

**CONSECRATED LIFE:
FAITHFULNESS AND CREATIVE INNOVATION**

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PRESENTATION

We are living in a time of significant change for consecrated life. It would appear that the process of secularization has caused a “crisis” which can be mainly identified through two important signs: declining membership and the seeming loss of significance. How can we “pass through” this crisis in a constructive way? This issue of the UISG Bulletin, wants to offer some reflections that may help to develop such an approach. Starting from the assumption that over time everything changes and is transformed, we must first embrace change as an opportunity to start afresh with new energy. Secondly, we address the topic of declining membership and reconfiguration, and finally we reflect on new possibilities offered today especially in terms of intercultural and inter-congregational developments. All of these topics are explored without losing our essence as consecrated women rooted in God, rediscovering every day the joy of being consecrated.

Sr. Tiziana Merletti, SFP

Reconfiguration: A parable of decline or an opportunity for female Religious Institutes?

A common practice in the western world is to deal with the reconfiguration of Religious Life Institutes when the situation becomes critical. It is no secret that one of the most tangible and evident consequences of the Institutes declining number of members, combined to the growing multiculturalism of governments and of communities, is that the newly elected governments at General Chapters, are mandated to conceive new ways and forms of restructuring the Institute. This study intends to provide guidelines contributing to transform such a delicate task into a response to an appeal for transformation and evolution, rather than resulting in grim report on diminishing resources and ability to act.

Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA

Welcoming changes in the light of Scripture

In order to prepare ourselves to welcome change, it can be helpful to acknowledge what we want to bring with us when we leave the country that we know in order to go into the land that the Lord will indicate to us. When travelling from one country to another, it is necessary to stop regularly in order to recover our strength and courage before setting off again. These stages are oases in which we share with other travellers the joys and the exhaustion of the journey. I invite you to imagine living through one of these pauses which might help us to perceive this time of reflection on reconfiguration as a privileged time, a blessed oasis.

Prof. Dr. Myriam Wijlens

Diminishing Human Resources for Leadership in Religious Institutes: An Assistance for Taking Stock and Shaping the Future

In 2002 the secretariat of the Conference of Major Superiors in The Netherlands (KNR) developed a questionnaire intending to assist institutes in taking stock and opening up new paths in preparation for the future. The questionnaire was not intended as a survey, but as a means of making all members of a province/house aware of their situation and therefore come to appreciate in what areas decision must be made.

Fr. David Glenday MCCJ

God's fellow workers: the joys, challenges and opportunities of the relationships between Institutes of Consecrated Life

We are all well aware of the challenges our Institutes face at this time, and the considerable effort and energy poured into initiatives of ongoing formation aimed at renewal. Happily, there are projects of cooperation in this area, but they need to be multiplied, born of the conviction that any real renewal will be renewal together, that we really do need each other for this task.

Carlos del Valle, SVD

Rediscovering the joy of being consecrated

Much has been written about the Consecrated Life, and much more has been lived. The Consecrated Life is something that we breathe, rather than something that we think about. The question is not 'what is the consecrated life?', but rather 'how can I be a religious woman/man today?' Let us try to understand the world of the Consecrated Life in which we move, and to understand ourselves. Without being nostalgic about 'what is not being lived', let us rather look forward and cherish hope as a nostalgia for the future. This reflection wants to transmit a creative passion for the possible. If, in the Consecrated Life we do not feel the need for change, we become self-satisfied. We need to innovate, and not to be obsessed with growth or diminishment.

RECONFIGURATION: A PARABLE OF DECLINE OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FEMALE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES?

Sr. Tiziana Merletti, SFP

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Original in Italian

1. Introduction

A common practice in the western world is to deal with the reconfiguration of Religious Life Institutes when the situation becomes critical. It is no secret that one of the most tangible and evident consequences of the Institutes declining number of members, combined to the growing multiculturalism of governments and of communities, is that the newly elected governments at General Chapters, are mandated to conceive new ways and forms of restructuring the Institute. Usually, the aim is to gain greater flexibility in the relationship between the government and its members, more participation of the latter in the life of the Institute as well as a reduced number of members in position of responsibility. This study intends to provide guidelines contributing to transform such a delicate task into a response to an appeal for transformation and evolution, rather than resulting in grim report on diminishing resources and ability to act. After all, it is the call of a Church invited not to be self-centered, nostalgic of a glorious past, but rather called to become the model of flourishing structures, as an example of open, adaptable and life-generating

systems for its members and able to better reach out humanity wherever it lies. No matter for how long more, it is better to manage with diligence what we currently have. The same Pope Francis, during his recent visit to Milan on March 25, spoke in similar terms: “many grew up with the idea that religious families needed to occupy spaces rather than launching processes. We must initiate processes, not occupy spaces ”.

2. Types of reconfiguration

Canons 581 and 585 define five actions which can be followed to reshape the institutes’ structure¹ :

Division into parts: it refers to a first selection of aggregated houses to be grouped into larger units, the main entity being the *Province*.

Establish new parts : it refers to the creation of additional units, similar or different from existing ones.

Fusion of established parts : it refers to aggregating several units modifying their composition (i.e. several regions which become a Province), or preserving their set up but extending their territorial borders (i.e. the fusion of several provinces into one).

Modification of established parts: it refers to a different configuration of existing parts (i.e. a Region becoming a Province or viceversa, or changes in the territorial boundaries).

Suppression of a part of the institute: it involves the suppression of a circumscription, also in view of a transformation (i.e. a Province which becomes a region/delegation/single Generalate). Accidentally this action is not included in Canon 581 but in the following Canon 585, although it is one of the main possible needs during a reconfiguration.

In addition to the two above said Canons, the CCL 83 mentions parts of an institute in Canon 621, where a Province is described and in Canon 634 §1, in the section on temporal goods.

3. The “parts” of Consecrated Life Institutes

A deeper analysis of the work done by Commissions tasked with the revision of CCL 83, highlights some common elements :

- 1) All the attention is on the Province, as it is the most complete and comprehensive unit, having²:
 - a territory
 - a canonical recognition

the union of more houses
under the same authority

- 2) Preserve with certain consistency, the approach to enforce the principle of institutes' autonomy also in one's own structural organisation, and thus be ready to activate a reconfiguration process failing the conditions for the existence of a Province³.
- 3) When dealing with other units which are not provinces generates a certain hesitation. In Canon 581 and Canon 620, "the parts of an institute" are often considered as units equivalent to a Province rather than units of a different type.

These are today, contrarily to provinces, the forms which are more flexible and adequate to interpret the current situation and better advocate for life, regardless numbers being limited.

The definition of the characteristics of a "part" (defined with different terms in Proper Law, such as: regions, delegations, inspectorates, districts, custodians, vice-provinces, etc.) different from a province, is usually done "by default" due to: lack of members, insufficient economic means and works, limited autonomy at least when the appointed superior has delegated power only by the Superior General or the Provincial, therefore is not a major Superior.

However, it is a "potential" public juridic person (*ipso iure* the provinces, with a formal act to establish the other parts), of the "*universitas personarum*" category⁴. Although, it is not collegial⁵, since the major Superior acts with personal powers (can. 115, § 2) connected with her office.

4. Canon law requirements

Hereafter, a summary of requirements for a sound reconfiguration process according to universal law.

Constitutions must contain norms of law regarding the Institute's structure.

In particular:

- Which are the potential parts foreseen in the Institute. A brief description: internal competent authority, procedures to be followed, rules, use of tangible and intangible assets⁶
- Which are the criteria defining the erection or suppression of one part of the Institute.
- Which is the competent authority for such decisions: General Chapter// Superior General collegially with the Council// Superior General with the consent of the Council.
- Which are the inspiring principles to preserve the patrimony, in its parts and in its whole.

The Directory must include detailed norms concerning the management of the various units:

- The number of houses and of members required in order to erect a province/another part.
- Sufficient and grounded reasons to undertake modifying the structure.
- Relationship between the Superior General and the Provincial Superior and how to exercise the different competences on the Province's houses and members.
- Relationship between the Superior General and the Superior with delegated powers and how to exercise the different competences on the units' houses and members. Viceversa, members need to clearly know who is the Superior competent for any incoming needs.
- Seat of the Noviciate and indications about initial and ongoing formation.
- Responsibilities of the various levels of authority concerning works and apostolic activities.

5. Principles for a vital and effective reconfiguration

When analysing the various experiences of reconfiguration of religious institutes, there are some theological and canon law⁷ principles which allow to undergo a thorough and constructive study for such an important process of change, to serve the good of the institute⁸.

Governance Autonomy and Responsibility

CIC 83 acknowledges the great importance for institutes to enjoy an adequate autonomy, namely of governance, as stated under Can. 586 § 1. We herein underline that the Superior General and the Council are held liable to be aware of any situation of unease among members due to structures no longer fit to meet the needs of the people, the time and the place where one works. Signs of similar unease are often recorded in two extreme situations: an excessive presence of the government, involved in micro managing, or the opposite, absence/distance which produce lack of care and of governance. Accepting to face, to raise and to understand a problem, suggesting solutions to its members can inevitably cause concerns and anxiety. However, problems become greater when trying to dismiss or postpone them, since contradictions end up surfacing and require action, but then solutions are found under pressure and the outcome is not always the best.

Subsidiarity and Decentralization

Subsidiarity can be defined as the guiding principle stating that if an inferior entity can adequately fulfil a duty, the superior entity does not need to intervene but merely supports its actions. If an institute promotes formation empowering

its members, time will be ripe for a decentralization. An initial division into parts represents an important moment in the life of an institute, but also during the downsizing, members should be granted this opportunity. It should be linked to the principle of *accountability*, which is extremely widespread in the field of “governance” and which calls individuals to be accountable for their decisions, actions and results achieved⁹. In this specific case, such principle is enforced in a circular mode, since members are accountable to superior “minors”, superior “minors” to superior “majors”, superior “majors” to the entire institute, particularly during the General Chapter.

Principle of identity

Each institute, in redesigning its organisational model, is called to keep into special account its own spiritual roots, to protect its patrimony, to encourage community life, to protect rights, to clearly define members’ responsibilities and the institute’s planned mission¹⁰.

Communion and a sense of belonging

The principle of communion applied to changing an institute’s structure should not be understood as an exercise of “rotating people”, because what is at stake is the possibility for its members to “meaningfully” continue living their communal life in mission. For instance, when uniting provinces belonging to a given entity but located in remote territories, the challenge is to make members still feel part of a reality that appears foreign and distant. What makes things worst is the fact that the Superior major/delegated will be less frequently in the houses and the middle level of governance could be less effective and forceful. Therefore, the government will have to put into place initiatives (at intermediate levels) to keep encouraging contacts among members.

Corresponsibility of members

All institutes’ members follow the same call of the Holy Spirit, hence they all enjoy the same right-duty to participate in governing the congregation, particularly when it concerns the quality of community life and of ministry for the entire community of life. Canon 115 §2, stipulates that consecrated people are members of public juridic collegial persons, where the members decide their action, they “*are part of the decision-making process, with or without equal rights, under norms of law and of statutes*”. It is thus important to underline that members are involved in the government either directly or through a representative¹¹. In practical terms, it means that all the members involved in the reconfiguration, are to be informed and can take part in the process. A coordination commission should design two/three models to be proposed. These should be approved by the leadership and then shared with members for comments and suggestions. In order to achieve a result, this process cannot be

managed under time pressure: it requires patience, attentive listening, discernment, planning, decision-making, implementation, assessment¹². A change in the structure can represent a major change in individual lives, hence before reaching the final decision, it is necessary to promote at least a survey or a consultative vote, if a unanimous vote is not envisaged.

Principle of ongoing formation

In keeping with the spirit of Canons 592, 2 and 661, when changing a structure, it is necessary to verify who in the government, is in charge of this aspect of ongoing formation which concerns leadership formation, particularly for the youngest members, in this new scenario. Each member, on their side are committed to grow into the institute's spirit, in an effort to understand the motivations for change, while avoiding to live clinging to the past, they should provide a mature feedback on how the structure's change has a positive impact, or not, on individual and community life. Particular attention should be focused on the most vulnerable, the elderly and ill members who should be prepared – as best as possible – on spiritual, emotional and practical levels, and must be reassured that reconfiguration will not have negative consequences on their personal care.

Principle of apostolic mobility

As regards the apostolic service, superiors must take care of all the implications due to the structure's change. It is indeed essential to clearly define the various levels of responsibility, authority, power of delegation with religious and civil authorities, particularly when works are concerned. Good governance can be seriously undermined by superiors of different levels, who intervene on members in charge, without a clear definition of roles, in a wearing ping-pong which creates confusion, resentment to the advantage of someone external who might profit from this situation.

Clear, consistent and distinctive levels of governance

It can occur that a reconfiguration process is activated due to the lack of members, but it ends up requiring even more members to cover all governance needs. Moreover, it is necessary to thoroughly analyze the current system's organization, to avoid running the risk of leaving certain tasks unmanaged, namely at intermediate levels. Experience shows that certain omissions can increase the responsibility of the Superior General and of the Council, which inevitably leads to micro-managing¹³.

The various models¹⁴ can have different variables, let us consider a few cases:

The fusion of several provinces. The new province is likely to grow, to the

extent that it will be difficult for the Provincial Superior to provide an effective management and animation, if ever, she still has the energy and the age to travel and to handle the rest. In that case, a possible alternative could be the Provincial Vicar, as provided by Canon 620. Due to her special status, the Vicar could share the responsibility with the Provincial Superior to manage sisters in particular conditions (i.e. in infirmaries or living in given geographical areas). The scope of her authority should be agreed and clarified at first, to avoid conflicts, specifying which functions are reserved to the Provincial Superior. When selecting delegates to Provincial and General Chapters, particular attention should be given to ensure an equal and proportionate representation of the various groups, now aggregated under the same unit. Some groups which are implementing this process, plead for a simplification of the entire governance and organization. In particular, managing works on behalf of the Institute often requires skills and competences beyond the possibilities of the members involved. No doubt, we are still in an experimental phase and it will take some years, to understand if it was worthwhile to choose a fusion, rather than other less disruptive solutions.

Provinces reconsidered as units with delegated powers: Other profiles, other than the Major Superior, manage governance with delegated powers in certain domains. The system becomes centralized and it is in the hands of the Major Superior and of her Council. This kind of solution requires a great administrative ability in identifying delegated matters and providing appropriate powers to avoid having to frequently rely upon the highest authority¹⁵. In practice, it will be vital for the delegated superior to decide what she will need, in terms of structures and of means, to fulfill her task. It must be fully compliant with members' rights and with the delegating authority. Should one of the two general councilors be delegated, it could create a problem since she would end up having two "identities": one as a councilor called to assist the Major Superior for the good of the entire institute and another as the delegate for a specific unit. The government has the duty to avoid confusion in assigning roles, and to ensure a balanced exercise of distinct roles.

Open system/Unity of the Congregation

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical '*Laudato si'*', reminds us that this universe is "shaped by open and intercommunicating systems"¹⁶, which result in countless forms of relationship and of participation. Therefore, when referring to structures, we must keep in mind that there are multiple variables, there is no perfect abstract structure, nothing can be designed on the drawing board. Schneiders¹⁷ utilizes quantum physics as a metaphor to express that religious life is not a mechanical reality but an organic one. It is not made of single parts operating with precision in order to produce a perfect and comprehensible whole. Religious life must be viewed in a holistic system where everything is interconnected and

interpreted through relationships, open to be mutually influenced by the external world. If this is true for the entire institute, all the more so for each of its parts. The secret is to seize the reconfiguration as an opportunity to grow into open systems. It is an invitation to welcome an exchange of vulnerabilities and to be mutually enriched, in a dialogue unveiling the true identity of the single parts and of the whole. It is not with predefined rules, subject to control that one can discover new pathways, but rather accepting the risk of chaos linked to the unforeseeable future, to diminishing resources, to decreasing active members. This approach can bring about a new concept of unity that takes into account the fluctuating reality in constant change, the evolution of life in terms of interculturality and of transformations so typical of the Holy Spirit acting both inside us but also between us and our structures.

6. Procedures

a) How to manage a reconfiguration already established in Constitutions

- Define the reconfiguration goals ¹⁸
- Greatest involvement of all members during the discernment and the assessment of the various options
- Use advisory and participatory bodies
- Define the new type of authority foreseen and clear levels of decision-making/proxy of powers
- Decide the unit's possible new seat, its name and logo
- Decision taken via decree by the competent authority
- Accurate schedule in terms of implementation and assessment. As for the calendar, it is reasonable to keep in mind the deadlines for General Chapters
- Communication of courtesy to local Bishops involved/Conferences of Major Superiors
- Communication to collaborators and consultants
- In case of fusion of units with the status as public juridic person, according to the agreement with the State, it will be necessary to extinguish the civil entities, fulfill the various procedures such as transfer of ownership, modified wills of members, etc. Otherwise consequences will be more severe in case of crossed fiscal checks between the new civil entities and the canon profile of the extinguished entities. Particular attention should be paid to the organization of archives and all their sensitive material stored (both in terms of the institute's history, as well as of the members' life).

b) How to manage a reconfiguration if not stated by Constitutions

Should Constitutions not mention the unit in question, once implemented the

abovesaid steps and after members' discernment, it will necessary to do the following:

- Prepare a possible Plan “ad experimentum” with clear and comprehensive timing and instructions.
- Apply to the Holy See for the licence to pursue “ad experimentum” (can 583). The licence corresponds to one of many specific single administrative acts: a privilege, dispensation, rescript, decree. It should always be filed and granted in writing with a motivation and explanation on how the decision was reached as well as the timeline and term to end the experiment. Constitutions remain unchanged during this period of time.
- The Holy See issues a grant decree with no extension period, after which Constitutions are to be amended (can. 587, § 2).
- Possible assessment and monitoring of the experiment
- Vote at the General Chapter on the unit to be added to Constitutions
- Approval of the Holy See to amendments to the Constitutions
- Implementing changes.

7. Conclusion

The strong emphasis placed by the Church with the Vatican Council II on *communion* has produced a rich reflection on this theological aspect, central to interpret and build the Church. However, it also true that for some years now, the Church structures and its underlying laws are been questioned on how they should contribute in making communion truly visible and tangible in ecclesial life. Religious institutes are confronted with the same challenge: transform their structures into “a house and a school of communion”, where members can fully live their vocation, in a mature atmosphere of mutual collaboration and support, where all resources and means are used to accomplish the institute's mission. Numbers should not influence the importance of a life devoted to proclaim God's mercy. Undertaking a reconfiguration is inevitably associated with a feeling of decline and of completion but not necessarily with a feeling of defeat and of uselessness. Finding a good process is considered almost as a right of both present and future members but also for past members who, in giving their lives, have taken over from the founding fathers and mothers : spreading the Word of the Gospel they received in the community of life. Here and now, as if we were again that “little flock” of the early times.

- ¹ See D. ANDRÉS, (*Le forme di vita consacrata: commentario teologico-giuridico al Codice di Diritto Canonico*) The forms of consecrated life: a theological and legal commentary to the Code of Canon Law Rome, 2008, pg. 45.
- ² During the 11nd Session of the Coetus Studiorum De Institutis perfectionis, held on May 8-12, 1967, under the title *De domibus et provinciis religiosis* comes the definition of Province: *Communicationes*, 17 (1985), pg. 134.
- ³ See F. G. MORRISEY, *The restructuring of Provinces in a Religious Institute*, in: *The Jurist*, 62 (2002), pg. 116.
- ⁴ Under Roman law, at least three members (*tres faciunt collegium*) are required when constituting a juridic person, who pursue a truly useful purpose and who possess the means which are foreseen to be efficient to achieve their designated purpose (Can. 114 §3).
- ⁵ “*The distinction between collegial and non-collegial persons is based on the mode of action of such juridic persons, whether decisions are made or not according to the agreement between individual members*”. PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITY OF THE HOLY CROSS, *Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, V ed. Rome 2004, pg 132. As well as the text edited by GIDDC, *The right of mystery in the Church (Il diritto nel mistero della Chiesa)* Vol. I, Rome, 1986, pg. 349 and THE CANON LAW SOCIETY OF AMERICA, *New Commentary On The Code Of Canon Law*, pg. 160) where religious institutes are considered collegial juridic persons since their participation is indirect through elected representatives.
- ⁶ It would be regrettable to set extremely rigid and constraining criteria for the minimum number of members, an adequate level of autonomy to cater for staff, formation needs and economic resources. It would impact particularly the vitality and spreading of units in mission countries. See J. BEYER, *The right of Consecrated Life (Il diritto della Vita Consacrata)* Milan, 1989, pg. 77. As regards the aspect of territoriality: in general terms, houses under the same territory represent a same province, with a few exceptions concerning languages and rituals.
- ⁷ See R. McDERMOTT, *External and internal reconfiguration of Religious Institutes (Canons 582 and 581 CIC)*, in: CpR, 86 (2005), pages 57-81.
- ⁸ See B. DOLPHIN, M. PG. GARVIN, C. O'DWYER, *Leadership in consecrated life today*, in: *Studies in Spirituality*, 12 (2007), Leuven, pages 257-280. The authors describe a threefold dimension of leadership: administrative, pastoral and prophetic. It goes unsaid that during a reconfiguration process, all three dimensions come into play.
- ⁹ Being accountable entails also transparency, that requires communicating decisions and motivations, and participation, that means creating opportunities to dialogue, criticize and contradict.
- ¹⁰ R. McDERMOTT, *External and internal...*, “*Religious need to be clear to assert who they are and what they are about*” pg. 73.
- ¹¹ Idem, pg. 76: “*Systems of government in religious institutes should respect and reflect this concept of collegiality which can be accomplished in various ways*”.
- ¹² See Idem, pg. 75.
- ¹³ Idem..., “*Human beings, environments, and cultures do not stand still, and government structures must be flexible, adaptable, and resilient in order to revitalize the gifts of the Spirit in communal life and apostolic service*”, pg. 74.
- ¹⁴ See MORRISEY, *The restructuring...*, pges. 118-121.
- ¹⁵ R. McDERMOTT, *External and internal...*, “*Both subsidiarity and delegation promote the human dignity and co-responsibility not only of officials but of each member as well*”, pg. 78.
- ¹⁶ FRANCESCO PP, Encyclical: *Laudato si'*, § 79, in: *The Osservatore Romano*, June 18, 2015.
- ¹⁷ S. M. SCHNEIDERS, *Finding the treasure*, pg. 359-363.
- ¹⁸ F. G. MORRISEY, OMI, *The Restructuring...*, pg. 127: *is its purpose to renew and strengthen the mission of the congregation, or to strengthen community life, or to simplify structures, or to facilitate administrative processes, or to reduce expenses, or simply to take the reality of declining numbers into account?*



WELCOMING CHANGES IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA

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Original in Italian

Time, the place of a life that is given
“Live today,
God gives it to you, and it belongs to you,
Live it in Him.
Tomorrow belongs to God,
It does not belong to you.
Do not bring to tomorrow the preoccupations
Of today.
Tomorrow belongs to God: entrust it to God.
The present moment is a fragile
Footbridge.
If you load it with laments from yesterday
And with concerns about tomorrow,
The footbridge collapses and you fall down.
The past? God forgives you for it.
The future? God gives it to you.
Live today
In communion with Him”.

(A prayer that was found on the body of Odette, a member of the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who was murdered in Algeria on 10th November, 1995)

This prayer was found in the pocket of the Little Sister of Jesus when she was murdered in Algeria. This text introduces us to, and will accompany us in, our reflection on the reconfiguration that we are undertaking. It is an invitation to live in the present moment, without any regrets for the past and with openness to tomorrow... and tomorrow is gift, it is something new, it belongs to God and to his unpredictable surprises. To be open to tomorrow means to look ahead and

to imagine that the future will be different from the past and perhaps also from the present, and will open us to change.

Above all, let us be aware of something that is evident – so evident that we can be in danger of forgetting it: change is a constitutive element of human life itself. From birth until death, we are changing, we are transforming ourselves and we are being transformed: this is true from a biological point of view because our bodies develop and then decline. This is also true at a psychological, social, rational and spiritual level... throughout our lives, changes are occurring, changes that we suffer, changes that we choose, that we desire or we reject, but which accompany all the stages of our lives and which always demand that we leave something behind, that we give something up, in order to enter into a new stage. This is a step that we can choose to suffer, to welcome or to reject: depending on our attitude we will live it and we will make our sisters live it in very different ways.

From many Biblical texts I have chosen three that might help us to reflect on ways in which we might prepare ourselves to welcome the steps that the Lord invites us to live, in order to anticipate in a realistic way, the changes that we shall have to undergo, and to respond to the social and ecclesial calls that are implied, and also to the internal demands of our congregations.

The first text is an invitation to set out:

“Yahweh said to Abram: ‘Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing: I will bless those who bless you: I will curse those who slight you. All the tribes of the earth Shall bless themselves by you. So Abram went as Yahweh told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had amassed and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set off for the land of Canaan, and arrived there”. (Gen 12: 1-5)

All change is an invitation to leave that which we already know, that which is familiar to us, that to which we are accustomed, in order to go towards something that does not yet exist, something that is simply in the form of a promise for the future... At the moment of leaving, Abraham knows what he is leaving, but he has no experience of what he will find. So, in order to dare to leave, he brings with him all that he possesses, all that he knows, all that gives him security. Similarly, for you: when the moment comes to leave structures that you know well, that are familiar to you, to which you are accustomed, you undoubtedly set off with all that you have.

In order to prepare ourselves to welcome change, it can be helpful to

acknowledge what we want to bring with us when we leave the country that we know in order to go into the land that the Lord will indicate to us. When travelling from one country to another, it is necessary to stop regularly in order to recover our strength and courage before setting off again. These stages are oases in which we share with other travellers the joys and the exhaustion of the journey. I invite you to imagine living through one of these pauses which might help us to perceive this time of reflection on reconfiguration as a privileged time, a blessed oasis.

In order to prepare ourselves to welcome the changes connected with reconfiguration, like the nomads in the desert we need to stop at the oases that we find on our journey... there we can take a short time to remember the big changes that we have already lived through during our lives in our Institute, and the evolutions, whether happy or painful, that we have been through during our journey through life. And thus, by remembering, we can recognise and accept that these changes, these evolutions, whether happy or painful, have not only been navigable but have also been rich sources of life. To help us to remember, the following questions may be helpful:

What have been sources of living water for me during these years?

What are the wells to which I return and where I sit down to rest when I am on the road and tired?

In other words, what has been, for me, a source of nourishment and life during my journey?

This moment in which we gather up the changes that we have lived through and which constitute our 'Old Testament', can help us to welcome a new change, one more step... and to listen to the radicalism of the calls to leave everything, and which resound throughout the New Testament.

"As Jesus was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men'. And at once they left their nets and followed him". (Mk 1: 16- 20)

Like Abraham, the first disciples respond to the call that invites them to leave everything, but unlike Abraham, they follow The One who calls them, without taking anything with them anything that is familiar or that gives them security. Their security is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, unconditionally. This radical welcoming of a change of lifestyle that has been proposed to them, is not achieved definitively at first. After the death of Jesus they are overcome by disillusionment, because the change does not seem to have brought the fruits that they had been hoping for. The promise that came with this change of lifestyle has not been achieved and they succumb to the temptation that is always

threatening us from all sides: the temptation to turn around and go back to what was familiar.

“Simon Peter, (...) the sons of Zebedee and two more of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said: ‘I am going fishing’ (Jn 21: 2-3)

In order to encourage ourselves to enter courageously into the journey of change that is being proposed to us by social and ecclesial reality and also the internal reality of our Institutes, I suggest that we listen to one final text: the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, from the Gospel of Matthew (15: 21-28). This story reveals to us the road that Jesus of Nazareth, who was rooted in his own village and in his own culture, had to follow in order to open himself up to the universal dimension of his mission.

“Jesus left that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting: ‘Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil’. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. ‘Give her what she wants’, they said, ‘because she is shouting after us’. He said in reply: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel’. But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. ‘Lord’, she said, ‘help me’. He replied, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the house-dogs’. She retorted, “Ah, yes, sir; but even the house-dogs can eat scraps that fall from their master’s table’. Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted’. And from that moment her daughter was well again.

This text is undoubtedly disconcerting, because it presents to us a face of Jesus that is not at all familiar to us – a Jesus who is deaf to the calls of the Canaanite woman: *‘But he answered her not a word’*; a Jesus who is enclosed in a ‘narrow’ understanding of his mission: *‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel’*; a Jesus who justifies this understanding in the name of something that is good: *‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the house-dogs’*.

The biblical text sheds light on the journey that Jesus had to make in order to move from a narrow understanding of his mission into a wider understanding of a saving mission that knows no boundaries. In other words and in contemporary terms: in order to move from the local to the global, from the particular to the universal.

And the text shows us that this journey can be made only when we acknowledge the shadow sides of our motives when faced with having to make choices. Do we refuse to listen to calls that come to us because they upset certainties associated with appropriate choices in the past and which we do not need to revisit? So also with the temptation to exclude, even for reasons that

seem worthy. We cannot entertain the thought of endangering a mission and a style of life that have given good results in the past, nor waste energy putting into practice changes whose results are unknown, etc.

In our following of Jesus we are, now and always, invited to take this step and not to imprison ourselves in the certainties of a reality that is known, appreciated and which was valid in the past.

And by way of conclusion I offer you a short text which has been taken from the tales of Rabbi Harold Kushner, which can help us to reflect at times when we are overcome by disillusionment regarding a change that does not offer obvious success, and which threatens to make us succumb to the temptation to turn back.

“One summer day I was sitting on the beach, watching two children, a boy and a girl, who were playing in the sand. They were near the water’s edge and were working with great concentration, building a sandcastle which had doors, towers, tunnels and internal passageways. Just as they were completing it, a large wave came and knocked the castle down, leaving it reduced to a heap of wet sand. I thought that the children would begin to cry and would be desolate because of what had happened. Instead, they took hands and ran off together, far from the water, and they were laughing. They sat down and began to build another castle. I realised that they had just taught me an important lesson. All the plans that we had made during our lives, all the structures that we had built, taking so much time and energy, were built on sand. The only permanent thing is our relationships with others. Sooner or later, a wave will come and will knock down everything that we have built and on which we had spent all of our energy. When this happens, the only people who will be able to smile will be those who are holding hands with someone”.

DIMINISHING HUMAN RESOURCES FOR LEADERSHIP IN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES: AN ASSISTANCE FOR TAKING STOCK AND SHAPING THE FUTURE

Prof. Dr. Myriam Wijlens

Prof. Dr. Myriam Wijlens (Netherlands), obtained the licentiate in Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1986 and a doctorate in Canon Law from Saint Paul University in Ottawa in 1990. Since 2005, she has been a full professor of Canon Law in Erfurt Germany. Since 2012 she has also been an honorary professor of 'Canon Law and Ecumenism' at the University of Durham in England. In 2008 the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity appointed her for six years as delegate to the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. This was recently renewed up until 2022. Professor Wijlens specializes in ecumenism and canon law. She has published several books and approx. 90 articles.

Original in German

In 2002 the secretariat of the Conference of Major Superiors in The Netherlands (*KNR*) developed a questionnaire intending to assist institutes in taking stock and opening up new paths in preparation for the future. The questionnaire was not intended as a survey, but as a means of making *all* members of a province/house aware of their situation and therefore come to appreciate in what areas decision must be made. The questionnaire might need to be adapted to a specific institute. Dr. Wijlens adapted the questionnaire for use in Germany in 2009. The questionnaire has been updated regularly.

1. Aim and Objectives

- What are the aims and objectives of your Institute as a religious community?
- Are you able to bring these to fruition? As an institute? As a province?

2. Spirituality

- How do you provide for a lively spiritual life for your members?

3. *Spiritual direction/Pastoral care*

- Is spiritual direction adequately provided for? How long can you guarantee such provision?
- Is there a priest appointed to take particular care for the needs of the community/ies? A pastoral worker (or a person comparable to a hospital chaplain/Chaplain for old age homes?)
- Is daily prayer possible? Are the members still able to sing?
- Is the Holy Eucharist celebrated daily? Is there a choice of confessors? If this is not possible because of a shortage of priests, what happens then? If this will be a problem in the future, how do you intend to solve it?

4. *Leadership/Governance/Management*

- How old is the current leadership team? How many terms of office has each already served? Can they be reappointed or is postulation (again) required? If re-appointment is possible, how old will each be at the end not of the current, but of the next term of office? Is it realistic to expect that they are able and willing to serve till that time?
- Who will be available for leadership positions for the term after the coming term (often in 4 to 8 years)? Will they really be capable to do this *then*? How old will they be at the end of their term (often in 8 or 12 years)?
- Is there a *true* choice of community members who could serve in the office of (major) superior when elections will take place not only for the next leadership team, but also for the one after?
- Are the headquarters of your institute in Germany¹? If there is no major leadership (level) abroad, are you responsible for houses in other countries? What arrangements have been made to look after these in the long term?

5. *International Finance*

- Do you manage any assets of foreign parts/units of your institute in Germany (e.g. for the generalate or for other provinces)? Do you have an office in Germany for missions in Africa/Asia? If so, who is responsible for it?
- Do you expect any changes in this area in the short term/long term? If so, are you sufficiently well informed concerning any options and/or difficulties?

6. *Novices*

- Have there been any novices in the past ten years? How many sisters made final vows, were professed and are they still members of your community? What implications does this hold for the future of your institute/province?
- As regards training/education and formation of the novices, do you cooperate with other Provinces or institutes? What would it take to do so?

7. *Apostolate*

- Does your institute/province (still) have its own apostolic works (hospital, senior citizen facility, nursery school, farm, etc.)? How many people does your institute employ there?
- Does your institute/province have governance responsibility for these works?
- Are there any plans to transfer the responsibility for these works to others? What do your plans look like? Who helps you in these questions? What kind of help would you like to receive? From whom?

8. *Physical long term /Care and accommodation of members*

- In your institute: how, when and with whom do you discuss long -term physical care and accommodation of your members?
- Are there any regulations as regards accommodation of your members in institutions like senior citizen facilities or facilities for long-term care (specialized homes for dementia patients etc.)? Are these arrangements in writing? Are they being updated regularly?
- Are your houses adapted for elderly members: elevators or lifts, special showers, raised toilets, no stairs etc.?

9. *Housing*

- Do you expect to be forced to close/sell houses/buildings? Who are you going to consult regarding a possible sale? Do you know any real estate agents who specialize in the sale of religious houses? What help do you need?
- Do you intend to maintain/keep your own house for as long as possible or can you envisage renting this accommodation? Who will help you to rent it?
- Do you possess any buildings that are officially classified as heritage? What implications does this have for renovating, renting or selling these buildings?

10. *Finances*

- Do you manage your financial affairs yourselves or have you mandated a (larger) religious institute to do this for you along with theirs?
- Do you prepare a budget? Is this a helpful instrument for you?
- Are your annual financial statements easy to 'read' and intelligible for the leadership of your institute or would you wish to have a model which is more clearly structured?
- Are your annual accounts professionally audited?
- How old are your advisors? How long would you think of retaining their services once they have officially retired

11. Assets/Investment

- Have some of your assets been invested?
- What are the purposes and/or portfolio profiles of your investments, and have you got an agreement with your bank as regards risks, etc.?
- Is there written documentation of the general conditions of your investments?
- Who is your asset manager? Why only one person? Who exercises control/supervision of this person and evaluates his / her performance?

12. Reserves

- What are your budgeted reserves? Possible items for which reserves must be there include:
 - a) living expenses;
 - b) additional personnel such as nurses, gardener, management secretary, accountant;
 - c) building maintenance
- Have these reserves been formed following a resolution of the leadership and is there a regular review in place as regards their adequacy / need of correction?

13. Archives, art, cemetery

- What is the state of your archives? What do you plan to do with these archives? Who is to maintain them when your institute has become extinct? Have you thought about central archives with other institutes? Do you have contact with the diocesan archives?
- Do you possess any art works? Is there an inventory of these works? Do you know the value of these works?
- Have you got your own cemetery? What is its future, e.g. if the adjacent monastery is to be sold? Who is going to tend the cemetery when all the members of the religious community have died?

14. External support

- Are there any plans for a merger (or any other form of cooperation) with e.g. a neighboring province? What are the arguments not to do this (as yet)?
- Do you expect support from your general leadership or from other provinces at the time when you yourself will not be able to carry out the leadership functions any longer?
- Do you expect spiritual or leadership support from among your own spiritual family e.g. Franciscan, Carmelite, Benedictine? Are these institutions aware of the fact that you expect this?
- Do you hope for help from somewhere but do not know yet clearly from whom and from where? Have you made any plans, e.g. are you planning to 'outsource' certain tasks?

15. Relations with the diocese

- Is the diocese legally/canonically responsible for your institute in one way or the other?
- To what extent does the diocese take an interest in your institute? Does it go beyond financial matters? Do you maintain contacts with the vicar for religious? Are your annual financial statements presented to/approved by the bishop? Does the diocese support you or do you support the diocese financially?

16. Position of non-members

- Do you engage any non-members as consultants for your leadership team or are you planning to?
- Do non-members hold 'leadership/management positions' in your institute?
- How do you see yourself in your role as the 'employer' of non-members in particular in areas of such importance as coordinator or pastoral work? Do you expect any problems that might evolve in this area in the near future?

17. Vital documents

- Has your institute/province set out somewhere what is to happen to your assets/property when your institute/province is suppressed? What are the arrangements in case e.g. part of your assets are to be transferred to an African or Asian country but are to remain in, and be managed from e.g. Europe (e.g. for reasons of inflation)?
- Are you prepared to deposit with the Conference of Major Superiors/or Generalate copies of your constitutions, your statutes as a civil juridic person, as well as other documents which are relevant in the final phase of your institute? Does this include the names and addresses of your financial and legal advisors, bank, etc.?

18. General

- Do you expect or need support in any area in the short term? How can the general leadership team or the conference of major superiors be of help?

¹ Dr. Wijlens adapted the questionnaire for use in Germany in 2009



GOD'S FELLOW WORKERS: THE JOYS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Fr. David Glenday, MCCJ

Fr. David Glenday, a Comboni Missionary, is currently the secretary general of the Union of Superiors General (USG).

Original in English

For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely men? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor 3, 4-9)

1. Rejoice always (1 Thes 5, 16)

A wise tradition of the Church encourages us to begin every important evaluation of our lives and mission from a place of consolation, from joy, and this, I believe, is also the best place from which to begin this brief communication on the ways Institutes of Consecrated Life relate with each other. Early in *Evangelii Gaudium*, though, Pope Francis offers us the salutary reminder that the kind of joy we are talking about here, the joy of the evangelizer, always shines out against the backdrop of grateful memory.

So we could do much worse than to take as our starting-point here this question: what grateful memories do we have of positive and life-giving relationships between other Institutes and our own that continue to bring us lasting, inspiring and energizing joy?

In the hope of encouraging you to find your own answers to this question, let me respond to it from out of my own story and my own experience, and with reference to four key areas of our consecrated living.

a) The charismatic, and hence relational, experience of the Founder

I consider myself very blessed to have as Founder St Daniel Comboni, a missionary for whom friendship, relationships and cooperation with others in the Church were like the air he breathed. Passionate and single-minded as he was about the evangelization of Africa, and with the personal experience of the grave difficulties this great project entailed, he was never in any doubt that this was a work that called for the concerted efforts of everyone in the Church. Indeed, one could almost say that he was led to found his own missionary Institutes only when the urgency of the mission overtook the difficulties and resistances that the call to cooperation provoked.

Yet naturally I do not for a moment think that this openness of Daniel Comboni was exclusive to him. I suspect that if all of us return to our Founders and Foundresses, women and men of the Spirit, we are likely to find in them people who believed in building networks of friendship and cooperation with others. When we study and reflect on our Founders, this is perhaps often an aspect of their graced experience that we overlook, and so we run the risk of missing the challenge that is there still to be discovered in our founding charisms. In what ways for our Founders was their charisma a gift of relationship and of cooperation? And in what ways does our fidelity to them urge us to similar relationships and cooperation today?

b) Together in formation

I consider myself to have been very fortunate indeed to have studied philosophy and theology as a young man at the Missionary Institute London (MIL), a consortium founded by seven exclusively missionary Congregations, which formed women and men evangelizers over several decades, but which sadly – in view of the changed demographics of missionary vocations - was eventually closed some years ago.

There was something deeply energizing and life-giving to be preparing for mission with colleagues from other missionary families, and the fruits were many for our future mission. We formed friendships and lived fraternity; we widened our horizons; we experienced different approaches to mission born of varied histories; we learned to see how the Spirit works in so many different and beautiful ways; we envisaged mission in terms of communion and cooperation.

I imagine that many of you have, in one way or another, had similar experiences of formation with men and women drawn from other religious Congregations, and I suspect that to revisit and re-savor these experiences can be enlightening and encouraging for the challenges being discussed in this brief reflection. Does the formation we offer the members of our Institutes challenge and prepare them for doing mission together?

c) Shared mission

Grateful memory, and hence energizing joy, is thus also generated by re-visiting our experiences of mission and apostolate, where in one way or another we have been drawn into cooperation with other religious.

One experience I treasure as especially precious was my time in Uganda in the 1980s, a time of grave political unrest and real suffering for very many. At the time I was fortunate enough to be editor of LEADERSHIP, a magazine aimed at the formation of lay Christian leaders, and it is moving to recall the network of cooperation and support provided by missionaries of many different Congregations throughout the country and even further afield, which allowed the magazine to be a focus of hope and encouragement for many.

And maybe also here there is a lesson to be noted and learned: are we able to build on experiences such as this, somehow occasioned by crisis, when the crisis has passed and “normality” returns? Often, sadly, it seems to me that we are not. As we shall say below, we need to learn to cherish and develop the gift of relationship, and not let it fade or wither.

Even more widely, I think we can say that often there is a lack of strategic planning among religious Institutes working in the same nation or region, when it would make much more sense for them to plan together and to pool resources for the good of the Church.

d) Partners in discernment

It has been my lot over the years often to be involved in the government and animation of my own Institute at local, provincial and general levels, and my own current mission at the USG finds me once again in this field.

It is certainly a great joy to be involved in the kind of shared discernment that this necessarily involves. Put simply, faced as we are with huge challenges of life and mission, there is just no alternative to putting our heads and hearts together, helping each other to glimpse what the Lord is doing in history and to find a way forward in lending him the hand he continues, it seems, to seek. Being involved in this kind of sharing is a special way of discovering the gifts of the Spirit, the wisdom and holiness of fellow religious from other Congregations, and is deeply edifying in the best possible sense of the word.

There is a challenge, though, here too: in my view, we need to be more decisive in following through on the practical consequences of our shared discernment and giving them flesh in projects of common mission.

2. Joy in the Holy Spirit (Rm 14, 17)

When we reflect on this journey from the grateful memory of positive experiences of relationships between different Institutes, to the joy that these relationships engender, we discover that we have been drawn into the very heart of consecrated life: this joy is in the end the work and fruit of the Spirit, who continues to make the gift of religious life to the Church and to the world.

This realization – from grateful memory to joy to a new awareness of the Spirit at work – draws us to make several challenging affirmations, affirmations that can have not a few practical consequences:

- the whole question of building relationships between religious Institutes is not secondary or peripheral, but lies at the heart of what consecrated life is called to be. It is the Spirit who draws us together;
- these relationships are an essential element of the charismatic reality of consecrated life: without them, Institutes will not live their charisms to the full, and will not themselves experience the power and wealth of those charisms. Here, as in other areas of human life, I only fully discover who I am through you, precisely because we are both the same and different;
- it is, of course, desirable that Institutes cooperate in mission, and this makes sense in terms of good use of the resources available in responding to the missionary challenges of the day. Yet this albeit positive approach is not the whole story; something deeper and richer is at stake here. An exclusively utilitarian approach is not enough;
- this essentially charismatic and not merely functional vision burns in the words of Jesus in his prayer at the Last Supper: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”. Our communion is not just a way of better organizing ourselves to meet the needs; it is our first and most effective witness to the Lord we follow.

As already suggested, this vision of communion is no theory: it has far-reaching consequences. When it is lacking, it can lead our Institutes to forms of parochialism or even unedifying and sterile competition. This vision is vital if we are to weather the inevitable difficulties and complications that arise when we come together in projects of mission; experience shows that without this vision, it will be very difficult to stay the course. It is a vision which, when wholeheartedly embraced, frees us to be generous, imaginative and creative.

Perhaps the heart of what we are trying to say here can be best expressed in the memorable words of Pope Benedict XVI's homily on Pentecost Sunday 2012:

“Jesus says: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth’ (Jn 16:13). Here, in speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus explains to us what the Church is and how she should live in order to be herself, to be the place of unity and communion in Truth; he tells us that behaving as Christians means no longer being shut into our own “I” but rather being open to all things: it means inwardly welcoming the whole Church within ourselves or, even better, inwardly letting her receive us. Therefore when I speak, think and act as a Christian I do not do so by closing myself into myself, but I always do so in all things and starting with all things: thus the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity and of truth, may continue to resonate in our human hearts and minds and spur people to meet and to welcome each other. Precisely because the Spirit acts in this way, he ushers us into the whole truth, which is Jesus, and guides us to look at it more deeply and to understand it. We do not grow in knowledge by locking ourselves into own ego but only in an attitude of profound inner humility do we become capable of listening and sharing in the “we” of the Church”.

3. Collaborators of your joy (2Cor 1, 24)

From grateful memory to joy; from joy to the work of the Spirit; from the work of the Spirit to mission in communion: and what might be the shape of such a mission today and into the future?

We attempt some modest answers:

a) A spirituality of cooperation

From what has been said here so far, it is evident that this vision of communion can only be sustained by a deep well of faith-motivations nourished by the Word, by prayer and contemplation, by love of the Cross and joy in the Resurrection. Communion calls for holiness, for intimacy with the Lord who called us together. Looked at from another angle, we would say that any spirituality of religious life without this element of communion of charisms is seriously incomplete.

b) The patience of the sower

It would be very enlightening to re-read the Lord's parables of the seed and the sower in terms of their implications for the mission-in-communion of consecrated life. We would, for example, be encouraged to believe enough in this mission to be ready to make humble beginnings; we would learn to be patient and to be willing to start over and over again; we would understand better how precious the seed is, and so would cherish the various, even apparently minor, experiences of communion.

This latter point is of especial importance. One can readily understand that in certain cases projects of communion may over the years come to be less relevant or viable, and need to be brought to a conclusion. Yet the matter should never end there: all the positive experiences lived together need to be made the beginning of something different and new, a tradition and heritage that calls us to new concrete forms of communion and cooperation into the future. Experience is too precious to be thrown away.

c) Towards renewal together

We are all well aware of the challenges our Institutes face at this time, and the considerable effort and energy poured into initiatives of ongoing formation aimed at renewal. Happily, there are projects of cooperation in this area, but they need to be multiplied, born of the conviction that any real renewal will be renewal together, that we really do need each other for this task.

4. More courageously

We cannot conclude this brief communication without recalling the words of Pope Francis at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life, typically challenging religious to live this moment, sometimes characterized by fragility and diminishment, as an opportunity in the Spirit:

“I hope for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes. Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption”.

REDISCOVERING THE JOY OF BEING CONSECRATED

Fr. Carlos del Valle, SVD

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Original in Spanish

Introduction

It is not easy to come up with words that can truly enlighten and expand our minds. When we write, we can indulge in language which only inflates the egos of pedantic scholars. Therefore we need to ground our theology in testimony, not only in texts. For, in religious men and women, we discover much good, creativity, generosity, sensitivity, generous solidarity. We find genuine searching, desire for cohesion, profound values. Testimonies to so many initiatives... some of which are here to stay, and others destined to disappear.

I will attempt to present ideas that have been germinating in me for some time: to put the word at the service of hope. In the Consecrated Life there are many people who specialise in talking about what ought to be done, and not so many who talk about being. We have been preoccupied with systematising the Consecrated Life, without making much effort to tell its story and to translate its great concepts into our daily experiences. In this reflection I would like to present an idea of the Consecrated Life that I love and hope for. I would like to situate myself in a theology that is more descriptive and intuitive, combining incisive analysis with desire. We do not need theologians who will elaborate the metaphysics of the religious life, but rather those who are witnesses to the Gospel, men and women alive with the Spirit of Jesus.

Much has been written about the Consecrated Life, and much more has been lived. The Consecrated Life is something that we breathe, rather than something that we think about. The question is not 'what is the consecrated life?', but rather 'how can I be a religious woman/man today?' Let us try to understand the world of the Consecrated Life in which we move, and to understand ourselves. Without being nostalgic about 'what is not being lived', let us rather look forward and cherish hope as a nostalgia for the future. We are moved by the pregnant woman as an enthusiastic expression of life and of hope, in order to live in the peace that brings hope. To look at the future with joy is to hope.

The future... a time of plans, enthusiasms, longings. It motivates the present, directing us to an horizon and presenting goals to move towards: something to

struggle for; to reflect on the end that we wish to attain. Reality is not simply what we are, but also what we want to do with what we are. This reflection wants to transmit a creative passion for the possible. If, in the Consecrated Life we do not feel the need for change, we become self-satisfied. We need to innovate, and not to be obsessed with growth or diminishment. The growth in numbers of those in the Consecrated Life could be the result of always repeating the same things (as cancerous cells do): it can lead to a system that is obese, paralysed, lacking in vitality. Innovation lies in language, organisation, methodology, styles of formation, the way of managing material goods, the new spirituality; new forms of community, of leadership, of evangelisation; the paradigm of mission as dialogue, which reconfigures everything.

A reflection centred on self-realisation gives way to another based on fraternity. Today we are discovering prophecy in identity and in mission. Spirituality and mission are coming to the fore. Today we are suffering from a crisis of identity, of belonging and of availability, not only in relation to our end but also to our founding moments. Crisis is a time of tension, of change, of opportunity. Let us use this as an opportunity to bring to birth something that will be new and better.

We are the inheritors of great traditions, but our prophetic soul is sick, lacking vision and challenge. We need new models of Consecrated Life characterised by prophetic passion and evangelical daring, so that we may not be constrained by short-sighted attention to current administrative pre-occupations. Let us move from efficiency and pride in works and numbers, to give primacy to signs, to missionary fraternity, to compassionate solidarity and to interior conviction. Let us look again at our sacred territories, which sometimes are not so sacred.

Touched by an 'apology of decline', we are looking for security, strength, success, but God comes to us like a gentle breeze, a voice of subtle silence. We like to be assured of our future, of permanence, according to our logic. The logic of God is fragility. He is making us grow smaller so that we may be re-born, through our encounter with his whisper and his silence. Our fragility leads us to move away from superficial relationships, from the deadly dream of continuing to dominate, like good employees in the field of the sacred, and instead to awaken ourselves to cordial relationships, seeking the encounter with God and with our brothers and sisters. To become small is a blessing: it strengthens fraternity and the living out of the Gospel.

1. Consecrated people... people of the Spirit

We religious men and women convey an image of good workers, people who are committed, whose lives are organised and austere, with timetables and rules. It is not really an image of people who are happy, living their humanity to the full, cultivating sensitivity and tenderness. Our Consecrated Life... a fragile boat with old, worn nets, in the hands of fisher folk who are exhausted and whose souls seem to be dry. The Consecrated Life deserves to be something different from what it is: a life that meets the requirements for mission. Because mission is not in crisis: it is the people who are disconnected from the Spirit who are in crisis, and who have turned into professionals in the field of the sacred.

Religious life can be a comfortable way of life, and embody a lack of coherence between what we say and what we live: where we cling on to tasks that distract us, crises that anaesthetise us, acquisitions that satisfy us, small securities that keep us calm. We need to re-focus attention in order to conquer the paralysis of mediocrity which make us respectable professionals or self-centred people leading an insipid life. The Consecrated Life does not need individuals who are professionally self-satisfied, or occupied in commitments that are spiritually innocuous (Dolores Aleixandre).

When analysing the quality of the Consecrated Life, we must begin with joy. In the Gospel, joy comes as a surprise, like the treasure in the field, which leads us, out of a sense of joy, to sell everything else. Only a Consecrated Life that is joyful can affirm our vocation and has the capacity to call forth the vocations of others. But there are communities that are infected by the virus of *acedia*: enthusiasm and optimism are lacking, replaced by an abundance of sadness, bitterness, monotony. These are symptoms that are expressed as instability and a need for change; an excessive concern with one's health (the word of the doctor becomes more important than the word of God); a search for comfort (one's own room, programmes and times in front of the T.V. or the internet, which cannot be altered); activism (disguised as apostolic commitment); affective distance from the community and neglect of communal activities (minimal observance and personal discipline); exaggerated criticism of others; apathy, general discouragement. When the ego takes centre stage, availability enters into a state of crisis. Satisfaction and quality of life are played out on three levels: *personal*, depending on one's experience of faith, source of meaning and motivation; *community*, the quality of our lives together; *missionary*, in the gift of oneself to others and the exercise of the mission.

In individuals and communities, a sort of practical atheism can exist, when thinking, judging and acting do not come from a personal encounter with the Lord. We describe in detail the history of our illnesses or experiences of being badly treated by our superiors. But do we know how to share our experience of God as an experience which gives meaning to our lives? This lack of meaning constitutes a deep crisis and is the root of our sadness. In the area of faith we gamble with the meaning of the Consecrated Life: it is not a matter of being more pious, but more believing, of finding the meaning and the foundation of our life and our mission. Are we specialists in the field of experiencing God and in transmitting this to others?

The disciples on the road to Emmaus illustrate the frontier between meaning and lack of meaning in their discipleship. The scene begins with the disciples walking along sadly, disenchanted: they have lost hope, abandoned community and are going back to their businesses. Their following of Jesus has ended and their motivation is weak: they are looking for the first thing they can do, they have no understanding, little faith, and are full of fear. This leads them to give up, to split up, to deny. Later the disciples appear to be decisive, going towards Jerusalem, filled with enthusiasm and hope, going back to their community (the place where they had experienced Jesus) and begin to follow him. They have encountered the

Resurrected One. Their faith strengthens their discipleship. They still have the same weaknesses, but their discipleship is now built on faith, which fills their lives with meaning and enables them to confront challenges with joy.

The Consecrated Life is life in the Spirit. If our lives are irrelevant, it is because we are suffering from evangelical anaemia. In order to have a meaningful future we must rescue our passion for Jesus and for the Kingdom. We are people who are seeking God. Let us devote our best energies and efforts to this. The quality of the Consecrated Life is a problem of vocation. To live with vocation (quality) is more important than the topic of vocations (numbers). Our preoccupation with numbers leads us to look for quantity rather than quality. Having a vocation is not something that is immediately obvious. We are living and breathing in a culture of professionalism, of self-realisation. This affects our way of living. The ego becomes of the focus of self-realisation, leaving no room for the experience of a vocation that has been received and which gives meaning to our lives. One can be a good professional in the field of medicine without being a good doctor, and one can do many good things in the Consecrated Life without having a vocation for it. Vocation is a question of identity, inseparable from one's quality of life (Carlos Palacio). Let us not allow ourselves to be trapped by the predators of vocation: conformism, consumerism, comfort, superficiality, mediocrity.

Vocation is necessary in order to enter and to remain in the Consecrated Life. Human and spiritual qualities are not the only criteria of vocation. It is necessary to have been touched by Jesus, to feel oneself called to live his way of life and to allow it to give meaning to one's own life: this is our first mission. Jesus' way of life has three pillars: relationship with the Father; living with those whom He calls (living with Jesus creates community); and putting one's life at the service of one's brothers and sisters. Only from this sense of being called is it possible to link one's experience of God, one's sharing of life with others, and one's being sent out on mission.

God compares Israel to the belt that is worn around a person's waist (Jer 13: 11): an image of the union that is born out of a personal relationship of friendship and love, and which has a strong affective component that impels the person who adheres to this to avoid becoming separated from that which is her/his life. This strength is not found by adhering to orders: it situates us within the experience of lovers, who seek to be together and united, with the same intensity with which the roots of a tree seek out water. They discover their identity when they cling to, when they are rooted and remain in that which gives them the possibility of life. They are driven by the desire to be and to live, and this makes them cling to that which gives them meaning (D. Alexandre). Jesus has the capacity to be the passion and the horizon of our lives. The Song of Songs was written for religious.

We need to return to the heart, to rediscover interiority and the capacity to appreciate what is important and to live it with passion, intensity and energy. There are also passions in our lives that are like a firework display, showy but ephemeral: when they disappear, they leave us in darkness. Let us feed our longing for the grand passions that are capable of firing our lives with enthusiasm. Let us live *'with our gaze fixed on him'* (Heb 12: 2). For this we must be faithful to our

traditions: *silence and solitude*, which teach us to live with ourselves in order to enjoy our identity, our vocation and our mission; *prayer and contemplation*, which allow us to cultivate an experience of God in our daily lives.

Are we focussing on the things of God, or on God? We are not administrators of the sacred. We are not asked to administer beauty, but rather to enjoy it, to go up the mountain, as Moses did, and to come back down again with radiant faces. Let us allow the Spirit to have space to move within us and stir up concerns, to imbue us with the faith that determines who we are, how we live and what we aspire to. Prayer in the Spirit is our primary task: to dedicate most of our time to prayer, to learn to be quiet and to listen, to forget ourselves, because, rather than listening to Him, we are accustomed to listening to ourselves, to our fears and anxieties. True prophecy in the Consecrated Life today is mysticism. What attracts people to Jesus is that, from his intimacy with the Father, he draws the energy to combat injustice and to heal relationships that are broken.

To live in and from Jesus: the centre that widens our heart, enabling us to go beyond ourselves. When we open the door to Jesus, our whole life turns around him, and finds its meaning in him, because we know that we have found a treasure. If we lose this centre, we fall into feeling stressed, being overactive, spiritual life vanishes, we no longer appreciate community life, we lack interior balance and the mission becomes a profession. Then it becomes difficult to have a life that is open to fraternity and to mission. What is essential is to live in God: intimate prayer with the Lord changes our scale of values. In the Consecrated Life there is a need for 'strong friends of God' who can live the present with passion and give themselves to what they are doing.

The world does not expect us to be an NGO offering free services, but rather the voice of the Spirit, a sign that questions values that are based on profit, and to be witnesses who communicate something of the energy of the Gospel and a reminder of God's dream of life in abundance. It is easier to offer buildings than it is to offer spaces that welcome and listen; easier to offer organisations than to offer opportunities for meeting and for sharing of prayer.

2. Community Life in the Spirit of Jesus

"The apostles did not come down from the mountain carrying tablets of stone, as Moses did: they came out from the upper room carrying the Holy Spirit in their hearts". (John Chrysostom). Only after Pentecost did the group of apostles become an apostolic community. In the Eucharistic Prayers there is a double *epiclesis*: the first one calls down the action of the Spirit on the bread and the wine, in order to change them into the Body and Blood of the Lord; the second one calls for the outpouring of the Spirit in order to transform the community into the body of Christ. The sense of Eucharist does not end with the real presence of Christ: it is oriented towards the transformation of the community into the body of Christ. The Spirit causes the Resurrected One to be present among, and to form, the community.

Each congregation is a 'shared experience of the Spirit', of *koinonia*, the

awareness that believers have of participating in one single Spirit. But in our communities it is not the principles which suffer but rather their incarnation: we speak of *koinonia* but we have the experience of living in communities which pile solitude on solitude. There is disconnection between the great principles of the Consecrated Life and the lived reality of those marked by individualism. Disillusionment and mindless routine are growing in our communities like dandelion. We breathe the air which draws us apart from one another and from the poor: we lack sensitivity to the sufferings of those close to us and those who are further away.

We have already mentioned *acedia*. This is usually found in those who are addicted to work. It leads to intolerance, bitterness and a tendency to exchange ploughs for swords. Our comfort zones can also lead us to shut ourselves away, to pay too much attention to caring for ourselves and what is ours, making us insensitive to the sufferings of others and to new mission projects that come from the Spirit. The Consecrated Life then becomes residential living space in which each person creates her/his own life, spends their time on their work and their entertainment, giving up the idea of building courageous teams, and settling for 'live and let live'. There are communities in which the individual has pride of place over the communal, and in which projects are simply personal ones. Each one's personal interests take pride of place, and personal fulfilment becomes all-important. In a context such as this, the superiors seem like traffic police who try to control the flow of traffic and to avoid traffic jams or car crashes between cars that are going in different directions.

Levels of belonging to the Consecrated Life risk finding themselves placed on the peripheries of existence. In order for a reality to affect us, we must feel it in our whole being. Religious who find strength in solitude and external sources, come to believe that they have less and less need to be nourished by their community. In some congregations there are processes for renewal that are not connected to the lived experiences of the members. For example, the preparation of a Chapter usually offers some indicators, rather than trying to get to know the lived realities of the members. There is a need for the planting of new trees, rather than just remaining in the shade of the existing ones, so that communion within the Consecrated Life may always be a missionary communion. It is not enough for us to live together in order to be a sign of being 'companions of Jesus': we can wear ourselves out by working without reflecting that we are 'servants of the mission of Christ'. If others do not sense this, it is possible that our lives are nothing but booming gongs.

In community, are we breathing in joy and naturalness, or simply acceptable outward behaviour and resignation? In order to revitalise community, we used to put the emphasis on changing structures. Now, it is a question of strengthening relationships. But we are growing in the sphere of functional relationships rather than that of human relationships. We are taking the human level for granted and attend only to the functional level. There are no great conflicts, but we are suffering from lack of communication, individualism, apathy and indifference in the area of community matters, and fraternity remains fragile. Gospel fraternity is not simply peaceful coexistence or a pact of non-aggression. Individualism leads

to a vacuum and embittering solitude among those who live in community.

Living with others is what has the greatest effect on quality of life and personal satisfaction. This requires a good level of education, personal communication skills, democratic behaviour, dialogue, feasts and celebrations, sharing of goods and collaborating in the running of the community. What is most unifying is to do good work together. Whoever has greater love for their dreams for community than they do for the community itself, ends up by destroying it. The community is constructed upon the weakness of each member, which finds the strength of the Spirit in the other members. We are talking about a life that is in process, and, for this reason, beautifully imperfect. We are living imperfect communion. Let us not look for perfection but rather for coherence. Let us learn in the Consecrated Life to defend what is fragmentary and imperfect (real life). Let us journey through life in prayer, commitment and joy, looking upon the Crucified One and searching for the Resurrected One. This is our service to the community, to the Church, to the world. When visitors come to our community, let them be able to say: *'God is here and I did not know it'*. (Gen 28: 16)

In mission and in community, rather than evangelising we need to discover what is evangelical and promote this. It is necessary to exercise *'awareness of the common vocation'*. Each brother, each sister, has been called to community life; *an awareness of communal faith and the celebration of this*. This is not just about pious practices but is rather a matter of sharing experiences of faith, talking about problems from the perspective of faith, and communal prayer based on the Word of God; *the communal search for truth*: living and creating truth through dialogue in community; *being corrected by one's brothers/sisters and then being reconciled with them*: this means that we can say again with Jacob: 'to see your face is for me like seeing the face of God' (Gen 33: 10). Without forgiveness, the problems of communal living create a suffocating atmosphere.

If the community is not an experience of the Spirit, it is a burden that carries limitations. The Spirit gives his energy for the formation of imperfect communities. The Resurrected One took his place *'among them'* – not above them, showing superiority, not apart from them, judging them. In community we are linked by close bonds when we have Jesus in the centre. Mark (3: 34, 4: 10) repeats: *'among them'*. The image of following leads us to think that Jesus goes on ahead and the disciples follow behind him. But it is rather a question of circularity, with everyone around Jesus. When I am in a circle, I am linked to others who also have Jesus as their centre. The cohesion of the group depends on the fact that the centre creates links among the group members who gather around it.

3. Consecrated Life viewed as mission

The Consecrated Life comes into being as a charismatic expression of the mission. We live our experience of God in our following which is based on mission – being sent to the margins. Our Consecrated Life is mission, and mission is our Consecrated Life. Mission is the key for understanding the charism of the Consecrated Life: being-for-mission. By means of the mission we progressively enter into the local Church, into society, into the world of the poor, and into other

cultures. There we look on mission as a personal satisfaction, something to be enjoyed, a source of pleasure.

We move from the society of obedience to that of surrender. We confuse mission with job. Shared mission is not the same thing as shared work. Mission is not the field of experience in which we achieve personal fulfilment, nor an arena for showing off our skills. We share what we live – the love of God. It is a collaboration with the Spirit. We must not confuse shared mission with the volunteer groups who help religious congregations. To talk of ‘mission’ is to talk of the Spirit and the network that he is weaving in our planet.

Mission is not action, nor the organisation of demanding social services. It is life. At the heart of the post-Vatican Council era is the idea of living the Consecrated Life from the ‘perspective of the hero/heroine’ (generosity, surrender, sacrifice, doing great things for the Kingdom). Today, these values and grand experiences are not so centre-stage. We are living our daily lives, without being super-women or super-men, but just people who are close to others as are family members, who recognise our limitations, ask for help and allow ourselves to be enriched and to be challenged. The way of ‘being and realising the mission’ is as important as the results that come from it. Our style of life is mission in the fullest sense of the word. And it is to be hoped that our activities are mission and not just work. The purpose of the Consecrated Life is not so much the building of the Kingdom as the welcoming of it. ‘To build the Kingdom’, ‘to expand the Kingdom’, are not biblical expressions: they imply an imperialist notion of mission. The Gospel speaks of ‘receiving the Kingdom’, of ‘entering the Kingdom’. There is a certain analogy (identification?) between the Kingdom and the Spirit.

We speak of two ‘epicleses’ in the Eucharist, which concern gifts and community. We need to add a third one: the outpouring of the Spirit for the transformation of life, which anticipates the arrival of the Kingdom. This is the sense of mission in the Consecrated Life. We must not reduce the Spirit to the level of the personal or the communal/ecclesial. The Spirit goes beyond the confines of the Church, open to the Kingdom, the centre of the preaching of Jesus. The Church should be continually becoming the Kingdom (Ellacuria). This is God’s plan: to configure humanity so that it may continually live in fraternal communion, with nature and with God: to generate a ‘*koinonia*’ that will embrace humanity, the cosmos and the Trinity. This is the purpose of the Church. If we imprison the Spirit within the Church, we forget about the Kingdom, its dynamism and its mission.

There are some people who carry out mission from a religious and confessional perspective: helping religion and faith to grow, transmitting doctrine, inviting people to become part of the community of believers and its cult: mission reduced to converting those who are outside of the Church; mission that is focussed on religion, evangelisation, the sacraments and liturgy. People are pressured into entering the Church as it is, instead of creating a Church that welcomes the world and its values. We religious men and women need to re-clothe ourselves in serenity and trust in the goodness of the world. Mission is not about responding to the need for the Church to grow, but is rather about responding to the urgencies and needs

of the world, without the subtle deceit that leads people to using economic resources to make ourselves more efficient, and our prestige in order to open doors for us.

We can only enter into mission by starting with our identity as defined by our charism, with the Spirit at its heart. Being sent out on mission is being sent by the Spirit, who reveals God's life as communion. The Consecrated Life is being configured as community in mission. The Spirit is its principal agent. Mission is not something that my congregation does: it is what is done by the Spirit, who is gradually changing the world and my congregation. Missionary spirituality is sensitivity, meekness, surrender, in the face of the presence of the Spirit: to allow oneself to be moved, carried, touched, activated. Whoever seeks the will of God is a mystic who allows her/himself to be moulded. Prophets collaborate with the Spirit by changing their ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Mission is spirituality, and spirituality is mission: it is to live in the Spirit, to act in accordance with the Spirit, to move in the Spirit.

The Consecrated Life cannot be understood without its prophetic mission, which captures the presence of the Spirit in the events of the present moment. But it is hard work to detect the voice of the Spirit that speaks through the Church, through Christians from other Churches, believers from other religions, non-believers and atheists, the poor; those who drive out demons that are not ours; hearing what the Spirit is saying today in the movements and the desires of the world. Mission is listening, not only to the murmuring of the heart, but also to the cries of the Spirit: the cry of 'reason'; the cry of the poor; the cry of those who are different (for reasons of sexuality, culture, religion); the cry of the earth. 'All truth, wherever it comes from, comes from the Holy Spirit'. (Ambrose). Mission today is living out Paul's advice: *'do not extinguish the Spirit, do not despise prophecies: examine everything and keep what is good'*. (1 Th 5: 19)

Do not dilute the biblical message about the Spirit, reducing it to the seven interior gifts (Is 11: 1-2), forgetting that the Spirit leads us to practise justice towards the poor (vv. 3-5) and the cosmic reconciliation of the universe (vv. 6-9). Let us read the signs of the times as signs of the presence of the Spirit in history. They are the profound aspirations of humanity that reflect the presence of the Spirit: challenges that are born from the great longings of humanity. We believe that the Spirit of the Lord fills the earth (Ws 1:7). Also, Christ is the patrimony of the whole of humanity, not the property of the baptised. But we have difficulty in discerning the presence of the Spirit in people, groups, tendencies, movements, ideologies... because his presence is always mixed up with limitations, errors, cultural conditioning, sins, personal or group interests, exaggerations, fantasies, fundamentalism (Victor Codina).

The Consecrated Life is inclusive, ecclesial, open, concerned for those who are weak. It is dedicated to the following of Jesus in contexts of poverty or marginalisation, at the service of the Gospel of justice and peace. How the Consecrated Life would change if the marginalised were the most important people in our lives: if the main criteria for our lifestyles were not ourselves but the people

and their needs; love guided by the desire to respond to what the weak ones need and hope for. The Consecrated Life that we love and hope for discovers God today on the margins, because he has converted these into his centre: the periphery that has become the centre; an exterior journey that is accompanied by another interior one, of spiritual conversion.

The Consecrated Life helps us to live out a faith that builds human communities. However there is a world of difference between being with others so that they take on Gospel living on terms dictated by us and living with others, always in listening mode and participating from the perspective of our differences. In the first case, the religious controls the rules of the game and are the experts: even if they are on the margins, they are still in their own world, their criteria are paramount is discerning the way forward. It is costly to move out of one's own territory and to accept that others have the reins. The Spirit is present in those who promote fraternal sharing, with the desire for what is good, true and just: a presence that is not constructed but discovered, unveiled. The Consecrated Life is missionary not only when it witnesses to what is good, but when it points out the good where it is not seen, among those who do not count. Mission is the welcoming of the Gospel that comes out to meet us, and we must not overshadow it with our own culture, our need to be in control, or our fears.

A Consecrated Life that goes out and that also remains: inculturation and the will to remain, give to mission an irrefutable strength and prestige. Our mission requires an incarnation in what is local (inculturation), with a universal vision (interculturality). And it requires us to remain: in the Bible we do not see any vocation that is '*ad tempus*': there is a requirement to remain faithfully with the poor. Any solidarity projects that are short-term, or any experiences of insertion or volunteer programmes, are all a form of alternative tourism. They are a sort of culture shock that allow people a first point of contact. Mission requires the establishment of bonds of friendship with the poor, '*wasting time with our rose*' (The Little Prince); feeling that I am suffering what the others are suffering; putting my hands where they are wounded and also where they are blessed. This is not possible if we are just there to have a look, without any commitment to stay.

We can glimpse this other Consecrated Life through continuous conversion to mission, where the life of the messenger is identified with the message. Let us look at mission not so much as a service but rather as an opportunity for the world and for the Church. It is about opening up spaces for meeting, listening, prayer and dialogue in the face of the challenges posed by society. The mission of those who are consecrated is, in the final analysis, to propose and promote a school for disciples. Let us move from a 'culture of membership' to a 'culture of discipleship'.

From the Desk of the Executive Secretary

Each month at UISG brings new developments and the possibility of building new relationships. We are doing this in order to collaborate on behalf of female religious life with other organizations and groups who are working in areas of common interest. The recent document *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican II* from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) speaks about “going beyond the models that we have inherited in order to appreciate the newness brought on by the Spirit.” Building solidarity networks is surely one of these new ways. As you will read we have been networking extensively in the field of communication in order to find ways to explain the charism of religious life to new generations. In strengthening our Talitha Kum anti-trafficking network at a global level, we are working to answer the appeal of Pope Francis “to adequately counteract this aberrant plague, this modern form of slavery.”

The Statutes of UISG speak about the Union maintaining relations of inter-communication and collaboration with Conferences of Religious at various levels. Therefore in the course of each year the members of various conferences come to visit UISG. In addition the President, Executive Secretary and/or a member of the Executive Board represent the Union at various meetings of national or continental conferences of religious or at conferences on religious life. During these past months the Union was represented in June at a Conference in Hayes (UK) organized by the Claretians; in August at the LCWR Annual Assembly and at the UISG Constellation Meeting (C2- USA) and finally in late August/early September at the ACWECA Assembly in Dar-Es-Salaam. The themes of these various gatherings give an indication of the topics that are of concern in different parts of the world.

The Conference of Religious of England and Wales had as its focus: *Unless the Grain of Wheat Dies... Death or Resurrection: An Exploration of Religious Life in the UK Today*. One of the speakers Fr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes CMF spoke about the Art of Dying Charismatically recalling that “When an Institute or a Community ends its days glorifying God, forgiving others, offering the best of themselves, then that Institute or Community imitates Jesus.”

The LCWR Assembly had as its theme: Being the Presence of Love: The Power of Transformation. Dr. Christopher Pramuk, whose presentation was titled *Leaning into the Mystery of Resurrection Faith*, emphasised “the vulnerability

of living from this vision of a future that cannot yet be seen, of loving and leading others into these liminal spaces between life and death, between what is and what is yet possible.”

The ACWECA Assembly addressed the theme: Revitalize our Solidarity for Deeper Evangelization in Today’s Complex Reality within the Region. While there are many challenges for religious in the area of Eastern and Central Africa, there is a growing sense of solidarity and mutual support among congregational leaders. In his address to participants Cardinal João Braz de Aviz shared his reflections on the content of the new document *New Wine in New Wineskins*. The challenges that have been identified for contemporary religious life include deepening the vocation and identity of consecrated life; new choices with regard to formation; human relationships especially the reciprocity between women and men; the service of authority and finally relational models. He concluded his reflections by pointing out that there is a need for religious life to transition to a spirituality of communion lived with intense generosity and conviction which will encompass all of our relationships.

Participants at the November meetings of the Council of 16 will reflect together on the document *New Wine and New Wineskins* and its implications, especially in relation to the service of authority and the type of accompaniment needed at all stages of formation which will sustain perseverance and fidelity. The meeting of the Council of 18 will share reflections on a similar area asking: *What are the support systems – or lack thereof – for priests and religious in mission territories that promote perseverance and growth in their vocation?* Perhaps one or more of the areas mentioned here require some in-depth reading and reflection and sharing of experiences on the part of congregational leaders? We hope to take up some of these topics in future editions of the bulletin.

Other News...

Conversations at UISG 2017

Looking at 2017 agenda of the Executive Board agenda for 2017, we hosted three “Conversations at UISG” on the following topics: *Religious life in China*, *New Approaches to Initial Formation for Sisters* and *Intercultural Challenge within Religious Life*. Initial formation was also the topic of a webinar led by Sr. Rosemary Howarth, ssnd, who is the novice director of the SSND International novitiate in Rome

Each conversation, organized especially for Superiors General and their councillors, included two different phases. Firstly a brief introduction was given by a Superior General or a sister who had experience in the area; this was followed by group work to share experiences and good practices.

Webinars 2017-2018: online seminars in different languages

UISG, in collaboration with the *Communicators for Women Religious* (www.c4wr.org) association, has chosen to sponsor a platform for online formation, allowing for a maximum of 100 participants to participate in the webinars offered for 2017 and 2018. These webinars can be accessed from anywhere in the world: you just need an internet connection and a computer (tablet or smartphone).

The topics that will be covered in 2018 include: *Intercultural Challenge within Religious Life, Institutional Communication, The Synod on Youth and Fund Raising for Mission*.

If you want to share with us your suggestions with regard to possible topics, please write to the following email address: comunicazione@uisg.org

The webinars' videos are available on our YouTube channel (you can access it through the home page of the following website www.uisg.org)

Presenting the Guide for Fund Raising for Mission

We presented the guide developed by *Mission Project Service* (USA), which includes profiles of all the Foundations who offer financial support or human resources for mission. This guide also provides practical examples on how to write a grant and maintain relationships with Foundations. It is possible to purchase an online subscription to receive a copy of the Guide.

For more information: <https://missionprojectservice.org>

Canon Law Workshops for Superiors General and Counsellors

Two *Canon Law workshops* for Superiors General of Congregations were held in Rome, one in English and one in Italian. Sr. Mary Wright, IBVM led a webinar in English entitled "*Preparing for the Future of Religious Institutes. Canonical aspects for Leaders*." A second workshop was held by Sr. Tiziana Merletti. For more information: canoniste@uisg.org

Council of Delegates of the UISG Constellations, November 5-11 2017, Manila (Philippines).

The *Council of Delegates* took place in Manila. The theme of the meeting was "*Building community in an Intercultural World*". There are 36 UISG Constellations worldwide who are represented by 52 Delegates.

For more information: www.uisg.org

Training on Facilitation and accompaniment of groups and organizations

In 2018, in collaboration with *Faith and Praxis*, UISG will organise a training workshop focused on the *Facilitation of groups and organizations*. There is a growing need in Congregations for facilitators who have the necessary skills to accompany institutes during assemblies, chapters and for discernment processes

at important times. This training aims at forming a group of religious and lay people who will be able to respond to this need.

For more information: www.faithandpraxisfcj.org

Useful resources

Presentation of the Guide for Fund Raising for Mission:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n8efkqtk0fr6ak7/AADXZ91kk4AL5amGeCefPyUDa?dl=0>

Material on the *The Synod on Youth*:

<http://www.dropbox.com/sh/u62q0gf9b5kwztz/AAD9CGJ301j571MJZbEarPtVa?dl=0>

Other news on the UISG website: www.uisg.org

If you want to discover all the formation (#formation) initiatives for 2018, click here: www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/meetings/formation/

If you want to receive the UISG Newsletter, please write to:

comunicazione@uisg.org

(Full name, congregation, role in the congregation, email and language).

YouTube Channel www.youtube.com/UISGRome

The Projects of UISG ...

Talitha Kum (www.talithakum.info)

The various Talitha Kum activities which took place in 2017 demonstrated the collaborative efforts within Consecrated Life in the fight against human trafficking. The international network, led by Sr. Gabriella Bottani, SMC, hosted different events fostering collaboration, formation and communication.

The Network is expanding:

Africa:

Cameroon: the commitment of some religious women led the local Religious Conference to officially create the network in their country.

Ghana: A Talitha Kum formation course will be held during March 12-17, 2018.

Latin America:

Two new countries - Paraguay and Panama - joined the existing networks.

Asia:

Talitha Kum South East Asia was restructured with two branches: Talitha Kum South East Asia and Talitha Kum East Asia. During 2017, the Catholic Religious Conference of Myanmar officially launched the Talitha Kum network.

On the different continents, we have continued to facilitate coordination and networking:

- in Europe, through RENATE (Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation)
- in America, through the participation of network representatives from the continental level in regional events.
- in Asia, the network coordinators have started to hold videoconferences.

New ecclesial spaces for collaboration

- Refugees & Migrants Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

Sr. Gabriella Bottani, SMC was asked to represent Talitha Kum in the group of the Refugees & Migrants Section which is supporting the United Nations work on the “Global Migration Compact”. For more information see: <http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>

-Santa Marta Group

Since October 2016, the International Union of Superiors General and Talitha Kum have been invited to attend the meetings of the Santa Marta Group. Following initiatives by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference for England and Wales (CBCEW), the group brought together in Rome during April 2014, Catholic bishops and police chiefs, in the presence of Pope Francis, to sign an historic declaration, committing themselves to a partnership to eliminate human trafficking. The Santa Marta Group now has members in over 30 countries.

- Women’s Section of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

Talitha Kum has had some meetings with Marta Rodríguez, the new director of the Women’s Section at the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life to foster collaboration.

Networks meetings of Talitha Kum International in 2017

- From December 2-15, Sr. Gabriella attended the South East Asia Major Superiors Congress and visited Talitha Kum Thailand and Talitha Kum Philippines.
- From June 19-23, the first meeting of the Talitha Kum International Coordination Commitment was held in Rome. It was an important moment that has helped improve international coordination across the networks.
- From October 21 to November 4, Sr. Gabriella visited Uganda and Kenya. The aim of the visit was to resume dialogue and strengthen the relationship with the local networks of religious women involved in the fight against human trafficking.

The Talitha Kum database

In collaboration with the faculty of Social Science of the Pontifical Gregorian University, and with the support of the SC Ministry Foundation, the planning phase of the Talitha Kum database has been completed. Access to the database will be restricted and limited. The releasable data will be made available to universities, congregational representatives at the United Nations and other

partners of Talitha Kum. It is worth noting that Talitha Kum is the largest worldwide network of religious life against human trafficking. The data gathered, according to international criteria, will be very helpful in trying to understand the severity of this crime against humanity.

First Course for the Formation of Talitha Kum Leaders

In partnership with the Pontifical University *Antonianum*, Talitha Kum / UISG has organized the first course for the formation of inter-congregational leaders involved in the fight against human trafficking. The candidates were selected in December 2017. The course will take place from January 2018 to March 2019 and it will be composed of an on-line phase and a residential phase. It will provide the participants with tools to enhance the skills that will support them in developing professional and relational skills, aimed at fostering collaborating and managing network activities.

“Wells of Hope” Project

In November 2017, Talitha Kum initiated the project “Wells of Hope” - funded by GHR. The project aims at fostering collaboration between religious sisters and Muslim women in the fight against human trafficking in the Mediterranean area, with a special focus on Muslim-majority regions and countries.

Migrants Project Sicily

One step at a time, we are putting down roots in Sicily. We continue to offer service in a quiet way. During the summer, the working pace slowed down a little because of the suffocating heat (43/48°). The sisters, however, never stopped working, driven by a deep desire of being present among the migrants who keep on arriving and whose reception become more and more difficult and unfavourable.

Four of the original pioneer sisters have left the project. However, four new sisters have arrived and some others are learning Italian in order to provide a more effective service. This is for us one of the many signs of Divine Providence accompanying us, giving us what we need to move forward.

The Sicilian people have gradually accepting us and have starting to appreciate our free availability to support their work. They now ask for support. They allow us to develop relationships with groups and institutions and they ask us to help not only with migrants, but also with poor people from the locality in order to avoid conflict between the two groups.

We do not work with thousands of migrants, but with small groups trying to be a humble discreet presence. We try to be present where others are not, where services are inadequate and where our international approach can be an asset

- where we can serve as a “bridge” between the staff and the guests at the Welcome Centre or between doctors, nurses and the migrants who are patients in hospitals. We offer our support where there is a need for listening or simple activities such as playing with children, teaching the most basic vocabulary in Italian or praying together. We are stepping up our efforts at the Welcome Centre at Siculiana, where the sisters of Agrigento are now well integrated, involved in many different activities.

In Caltanissetta, the nursing service offered under the bridges near the highway is of inestimable value, even though the police regularly dismantle the small tents and cardboard shelters that a large group of migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh rebuild with great difficulty every time under another bridge. We continue to offer our service at the soup kitchen for local poor and foreigners, are present at catechetical meetings and at the prayer groups with Nigerian women.

In Ramacca, besides working at the welcome centre for minors, the sisters are a regular presence at the hospital and collaborate with Caritas in two neighbouring centres.

Besides the existing initiatives, we have interesting new developments to share:

- **The Urdu/Italian school.** An Indian sister from Caltanissetta opened this in the parish, responding to the request of a group of Pakistanis who have now been in contact with the sisters for a year. At first, the men started to come, then the women appeared, and so the number of courses was doubled, one in the morning for men, one in the evening for women... Having persuaded the women to leave their houses to come to school is a great achievement.

- **The gift of two minibuses** from Caritas. The sisters of Ramacca and Agrigento can now leave the town and the city to go meet the migrants living and hiding in the countryside. They are free to help “the minors” from the centre explore the local area or to take them to the beach where they can get used again to being at the sea which in the past threatened to become their tomb... Sometimes the minibus can become a temporary ambulance for the sick who live under bridges, and at other times it can serve as a school or a listening centre, but not like an institution.

- **The creation of a vegetable garden** in the welcome centre for minors in Ramacca. This was made possible thanks to a project involving people from Belgium and it allowed the boys to till the land.

Ours is a silent, humble, discreet work. However, we have learnt that taking short steps is the right path to follow. If it is in God’s will, thanks to a network of relationships gradually growing between the sisters, the local population, and

different bodies working in the same field (e.g. parishes), we will see the fruits of our work in time, with the aim of becoming fully integrated.

Looking ahead, the challenge of living an intercultural and inter-congregational community life remains. Its difficulties are not only related to different cultures and charisms, but first and foremost to the different personalities with the strengths and weaknesses that each one of us has... In this way, daily life becomes a means of personal and community growth and a way of witnessing that it is possible to share a life together, despite the different congregations from which we come.

The International Bureau for Migrants

The **International Bureau for Migrants** is starting to become a reality within UISG, and this modest start is full of hope.

This year, Sr. Florence de la Villéon, RSCJ, the head of the office, was able to speak at several congregational assemblies to raise awareness about the migrants' situation today in the world. This opportunity allows congregations to evaluate their response to this crisis and if needed, to review their commitment to migrants, refugees and displaced people.

Another important exercise of awareness raising has focused on politicians passing through Rome. They often ask to meet religious representatives who are familiar with this issue. They wish to know the official position of the Church, but also to meet the sisters who work daily in the field.

As a result of the Sicily project, with its inter-congregational and international communities, small projects are being developed in other countries. We have tried to share our experience in Sicily with the congregations and bishops who were interested.

It is a modest start, but a useful one. To successfully integrate people who have fled their country into a new culture is a difficult task. As Pope Francis often reminds us, we are all invited to participate in this effort.

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