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Presentation of the 22nd Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)

The 22nd Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) – to take place in person and online from 2 to 6 May 2022, on the theme “Embracing vulnerability on the synodal journey” – was presented at 12 noon today, Friday 29 April, in the Holy See Press Office.

The speakers were: Sr. Jolanta Kafka, president of the UISG, Sr. Patricia Murray, executive secretary of the UISG, Sr. Mary Kudiyiruppil, deputy executive secretary of the UISG, and Sr. Franca Zonta, superior general of the Marianist Sisters.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of Sr. Jolanta Kafka

We are very grateful for the possibility offered by the Press Office to host the UISG and the presentation of the assembly.

Every three years the UISG Plenary brings together superiors general from all over the world. It is usually a point of arrival... a meeting to share what has been experienced and what the last assembly has outlined as paths of inspiration, further work and planning. And it often becomes the starting point for new research and creativity.

The joint assembly (USG and UISG) online (May 2021), followed by the assembly of delegations of constellations from all over the world, influenced the choice of theme. In these dialogues, the experience of the last two years, marked by Covid and the questions that its consequences have posed to us, were shared and deepened. This exchange took place in the hopeful context of the imminent preparation for the new Synod. From all these conversations has emerged the theme of our assembly: “Embracing vulnerability on the synodal journey”.

This year's themes are essentially two: *vulnerability* and *synodality*. We want to embrace vulnerability and join the synodal journey with the Church.

Let us start from the human fragility that Covid has made even more evident. Our vulnerability too, that of religious life. There is no doubt that we are going through a fragile time of difficulty and crisis. We feel the need for a new reading of the essentials of religious life and of the evangelical counsels. We need to re-interpret ourselves in the exercise of leadership, in the mission of authority as service, in an evangelical, synodal spirit.

From there, embrace the fragility that surrounds us, as a situation in which God calls us. It is a paradox that when we embrace fragility, we are strengthened to support one another. These are the two approaches - from within religious life and to suffering humanity.

There is no charism, no religious family that was not born to respond to the call of God in the most needy and fragile. But the way in which we place ourselves before the fragile is also important. Jesus becomes one of the others and teaches us that the best way to transform is to place ourselves with others. We have often placed ourselves not only on the side of the needy, but from a position of power. What is new is to recognize more consciously that we too need compassion, mercy, conversion, to be aware of our wounds, our sins.

It is about recognizing humanity not in its "I am God", as some thinker (?) said, but in its condition as a creature. It is about preparing ourselves to rebuild humanity from what we really are, that we are vulnerable creatures, and from there to embrace God's plan for it.

The condition of vulnerability puts us in relationship. I do not have everything; I need others. Showing ourselves to be in need of others is something to rediscover in the heart of religious life. We can learn to ask for the grace to count more on others, to receive wisdom, to hope that it will come to us from the diversity of charisms and vocations.

"Synodal journey" as a way and prospect for the Church: a vision, a form of pedagogy and economy ... let us welcome the call to walk together, sharing and listening deeply from our faith, our way of life, our hopes and our dreams.

With all religious life we are here, on the Synodal journey. We need to discern, therefore we need community to serve better the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel, caring and healing, renewing the service of the proclamation of the Gospel that embraces all, also those who feel distant or excluded. Christ is at the centre, as the way, the truth and the life.

We begin this journey with joy and hope to strengthen our identity and to launch ourselves with confidence into ecclesial communion. Certain of the presence of the Spirit who is always at work.

Intervention of Sr. Mary Kudiyruppil

I would like to explain a bit more the theme of vulnerability which will accompany the Plenary participants the first two days. Vulnerability is a common human predicament which calls for compassion, solidarity and support. Usually, people like to hide their vulnerability, put up a brave front and try to give the impression that everything is under control. This is because being vulnerable can be embarrassing, and seemingly a sign of weakness. We are barely out of the Covid-19 Pandemic and are still in the midst of a war – both these realities have laid bare the façades that everything is under control.

For religious congregations, it is even more difficult to appear vulnerable because of the assumptions on which consecrated life is built such as faith in God, prayer, assurance of being called and sent by God and the Church. For centuries Congregations of women religious have been bastions of strength and have enjoyed considerable

influence.

Today, religious Congregations are experiencing vulnerability from several quarters. We experience vulnerability in numerical strength. For many Congregations, a decline in numbers is making them vulnerable. We experience vulnerability from the inner structure of religious life itself, exposed as we are, to questions, challenges and attacks. We are being asked tacitly or aloud, about our professedly coherent positions and values, and the inconsistencies in practice. We experience vulnerability from within our own members in the communities who are looking for change and relevance.

It is important to note that the plenary theme says “embracing” vulnerability which is different from merely tolerating or enduring. “Embracing” happens when there is warmth and closeness in a relationship and a good rapport. It is about recognizing, owning, befriending and being at ease with being vulnerable. And in this honest encounter, there is power, healing and hope. Embracing vulnerability is embracing the Cross in the hope of the resurrection. The goal of the UISG Plenary is not just to lament our vulnerability, but to see how we, as religious women, who are still a formidable force in the Church and society, can keep alive the flame of hope through our presence and mission in the world.

As congregational leaders we are aware of our role of animating and fostering this dimension.

Intervention of Sr. Franca Zonta

The second and third days of our assembly will be devoted in a special way to the theme of Synodality. We will ask ourselves: how will the synodal journey transform consecrated life? And above all: what will be the contribution of consecrated life to this journey that involves the whole Church?

As consecrated women and men, we feel particularly challenged by this theme, by this path, a path that we as UISG have been following for some time now, since the breath of the Spirit that animated the Second Vatican Council led our sisters to come together and create the UISG, a structure that favours our confrontation and growth together, responding together to the challenges of the contemporary world.

Communion, participation, mission, the three key words of the Synod, also pose to us a continual challenge.

Our journey together stems from the desire to:

1. witness first of all the communion between the different charisms, the beauty of diversity in the different forms of consecrated life;
2. participate and share experiences, insights, ideas, hopes...
3. pool forces and resources for the mission, which today more than ever requires synergy, inclusion and integration.

And this is possible to the extent that we come together to reflect, think, share, making interculturality, a characteristic of our institutions, a great opportunity to experience and show that the dream of Pope Francis, expressed in such a dense and engaging way in “Fratelli tutti”, is possible.

Synodality touches a chord to which as consecrated women we are very sensitive. We have come a long way, but the road is still long.

The Plenary Assembly will make this chord vibrate even more. Finding ourselves together will allow us to say

with strength, in different languages and in different ways, but with a single heart *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*: we are here, we stand before you Holy Spirit! Because this is the attitude that animates us as we begin this plenary session: the awareness of our vulnerability that opens itself confidently to the action of the Holy Spirit.

We stand before you, Holy Spirit: renew consecrated life from the depths so that the synodal style that must animate us is not just occasional but structural, as Pope Francis told us in the opening message of the Synod.

And so that it is not just a fashionable word that we now include in every discourse and in every sphere, it will be necessary to commit ourselves to formation. Formation will be the turning point, because only a change of mentality, only a new way of conceiving leadership and the style of authority can make us set out even more promptly along the path of a true and fruitful synodality.

Intervention of Sr. Patricia Murray

At the UISG Plenary, the Executive Board will provide an overview of developments within UISG since the last Assembly in 2019. These fall into three main categories:

- a) New Initiatives
- b) Developing Initiatives
- c) Long-term Initiatives

New Initiatives include the following:

Establishment of Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI). CCCI grew out of a Sister-led project that began in Africa (Uganda, Zambia and Kenya). This initiative promotes family-based or family-like care, rather than institutional care for children in orphanages. It is clear that 80% of children in so-called orphanages have in fact family members. So, the focus is on supporting *families* rather than promoting *institutions*. CCCI is taking the learning from Africa and introducing their best practices in other parts of Africa (Malawi/South Africa) and Asia (Sri Lanka, India and the Philippines).

Commission for Care and Safeguarding was established two years ago in conjunction with USG. It aims to educate leaders of female and male congregations on all aspects of care and safeguarding – development of guidelines and protocols and all issues related to care and safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults. Congregations are asked to nominate a delegate whose role is to keep General Leadership well-informed. The Commission has offered a number of webinars over these past years which have now been published in conjunction with the Vatican Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Sisters Advocating is an initiative which helps prepare sisters to engage in advocacy on crucial pastoral issues and to help those on the margins to be able to speak on their own behalf. This is a way to actualize the prophetic ministry of religious sisters.

Laudato si' Platform - The UISG launched “Sowing Hope for the Planet” at Assembly 2019 responding to Pope Francis’ appeal to see the fundamental connection that exists between the environmental crisis and the social crisis we are currently experiencing and to be open to a personal and community ecological conversion. The Pope often reminds us that “everything is interconnected.” “Sowing Hope for the Planet” is a project in which every Sister whose congregation is a member of UISG, and their connections are provided with an opportunity to make a difference in our care of the planet. This initiative now promotes *the Laudato si'* Action Platform.

New Initiatives that will be launched on May 9th will focus on the needs of elderly sisters worldwide. The UISG, together with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), will focus on the needs of individuals living with some form of Cognitive Impairment – especially Alzheimer's. The second focus will be on the care and support of elderly sisters in general. In many parts of the world, women religious have no social security or health insurance. In addition they were often in pastoral ministries and received no payment.

Goals of the Plenary Assembly:

- To understand the process of transformation which can happen when a person engages in the synodal journey;
- To gain in clarity on the spirituality of synodality, especially regarding what the Scripture tells us about the wisdom needed for the synodal journey;
- To see what formation is needed to live and lead in a synodal way.

The Program of the Plenary Assembly will bring the participants on a personal journey in relation to the synodal journey. The theme highlights a disposition needed to engage in the synodal process – that of vulnerability. The synodal process invites all the people of God to engage in a process of discernment, listening together to determine what the Holy Spirit is asking of the Church today. To really participate in a discernment process, requires that a person be free to leave behind his/her own agenda and to engage in listening at depth. It is a process of transformation. The presentations during the Assembly will focus on experiences of vulnerability – so that each can identify her own vulnerabilities, the spirituality of synodality, and the call to lead in a synodal way. This will require new approaches to formation.
