., Superior General of the Company of Mary Our Lady.

The Secretariat of the Synod has appointed three Sisters as consultants for a three-year term:

- Sr. Nathalie Becquart (Xavier Sister, France)
- Sr. Maria Luisa Berzosa (Daughter of Jesus, Spain)
- Sr. Alessandra Smerilli (Salesian, Italy)

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