

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY ON THE SYNODAL JOURNEY



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EMBRACING VULNERABILITY ON THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

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PRESENTATION

In this issue of the Bulletin we publish the texts of the conferences presented at the UISG Plenary Assembly, held in Rome from 2 to 6 May 2022, on the theme “*Embracing Vulnerability on the Synodal Journey*”.

Dr. Ted Dunn

Embracing Our Vulnerability and Its Transformative Potential

Embracing our vulnerability, living in the fullness of our humanity with hearts wide open, is what transforms us. The only people who don't experience being vulnerable are those without empathy or compassion. Those who embrace it know its beauty, its creative potential; they know that being vulnerable is what makes us human and has the power to heal and transform hearts.

Sr. Nurya Martínez-Gayol, ACI

Spirituality of Synodality

The synodal journey is a path of conversion, change, abandonment of ways and structures that gave us security but that have become, on some occasions, fruitless and, on others, constitute obstacles if we intend to advance in synodality, together in a search for more participative and inclusive forms that allow us to walk “with everyone,” and to take charge of reality “with all.”

Dr. Jessie Rogers

Wisdom for the Synodal Journey

How can we embrace the wisdom of vulnerability? It means sowing seeds hopefully, even when we are weeping, and entrusting their growth to God (Psalm 126). It means risking ourselves and our future for the sake of the world and its future. It means accepting that change comes about not by force, but by embracing the other, through the offer of reconciliation. We need to imbibe Jesus' countercultural way of being in the world.

Sr. M^a Carmen Mora Sena, HCSA

The Leader's Vulnerability During the Pandemic

What I have experienced leads me to discover that vulnerability makes synodality possible because it makes it clear that we need to walk together and to count on the wealth, support, light, and contribution of others; and it strengthens my conviction that this is the path of leadership that Religious Life needs today, it is the one that brings us closer and opens us to others and lets God take the reins of our Congregations and of the service we offer to the world.

Sr. Anne Falola, OLA
Vulnerability as a Missionary

We are all vulnerable before a human history that classifies us as victims and villains, oppressed and oppressors, rich and poor, civilized and uncivilized, etc. As missionaries, we are called to build communion in this diversity embracing its beauty and fragility.

Sr. Siham Zgheib
Testimony

On two occasions, the Major Superiors have asked us to leave Aleppo if we felt in danger or if we were afraid. Each time and after a moment of discernment and prayer, we chose to stay; and our answer was: "In the time of darkness, we will not change a decision we have made in the light." We have offered our lives to Christ. We shall not take them back.

Sr. Sheila Kinsey, FCJM
Report on UISG Initiative: Sowing Hope for the Planet

Sowing Hope for the Planet is a project in which all Sisters whose congregations are members of UISG and their connections, are provided an opportunity to actualize *Laudato Si'* and to make a difference in our care of the planet. Our goal is *"to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."* (LS 19).

Sr. Yolanta Kafka, RMI - Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM
Report for Plenary Assembly 2022

More and more, we realize that through our contacts with the reality on the ground, through our interdependence as congregations, that we can bring our concerns about the needs of people and the planet to many different meetings and contexts. The prophetic nature of religious life, calls us as Superiors General/Congregational Leaders to mobilize ourselves as a global sisterhood

Sr. Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, Sr. Lia Latela, RMI, Sr. Gemma Simmonds, CJ
From Listening with the Heart

We feel honoured and moved to have been invited to take part in these days of the UISG assembly which, in continuity with the past, is creatively marking the present and passionately motivating the vision for the future of religious life, starting from its vulnerability in synodality with the universal Church.

EMBRACING OUR VULNERABILITY AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

Dr. Ted Dunn

Dr. Ted Dunn is a licensed clinical psychologist and co-founder of "Comprehensive Consulting Services" in Trinity, Florida. He has over thirty years of experience providing consultation, training and facilitation services to religious communities and other faith-based organizations throughout the United States and internationally. His background as a consultant, facilitator, professor, and psychotherapist has prepared him well for his current focus on guiding communities seeking deep change and transformation.



*This is what the LORD says:
"Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is,
and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."
But you said, 'We will **not** walk in it.'* Jeremiah 6:16

This is a time of reckoning. It is in these times of trial that we are tested, tested to our very soul. Life as we have known it, including Religious Life, is over and there is no going back to the way things were. We stand at a crossroads now, and we have a choice. We can choose to steel our defenses, fend for ourselves and remain as comfortable as we can for as long as we can, or we can choose to embrace our vulnerability, look for the ancient path and, together, give birth to a new way of being. The question remains: *What path will you choose?*

Outwardly there is chaos; inwardly there is a new world stirring. Listen to the heartbeat of the New. The change and tumult in our world are unprecedented. Add to this the complex and rapid changes facing you as leaders, and it easily becomes overwhelming. Trying to make sense of it all is like trying to drink from a firehose. It's hard to assimilate what to really think and feel about it all. It's hard to see the forest for the trees, stay grounded, and make wise choices. We can easily lose track of what matters most to us, as well as the people who matter most to us. The press of daily demands too often takes precedence over our care for one another, our common home, and our God-given purpose for living.

Fortunately, we've carved out some time to slow down and breathe, to listen to what is stirring. Let's take this opportunity, the time we have together, to let things sink in and get in touch with what life is trying to tell us. At these graced crossroads, amidst the whirlwind

of change, what might be the *deeper invitation*? What is the soulwork we need to do to listen to the heartbeat of the New? What does it mean to embrace our vulnerability and its transformative potential? These are the kinds of questions I'll be inviting you to ponder and share with one another.

As we begin, let me first say, Congratulations! You have chosen a theme that is completely contrary to the prevailing paradigm of our world. *Embracing our vulnerability*, speaks to me of the essence of humanity and the very heart of transformation. Embracing our vulnerability requires that we embrace the fullness of our being: life's beauty and austerity, the full cycle of surrender, gestation, and birth, and all manner of anguish and love. With each new cycle of life, in order for us to grow, we must not only humbly recognize our vulnerability, we must also embrace it. In other words, embracing our vulnerability, is part and parcel of the inner and interpersonal work of transformation. It is not a question as to whether or not you like being vulnerable. The question is: Can you see the value in it and, therefore, will you choose to embrace this kind of heart-work for the transformative potential it holds?

Before I go too much further, let me pause and ask a simple question:

What is it you are truly seeking? What is your deepest desire or most urgent longing as you plan for the future of your community and your own personal future?

Using your handout, jot down a few words or phrases in response to my question. I'll give you moment of quiet.

A Great Turning

We cannot travel to the future without honoring our past, our ancestors, and our traditions, but these cannot lead us there. We need to include and transcend the past, loosen our grip on time-honored traditions and ghost-structures of the past, in order to make room for the New. What leads us into the future is our *courage, creativity, and tenacity* to give life to our deepest longings called forth by the lure and love of God. Honoring the past cannot mean living in the past. Honoring our ancestors cannot mean living as they lived. If we truly honor those who have brought us to today, we must do for the next generation what our ancestors did for us: We must make room for the New. "For our lives to be meaningful," said Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "we must succeed in continuing the creative work of evolution."

Our entire globe is at the brink of a massive transition which we, as a species, are partially responsible for creating. The fate of the planet, humanity, and the nearly 10 million other species that inhabit our common home are all tied together. We will either evolve into a new way of being or devolve toward extinction. I believe we have a moral responsibility to reckon with the damage we've caused and do everything in our power to transform our lives. While there are no guarantees, I believe that we have the capacity to transform this crisis and aid in bringing forth the next evolutionally leap in the ongoing story of creation.

However, it won't be our clever brains, alone, that will determine our fate. We seem to be much better at making tools than using them wisely. Our future rests on our ability to make wise choices. We need to recognize the collective vulnerability we are all facing and partner in this work of transformation. Our future rests on our willingness to come together through intergenerational, interdisciplinary, interfaith, and intercultural collaboration.

The “I alone can fix it” hubris, and “might makes right” mentality of our leaders, will be the death of us. Our patriarchal caste systems that subjugate women and marginalize minorities will be the death of us. The racism, sexism, and ageism, and all the ways we have destroyed the dignity of difference and richness of diversity, will be the death of us. We will, in other words, either all hang together, or we will hang separately.

During this time of transition, I trust that you spend a lot of time thinking about how to best care for your members, manage your finances, and obtain the highest and best use of your land and buildings. But what about the highest and best use of your members’ talents, time and energy? What about the sustainability of your charism and mission? How will you care for the soul of your community? Like it or not, communities are compelled to change during this time of transition, but might there also be a deeper invitation, the possibility of transformation and the emergence new life?

Before we explore that deeper invitation, let me describe the crises we are facing in our world more fully and invite your reflections.

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home. Do you not perceive it? A mixture of natural and manmade circumstances has brought our planet to a tipping point: global warming, rising sea levels, species extinction, and rivers of migration. We can add the pernicious pandemic to the climate crisis, the festering wounds of racism and classism, misogyny and hegemony, human trafficking and slavery, economic injustice, LGBTQIA inequality, violence, war, and the toxic and polarizing politics that are bringing all of us to our collective knees. Eckart Tolle refers to these as the “Bells of Mindfulness,” all of which are tolling ominously, signaling the existential threat to our planetary home and humanity’s future.

Countless luminaries and scientists believe that we are teetering on the edge of a sixth great extinction of our planet. Greta Thunberg minced no words when she said: “We have raped and pillaged the planet and jeopardized our children’s future.” It is an existential, evolutionary crisis in which our species will either evolve into a new consciousness and a new way of being or devolve into an abyss of death and destruction. Hope lies in our willingness and determination to collaborate in taking the next evolutionary leap to a new level of consciousness. The question remains: *How relevant is this in your life and what is your response to this Great Turning?*

What impact are these planetary threats having in your own country? Are these merely the backdrop to your lives? Ilea Delio once said, “Creation is not a backdrop for human drama but the disclosure of God’s identity.” I couldn’t agree more. The world in which we live is not just the context for your life, or for Religious Life, it is the ground from which life springs and the object of all its endeavors. I believe you have a key role to play in both the transformation of our world, as well as the transformation of Religious Life.

Within this Great Turning are the tectonic shifts taking place across the religious landscape. You know these, as well. In the United States, for example, there is a rise in the hunger for spirituality amidst a decline in the membership of all mainline religions, especially Catholics. Those with no religious affiliation, Nones, are now the largest subgroup, outnumbering Catholics and trending larger.

I won’t present all of the demographic changes for Catholics across globe. You’ve seen them all before and are experiencing them firsthand. Suffice it to say that the demographic shifts represent only the tip of the iceberg, one small portion of the challenges facing religious communities. Nonetheless, the practical impact of these demographic changes is demanding enormous time, energy, and resources just to maintain life as it is today. Consequently, there is little left to shape a vision for tomorrow.

Adding to these challenges are a host of deeper issues that cascade down to the very

soul of communities. For example, individualism, co-dependency, workaholism and entitlement are undermining the foundations of community, namely, interdependence, co-responsibility, shared power, and mutual accountability. Consumerism, scandals of abuse, questions of relevancy, identity confusion, mission drift, and other vexing challenges strike at the very soul of communities.

The good news is that Religious Life is not dying. It is transforming, just as it has through many lifecycle changes since the time of Jesus. It is on the leading edge of an emerging consciousness in support of our planetary evolution. The good news is that you are a part of this Great Turning! You are, no doubt, working hard to make sense of your future and plan for it. The denial that persisted in recent decades is finally giving way to more proactive efforts to adapt and change.

The good news is that death, while it is a part of this transition, will not be the last word. This cyclical transformation is natural to all living systems. Death is never the last word;



it is always a new beginning. This is *God's promise*: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

Religious Life will rise again. But there are hard choices ahead and no quick fixes or off-the-shelf solutions. All of the options you have will require hard work. There is no escaping it. Even if a community were to come to "completion," there would be tough decisions and complex plans to implement just to take care of business, say nothing of grieving the losses and negotiating the inevitable differences of opinion regarding all the decisions they must make. You know these complexities all too well. The only solace, perhaps, is that God is with you and will not abandon you. This is *God's covenant*.

Thomas Merton once said: "Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are, in their own proper time and place in the history to which they belong and to which they must inevitably contribute either their response or their evasions, either truth and

act, or mere slogan and gesture.” Take a moment to reflect upon these words and jot down a few thoughts in your response to this second question on your handout.

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home as well as Religious Life. What in this Great Turning holds relevance for you and how are you responding?

When communities are introduced to the notion of transformation, without much thought, most will resonate with the idea of transformation. Sure, why not? After all, who would be against transformation? It’s like saying you’re against motherhood or world peace.

Unfortunately, despite their enthusiasm for the *idea* of transformation, most communities

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home as well as Religious Life. What in this Great Turning holds relevance for you and how are you responding?

will not put forth the concrete resources, or exert the emotional grit and spiritual discipline, needed to make the hard choices to transform their lives. They will not calendar the time, commit their monies, or engage their members in the hard work it requires. They will choose, instead, the well-worn path of least resistance. The pressing needs to care for their members, plan for what to do with their land and buildings, and simply to maintain life as it is, fills their calendars and eclipses the deeper work. Unwittingly, bit by bit, communities make choices driven more by fear than by courage, choices that all but guarantee their demise.

Some communities, a smaller percentage, will discover and dispose themselves to the fullness of grace at these crossroads. They will listen for a deeper invitation. They will seek to transform their lives and discern God’s call to new life. They will plan, not only for the external changes that must be made (e.g., finances, healthcare and the bricks and mortar of their lives), they will also open their lives to an inward journey, into the forest, through the dark night of the soul.

There are many options for change available to communities. No matter what option you choose, you simply cannot continue to live and function as you have in the past. Absent the “inner work of transformation,” these options will amount to little more than surface changes meant to ease the administrative burdens and make for a smoother path to “completion.”

What got you today won't get you to tomorrow. Helen Keller said it this way: “A bend in the road is not an end in the road, unless you fail to make the turn.” The vast majority of communities will fail to make the turn. Some will wait until it is too late and, by the time they wake up, they will have exhausted their resources and their will to change. Others will make only incremental changes, believing they are doing what's needed, only to discover their safe, small changes are not nearly enough. And some of the most resilient communities will successfully make this bend in the road and bring forth new life. They will have a hand in facilitating the emergence of a new Religious Life.

Adaptation is absolutely necessary, but how you adapt is key. According to Thomas Friedman, the amount of change we will experience in the next 100 years will exceed the change experienced in our entire human history.¹ Our capacity to adapt to this accelerating rate of change is being greatly challenged. The vast majority of communities will become extinct during this cycle of Religious Life because their efforts to adapt will be unsuccessful. Fortunately, we know why.

Here are seven of the most common misguided efforts. They will:

1. **Make new improved versions of the past.** Just like the new improved versions of toothpaste or soap, communities will make new and improved versions of themselves. They will attempt to do what they have always done, only a little bit better.
2. **Try harder, not differently.** They will try harder to tighten their belts, reduce expenses, postpone retirement, downsize, rightsize, and repurpose buildings, hoping for a different outcome, rather than try differently.
3. **Play it safe, rather than innovate.** They will play it safe, rather than innovate, out of a fear of making bad investments, losing their reputations, or of failing. As it turns out, playing it safe is the riskiest choice of all.
4. **Engage in incremental, rather than deep change.** They will favor small changes where the outcomes are predictable, conversations are manageable, and things are more controllable, rather than the chaos of deep change.
5. **Avoid something bad, rather than create something good.** They will worry more about making mistakes, rather than focusing their attention and resources on new possibilities.
6. **Download the same information, rather than create a new operating system.** They will download the same information using the same operating system, rather than create a new operating system, a shift in consciousness, that allows novel possibilities to emerge.
7. **Focus on external change, rather than the inner work.** They will focus on changing what's on the surface of their lives (land, buildings, finances, ministries, and the number of people in leadership), and largely ignore what's underneath, the personal and interpersonal work of transformation.

The common denominator here, if you haven't caught it, is *fear*. If communities are not to remain an analogue culture in a digital world, they will need a great deal of courage to adapt and change. Take a moment and jot some thoughts in response to this third questions.

*Is your community experiencing any of these misguided efforts?
Which ones and how do you understand this?*

While adaptation and changes are necessary, these efforts alone are not enough, *if* the desire is to transform. There is, still, a deeper invitation. To get to that deeper invitation, let me draw the distinction between change and transformation. Change is an external event, a new arrangement of things and, sometimes, an invitation to transform. However, as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, "You can change where you live, but you take your patterns with you."

In other words, if we change only the surface things and ignore the deeper work, the old story will migrate to a new venue. We take it with us to our new relationships, new places of ministry, or new places of living. Over the years we become imprisoned by these old stories, old structures, old ways of thinking and patterned ways of living. This is what Freud called "repetition compulsion" or what Einstein called a "betrayal of the soul." In other words, you can make external changes, but that's not the same as a transformation.

Transformation, in contrast, is an internal process, a journey that shifts the meaning and purpose of our lives. It shifts the patterns and practices of our lives and the structures that support them. It shifts our identity and realigns our soul with its outward expression. It is what Carl Jung meant when he said: "The greatest problems in life can never be solved, only outgrown." Transformation is not problem solving. It is a maturational leap, a soul to surface realignment of life.

The most obvious example here would be your decision to enter Religious Life. This was more than a change. It was a transformation. You didn't just change what you wore, where you lived, or your title. You transformed your primary relationships and commitments, your rhythm, practices and daily routines, your values and worldview, your identity and life's meaning and purpose, and you transformed your relationship with God. It was a soul-shifting experience that opened up an entirely new narrative for your life. It is the Paschal Mystery, not as a cerebral knowing, but as a living faith and experiential knowing.

However, every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. Crisis always precedes transformation, but does not insist upon it. A crisis, by definition, is a situation in which our capacity to cope is exceeded by the stressors we face. When in crisis, we have a choice to either change in an attempt to ease the pain or we transform the pain into a new beginning. More often than not, we try to *change* by either reducing the stressors or increasing our capacity to cope. Sometimes, however, we choose the road less traveled, a path of *transformation* that brings forth new life.

What happens at a graced crossroads? On the reverse side of your handout, you'll see a table with the words, "Graced Crossroads" and "Deeper Invitation." Let the left side represent your personal experience, and the right side represent your communal experience.

Now I'm asking you to reflect for a moment on two kinds of transitions. The first will be one of your own, personal, life-changing transitions, past or present. The second will be the transition your community is now facing. The purpose of this reflection is to draw upon your personal experience as a means for helping you to appreciate what your community is now facing.

We have all been here, where the ground beneath us shifts and we are brought to our knees, only to be transformed, not merely changed. Recall for a moment a crossroads in your own life, one from the past or a current one. This might be a serious illness, a job loss, the death of a family member or close friend, or a broken relationship or commitment you once vowed to preserve. On the left side of the paper, jot down a word,

phrase or image that captures your personal crossroads experience. Recall, also, its deeper invitation and jot that down. I'll give you a moment to recall such an experience and its deeper invitation.

Now reflect upon the transition your community is now facing. How would you describe this crossroads? On the right side of the paper, give it a headline. Jot down a word, phrase or image that captures the crossroads your community is now facing and what might be its deeper invitation? I'll give you a moment. Now hold both your personal and communal experiences in your minds and heart as I describe some of things that happen at these graced crossroads and deeper invitation they might offer.

Alcoholics Anonymous call these experiences "hitting bottom," the point at which we are forced to admit that there is a grave problem and we need to reach out for help. It is not a time to throw in the towel, but a recognition that, alone, we are not enough to bring about our own healing or open a new door to the future. People of a Christian faith might



call this a "dark night of the soul." For communities, as in our personal lives, this can be a "graced crossroads."

A graced crossroads, while it is a painful place, can simultaneously be a profoundly freeing place to be, if we let it. It can be a place of refuge where we gladly "take the yoke" (Matthew 11:29). As painful as it is, at a graced crossroads there is a feeling of liberation and relief once we let go of denying our own suffering or fighting against it. It is liberating for us, for a community, once we let go of all the unnecessary suffering that comes from our exhausting and futile attempts to cling to what is no longer working, to control what is outside of our control, and to deny, blame and shame ourselves or others for our suffering.

When we hit bottom, we begin to know what's really real, who's there for us and who isn't, who believes in us, and who doesn't. When we hit bottom, and finally accept the hand we've been dealt, we begin to ask questions for which there are no immediate answers, but for which answers must be found. With our denial gone, we can begin to listen and

search for these answers. We can begin to hear that still, small voice whispering a deeper invitation (1 Kings 19:11-13). The Celts call this a “thin” time, or a place where the veil between the two worlds of heaven and earth is thin. Christine Paintner, in *The soul’s slow ripening*, calls this a “threshold time,” when we are moving from one time and one awareness to another. It is a place where we can make “deeper connections with the divine.”²

Grace flourishes in every nook and cranny of creation, but never are we more aware of its presence and amenable to its ways than when we are at such a crossroads. Grace comes bidden and unbidden, whether we are aware of it or not. When we arrive at a crossroads, individually or as a community, the pain we must endure hollows us out. We are emptied of all hubris and stripped of our defenses. It is here in the deep quiet of own soul’s searching that we come face to face with those parts of ourselves we have rejected, hidden from ourselves and from those we loved. It is here, at these crossroads, that grace works its way into every nook and cranny of our being.

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A graced crossroads, for individuals and communities, is a place wherein God continually puts before us choices between life and death. God beckons, beseeches us to choose life, but these choices are always ours to make. Religious communities are now at a graced crossroads, a threshold between what was and what is yet to come. Here, at these graced crossroads, is a *deeper invitation: Choose life* so that your descendants might live. *Choose life* so that you might live more fully in whatever time you have left. *Choose life* so that you might have a hand in the transformation of Religious Life and our planetary home, bringing Christ into our world.

In every crisis, at every graced crossroads, there is a deeper invitation. Look again at what you noted as your graced crossroads and its deeper invitation. I’ll give you a moment to jot down any further reflections that might be emerging within you.

What is your experience of your graced crossroads and its deeper invitation?

The Divine Paschal Mystery of transformation is beyond our comprehension, but it surely does not happen without our active participation. Sitting in a prison cell, a young Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "Human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God." You can either try to plan your future or create the conditions for grace to intercede. To do the former, you must presume to know what the future is. To do the latter, you need to learn how to cooperate with grace and do the inner work of transformation.

Not far from where my daughter, Kelly once lived is a place called Death Valley. Death Valley is the hottest, driest place in the United States. Nothing grows there because it doesn't rain. Hence, its name. However, on rare occasions, against all odds, it does rain in Death Valley. And when it does, the entire floor of Death Valley becomes carpeted in flowers, a phenomenon called a "super bloom." What this tells us is that Death Valley isn't really dead. It's dormant. Right beneath the barren surface are seeds of possibility waiting for the right conditions to come about. In other words, in organic systems, *if the conditions are right, life is inevitable. It happens all the time.*

When you think of shaping your future, it might help you to think of it as an approach based more on the principles of farming. Now, I'm not a farmer, but I know enough to recognize that farming, like human growth and transformation, is not a linear or mechanical process. It is an organic and emergent process. And you cannot predict or engineer the outcome of organic processes. All you can do, like farming, is create the conditions under which life can flourish; plant the seeds, and let God take care of the rest.

What is the inner work of transformation that helps create the conditions for grace to intercede and for life to flourish? In my work with religious women and men across different cultures, I have offered them an approach that relies on the principles and processes of transformation. It is a means for cooperating with grace that I've described in my book, *Graced Crossroads*.³ I can't describe these in detail, but let me give you the shorthand version. You have a handout on these, as well.

These are the five dynamic elements that, when woven together, constitute the key processes for personal and communal transformation:

1. Shifts in consciousness: creating a new narrative
2. Reclaiming our inner voice: the seat and soul of everything that lives
3. Reconciliation and conversion: the womb of our becoming
4. Experimentation and learning: acting our way into a new way of being
5. Transformative visioning: listening to our deepest longings

These five dynamic elements comprise the inner work of transformation, ways of cooperating with grace and creating the conditions for new life to emerge. What these processes come down to, and this inner work requires, is exactly the theme for this gathering: our willingness to let down our defenses and embrace our own vulnerability with radical dependence on the grace of God. It requires that we take off our masks and embrace the full measure of what means to be human, not just our joys and talents, but our foibles, frailties, and raw emotions.

This pathway to deep change and transformation, as I said, is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage to risk rejection when we open our hearts and share our true selves with others. It takes courage to surrender and let go of the people and places we once loved, a way of life we once cherished, to give way to the new life. It takes courage to

reconcile, to offer and seek forgiveness, and to pursue our deepest longings in the face of resistance from our family and community. And for communities who choose to go down this path, to take this Exodus journey, they will need leaders who courageously embrace their vulnerability and help their members do the same.

Courage, of course, is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in the face of it. The root word for “courage” is heart; it means to have heart. We need to dispel the myth and masculine norms that being vulnerable is some kind of character flaw. Somehow, we have this myth that leaders are supposed to portray unwavering strength, to act professional, to barricade themselves in certainties, and to mask any emotions that could belie this portrayal. They are supposed to armor themselves against hurt or rejection and pretend that they are cool and calm when they’re not. They are supposed to speak from their intellect and hide their heart. It’s lunacy and death-dealing!

Cross-cultural studies on leadership make it abundantly clear that the most important qualities of a leader are to be grounded, honest, real, and relatable. A credible leader is someone courageous enough to risk the possibility of failure or of looking like a fool in pursuit of something more noble. Isn’t that what your founders and foundresses did? How can you be a credible leader if you are not grounded, honest, real and relatable, generously sharing your gifts and talents, as well as your foibles, frailties and feelings?

People need leaders who are compassionate, not just clever; empathic, not just smart; real and relatable, not lofty or aloof. We need leaders who inspire us because of their humanity, not in spite of it. Wasn’t this what Jesus did for us? He didn’t armor-plate his heart and grow a “thicker skin,” as so many leaders are advised to do. He didn’t hide from others or preach from the pulpit. He was right in there with us, entirely vulnerable, risking it all, utterly divine in his humanity. Isn’t this why we are inspired by the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Teresa of Ávila, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Oscar Romero? Isn’t that what moves us when we hear the Dalai Lama, Greta Thunberg, Desmond Tutu, Amanda Gorman, Thich Nhat Hanh, Malala Yousafzai, and anyone who gifts us with their utter passion and presence, their humility and humanity?

Embracing our vulnerability is a paradox, like so many biblical teachings. The literal interpretation sounds foolish. Its wisdom, for those who listen, lies beneath the surface. “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:11). “The last shall be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16). “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Embracing our vulnerability, living in the fullness of our humanity with hearts wide open, is what transforms us. The only people who don’t experience being vulnerable are those without empathy or compassion. Those who embrace it know its beauty, its creative potential; they know that being vulnerable is what makes us human and has the power to heal and transform hearts. They have come to know that we can’t selectively numb out our fear, shame, or guilt without also extinguishing our joy, love, and compassion. Those who embrace it in themselves can embrace it in others. I’ll give you a moment to note your reflections to this question.

Embracing your vulnerability is key to the inner work of transformation. In what ways are you and your community embracing your vulnerability and engaging in the inner work of transformation?

Summary

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home. The old stories are crumbling as new ones are emerging. There is no going back to the way things were. We stand at a graced crossroads now and we have a choice. We can react out of fear and take the well-trodden path of least resistance or we can wake up and respond with courage in search for the ancient path.

It is easy to lose hope during times like these when the challenges are so massive, complex and rapidly changing. During one of the darkest moments of my personal crossroads, I confessed to my wife, Beth that I could no longer permit myself to hope because I couldn't stand the pain of disappointment. Beth put her arms around me and said, "I'll carry the hope for you." Never have I felt so loved. Hope for new life does not rest on your ability to recruit new members or extend your longevity. It rests in the hearts of existing members or there is no hope at all.

Carry the hope for each other, for members who no longer hope and for our world where hope is in short supply.

The world needs not only your hope, but your active participation as agents of transformation. What could be more needed now than *incarnating wisdom* in a world increasingly unmoored from truth, mesmerized by the media, and manipulated by self-serving politicians. We need your *compassionate presence* in our wounded world so prone to shaming, blaming, and scapegoating. We need models of *living community* in our world wherein we seem more interested in building walls than bridges. What could be more needed now than for you to *incarnate the Gospel values* of love, kindness, inclusivity, mutuality, forgiveness, restorative justice, and mercy in a world so polarized and prone to violence?

Thomas Merton tells us that grace is granted to us in proportion to how well we "dispose ourselves to receive it." ⁴ We have only to create the conditions for grace to intercede and dispose ourselves to receive it. For a community to do this, it will need to engage not only in organizational change but choose to embrace the *personal* and *interpersonal* soulwork of transformation. Admittedly, the personal and interpersonal work is far more messy, intimate and painful than organizational change, and that is exactly why most groups avoid it. Yet, members, and the communities they create, are the heart and soul, the glue that holds it all together. If there is no concentrated focus upon personal and communal transformation, *what will you have, and who will you be, at the end of all of your organizational change?*

Transformation is not a boardgame and does not come in a box with a set of instructions. It doesn't take place as a result of a great speech or one-and-done assemblies. It does not fit neatly into artificial timelines, such as leadership terms or Chapter cycles. It is not a strategic plan. In this sense, it is more a pilgrimage than a plan, more about the sort of people you are becoming, than an effort to create some kind of grand vision. If you want a strategic plan, discern what will make God smile, and then implement it. There's your strategic plan.

Transformation is an ongoing process of conversion that takes place over time as a result of our courage, creativity and tenacity. Doing this kind of soulwork requires that we embrace our vulnerability, admit that we are human, blessed and broken, and stop the lunacy of speaking only out of our heads. We have to pull together and rebuff this madness of individualism. No one is a soloist. The ancient African language of *Ubuntu* tells us: a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. We need to remember that we belong to one another, that we are made for each other. Mother Theresa once said, "If we have no peace, it is

because we have forgotten one another.”

Now is a time of reckoning, and it in these times of trial that we are tested, tested to our very soul. Now we will learn how large or small is our heart, how merciful, how caring, how faithful, how responsible we have yet to be. I pray that all of us have the strength to remember that life is fragile. We are all vulnerable. We will all, at some point in our lives, stumble and fall. We must carry this in our hearts: What we have been given is very special; it can be taken from us and, when it is taken from us, we will be tested to our very souls. It is in these times, and in this kind of pain, that we are invited to look deep inside ourselves, follow the ancient path and count on our Love to pull us through.

During times of transition, when all hope seems to vanish, the veil between ordinary life and the Divine Presence becomes thin, and grace does more abound. Here, at a graced crossroads, there is a *deeper invitation*: listen to the lure and love God calling you to choose life, not only for ourselves, but for all those to whom we profess our love, our descendants, and future generations. The world needs you now as leaven, as salt, as the remnant God can use to transform the world. No matter your age, your ministry, or circumstances, you can be a presence that transforms.

Let me ask again: What are you seeking? A journey of transformation is for those who are courageous enough to listen and respond to a deeper invitation. It is for those who, by embracing their vulnerability and doing their inner work can learn to cooperate with grace and participate in this Divine Mystery of transformation. Those who participate in these ways will have the opportunity not only to transform themselves, but they will help facilitate the emergence of a new Religious Life, a new world stirring. They will put their mark on this Great Turning and add a page to the ongoing story of creation.

Thank you for the privilege of your presence.

***“Stand at the crossroads and look.”
What are you seeking and what is the path you are walking?***

- 1 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat : A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1st further updated and expanded hardcover ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
- 2 Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul's Slow Ripening : 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred*, (Notre Dame: Sorin Books,, 2018). p.1.
- 3 Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation* (St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020).
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SPIRITUALITY OF SYNODALITY

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1. What Do We Mean When We Say Spirituality?

- Spirituality: a quality related to the spirit (etymology)

According to its etymological origin¹, *Spirituality* is a quality related to the spirit. The condition and nature of what is spiritual.

- Spirituality as a source of life

Dictionaries translate “spirit” as “vital breath.” As the air that envelops us and which we breathe is fundamental to every person’s life; it is the source of life that makes us exist. Hence, we can say that spirituality is present as a life-giving principle for any human being and as a way of relating from the deepest part of oneself with that “source of life,” or with an otherness that transcends us. For us, that source is obviously God (his Spirit).

- Spirituality as a social skill

Spirituality makes us deeply aware that living is “co-existing,” that life is “communion.” It not only connects us with our “source of life,” but also with others. Therefore, the relational aspect is vital in every spirituality.

Hence, spirituality has been defined as the social ability to care for relationships at all levels and, so, to promote a full and meaningful life.

- Spirituality as motivation

A person's spirituality is the deepest part of his or her being; it concerns his or her motivations, ideals, and passion. "*Spirituality is the motivation that permeates life projects and commitments*" (Segundo Galilea). Consequently, it is something that has to do with the root that moves one's personal life and its fundamental relationships, its intentionality and activity. We could say that spirituality defines a person's way of life.

- Spirituality as a frame of mind, an inspiration for the activity of a person or community

Yet, since it is also a communitarian reality, it can be defined as the conscience and motivation² of a group, of a people.³

The spirituality of a subject, group, or people is its way of being and relating to the totality of reality, to its transcendent and historical dimension.

Asking ourselves about their "spiritual life," of course, means reflecting on the cultivation of silence, prayer, contemplation, but also on social and civic life, on socio-political commitment, on the use of money and time, on the seriousness and honesty at work, about their ways of seeking happiness and facing pain, on how they live their daily life, etc.

Spirituality must be framed in all these intertwined perspectives. Each dimension is co-determining and is co-determined by others.

- The Spirit leads us to take charge of reality. The need for discernment

Christian spirituality is a way of living the Gospel by the power of the Spirit; yet, it is, therefore, at the same time, a way of apprehending reality and, hence, of dealing with it. Therefore, it is the very action of the Spirit that impels us, with a specific disposition, to take charge of reality.

In consequence, if we understand "spirituality as the frame of mind with which we face reality, WITH WHICH WE TAKE CHARGE OF REALITY, of the history in which we live with all its complexity, we can ask ourselves *which spirit/disposition is adequate, and which is not, at each moment of history.*"⁴ Hence, the importance of *discernment* as an "instrument or mediation."

In our case, spirituality will then be the spirit with which we take charge of the reality in which we live and to which we are sent, that is, of the *Missio Dei*. And discernment will be the tool that allows us to harmonize this spirit or disposition with the "Spirit of God" who guides us in this enterprise.

In reality, the various spiritualities that have emerged in the life of the Church and been concretized in the different forms of life and religious families, have been exactly that: letting oneself be guided by the Spirit guide towards one or another way of "taking charge of reality," in response to its needs throughout history.

On the basis of this conception, asking ourselves what spirituality we have, means asking ourselves what spirit moves us in our daily life, with what spirit we face reality here and now, with what spirit we face the *Missio Dei*.

Now, this is going to be a central question for us, and for getting progressively a sense of what it means to talk about a synodal spirituality. Furthermore, it will make us increasingly aware of what this way of understanding "spirituality" demands of us in our lives as we "take charge"—and, so, "bear and take charge"⁵ of history, of reality, of social, political, economic, religious problems, etc., of our concrete multicultural situation, in the "here and now" of synodality.

Thus, spirituality reveals itself as a path of life, a path of experience, a path of pursuit, a human-divine path that embraces all that is human (body, senses, culture, society...), taking upon itself and becoming responsible for orienting it towards its destiny in God.

2. Synodality: A Plural Term

The International Theological Commission (ITC) describes synodality as a threefold constitutive dimension of the Church,⁶ which goes from the most external and concrete level to the most essential one. Firstly, synodality designates certain occasional events that we call synods, convoked by the competent authority. Secondly, the word indicates the *ecclesial structures and processes* that are at the service of discernment. Finally, the term's most essential meaning denotes to a particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church. This is the sense in which we are going to use it in this presentation.⁷

We can immediately perceive the connection between the ways of understanding "spirituality"—a way of taking charge of reality—and "synodality"—a particular style that characterizes the life and mission of the Church.

Synodality denotes a way of living and acting that defines the ecclesial community in its relationships *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Moreover, the etymological meaning of the word synod⁸ allows us to understand it as "walking together."

Therefore, we are tracking a particular way of walking together as the Church (synodality), in order to be able to, more and better, "take charge" of the world (spirituality). This is the essence of synodal spirituality: taking charge of reality, of the world, of the *Missio Dei*, walking together.

How do we "take charge" of our world's situation, so that this taking charge is synodal, i.e., so that it is done with that particular style which influences our ecclesial life and our mission and that implies "walking together"?

I will try to identify some features that seem particularly important to me, at this time that we are living as a Church, that would characterize this synodal spirituality.

3. Five Features of a Synodal Spirituality that Embraces Vulnerability

a) *A Spirituality of Listening*

Synodal spirituality must be a spirituality of listening because the first thing we need to do in order to "take charge of the world" is "listen to it" and "listen to ourselves." We can always listen! There is always someone who needs to be listened to!

Listening is "Decisive", because it is one of the greatest needs that human beings experience: "*the unlimited desire to be listened to*" (Francis); and it is demanding because not just any kind of listening is enough—we must listen well, with attention to those we listen to, to what we listen to, and to how we listen.

The Bible constantly reminds us that listening is more than auditory perception and that it is linked to the dialogical relationship between God and humanity. The entire Torah rests on a previous disposition: "Listen Israel" (the Shema) (Deut 6:4). The initiative is always that of God who speaks to us; and we respond, first, by listening. Yet, this listening is ultimately made possible by His Word, coming from His grace.

This is so true that St. Paul affirms: “Faith comes from listening” (Rom 10:17). Ultimately, believing means seeing what is born of listening. Hence, for the Bible, hearing—listening—is more important than seeing. Why?

The act of seeing is more imposing. The eye is the organ with which the world is possessed and dominated. Through the eye, the world becomes “*our world*” and is subordinated to us. We define and label reality. The seer is tempted to impose himself on the object he contemplates, to possess it on the basis of the pre-understanding he has of it, to judge it by its appearance alone. The relation established between the seer and the seen is an objectual relation.

Hearing makes it possible to relate to reality in a totally different way. First of all, because we cannot hear objects, we can only hear what they communicate, their development, their realization, their being-in-act... Moreover, “*we can neither determine nor control*” what we are going to hear.

The sound, the voice... “*the call*” comes, arrives, assaults us, surprises us.... somehow we are defenseless before its arrival. What comes to the ear imposes itself on the listener; it startles him unexpectedly, and he can hardly do anything to avoid it.

Only by “*not wanting to listen*,” by “*turning a deaf ear*” would it be possible to avoid “*listening*.” Yet, only when we see what is born of listening, can we see with an interior gaze and believe.

God reveals Himself by communicating freely, and He also reveals Himself through reality, through events, and through others who speak. We are simply asked to “listen” so that we can put “our spirit/our disposition” in harmony with His Spirit.

This listening—as I said—is demanding. It calls for a disposition that begins with an “emptiness,” by making of space, by the abandonment of “my own love, desire, and interest” [SE 189], and the readiness to receive. For what purpose? So that I may welcome what the other person says without listening to myself, without distorting what he or she tells me, without interpreting before it touches me inside, without pretending that I possess, I control, I believe that I already know, thus remaining impervious to any novelty or astonishment. Emptying myself of my prejudices, of my polarizations, ready to make a free space that imposes nothing and is full of expectation.

There is no true listening without hope, without expecting something from the other to whom I am listening... without “holding back my expectations, desires, quests...” Without giving absolute priority to the one from whom the word comes. This is why listening also generates hope “in the others,” who feel listened to, who perceive that someone expects something from them, who believes in them, and so dignifies them. Listening is the recognition of others and, therefore, implies their dignity.

This is perhaps one of the most important aspects in the synodal life of the Church, and in all our Assemblies, where the most important thing is, and should be, listening. There, almost everything depends on the quality of this listening. For, without listening there is no discernment. Listening to the Spirit who speaks within us, listening to the Spirit who also speaks in each of our sisters and brothers. In all of them, not only in those who seem more interesting to me, who have more important positions, more power, more influence, or whose thinking is more like mine. Each and every one must be listened to, and in order to listen to each one, it is necessary to create that inner space that allows me to welcome “the other and her word” and, along with it, her experience, her reality,

her perception of things, and the Spirit that dwells in her and wants to come out from her to meet me.

Emptying myself so that listening does not become merely the confirmation of my prejudices, an echo of my own voice.

***HOW COULD WE TAKE CHARGE OF THE WORLD WITHOUT LISTENING TO IT,
WITHOUT LETTING ITS CRY AND ITS NEEDS REACH US?***

Listening, says the Pope,⁹ corresponds to God's humble style. This attitude of humility, it seems to me, is increasingly important if we intend to live a spirituality of listening.

God must be the paradigm of our listening. The Bible shows us a God who listens.

Synodal spirituality must be a spirituality of listening because the first thing we need to do in order to “take charge of the world” is “listen to it” and “listen to ourselves.”

He listens to the cry of His people, He hears their complaint, their word... and in doing so He recognizes them as His interlocutor, as His *partner*. God “inclines his ear” to listen to man and allows Himself to be affected by this listening. The omnipotent, impassive God becomes passive when He listens to the voice of His people, of His child.

Jesus also reveals to us this humble attitude of God letting Himself be affected, letting Himself be changed, letting Himself be transformed by listening. The text of the Canaanite woman¹⁰ is a unique example of this “certainly vulnerable” listening, which affects and transforms. A poor woman who engages in dialogue with Jesus who, at first, “sees” her from her prejudices: she is a *Syrian-Phoenician*, a pagan, she does not belong to those to whom he has been sent. Yet, when she speaks, then what Jesus sees, “is born from listening,” and Jesus listens humbly. Therefore, the woman's word also becomes, for him, the presence of the Spirit of the Father who guides him and makes him reconsider his position and his intention.

We will not be able to “EMBRACE VULNERABILITY ON THE SYNODAL JOURNEY” without introducing “vulnerable” listening into our way of dealing with reality. Yet, only humble listening can really affect and change us.

Without humility, there is no listening. Without listening, there is no synodal journey.

We cannot listen in just any way. The disposition of “authentic listening” necessarily places us:

- 1) *“From below,”* in this sense. With the humility of the one who recognizes in the other, someone from whom she can learn, worthy of being listened to in depth... Someone who can change you. With the humility of the God who descends in order to listen... the God who “inclines his ear.”
- 2) From *“near.”* Listening asks for proximity, risking distance, letting myself be tou-



ched by the other person’s reality. Listening is *“that capacity of the heart that makes proximity possible.”*

- 3) Therefore, listening must also be *“from within.”* The true seat of listening is the heart. St. Augustine used to say: *“Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart.”* This speaks to us of the necessary depth that all listening must have. It is a matter of accepting the other’s truth with the heart, with what is essential... free of garb and superficial questions... Listening and letting ourselves to be “affected and moved” so that not only ideas reach us but also the experience, the life, the feeling of the person to whom we are listening. Without this “from within” our listening can never be merciful.

Consequently, authentic listening must always be preceded by “silence.” This silence allows us to get in touch with ourselves and with the source of life of our existence, to get

into our guts, into our hearts, and to empty ourselves of everything that prevents us, not so much from listening, but from making ourselves “available to listen.”

Listening is part of our mission. “The service of listening has been entrusted to us by the One who is the listener par excellence,” the Pope said. The first service we can render to communion is precisely “listening”. Bonhoeffer said that *“someone does not know how to listen to his brother shall soon be unable to listen to God.”*¹¹ Now, this is something that we can always do, whether old or young, agile or moving with difficulty; it is always possible to listen, to spend our time listening to the other, to take charge of reality by “listening to it.”

Listening as God listens to us, listening as Jesus invites us to listen: a kind of *“listening that gives the other the faculty to speak” (hearing to speech)*, and that in mutual listening is transforming.¹²

A spirituality of listening is born from this source: the perspective of a God who listens, and listens to all, and listens especially to the “voiceless,” to the most vulnerable, to those who have been left without words, and does so by awakening in them the faculty to speak, because His listening is always liberating.¹³

For this reason “being listened to”, being WELL heard,¹⁴ is always a healing experience. Simple listening heals many wounds. It enables the one who is listened to reverse and re-create his own narratives as one who is wounded, and to find ways of healing from there, to get out of the process of victimization, to regain her identity and dignity—not thanks to our advice but because of the quality of our listening, for it offers that humble but intimate space where it is possible to experience oneself as remade, healed, repaired.

Only by being committed to a spirituality of listening can we take steps towards the change for which the Church is yearning, and take charge of reality by opening ourselves to dialogue and discernment since listening is the condition of possibility for both.

b) **A Spirituality of Dialogue**

A synodal spirituality must be a spirituality of dialogue. For if synodality speaks to us of “walking together”, the word “dialogue” (from the Greek *diálogos*: *diá/logos*), on the basis of its etymology,¹⁵ expresses the idea of “thinking/talking together” or more concretely: “two speaking/thinking.”

If the aim is to “take charge” of reality by walking together (synodal), this can only happen “in the mutual speaking/thinking of those who are walking together” (dialogal).

Despite the importance of listening, more is needed before we can talk about dialogue. We need a subject who can speak. This is how we have been created: as listeners of the word, capable of responding to what we hear.

Dialogue is based on the power and the mystery of the word. We have the power to express reality, to say to ourselves who we are. The word is one of the most powerful instruments we have to express ourselves, to open a way to externalize our interiority, and obviously to communicate and dialogue.

Yet, in order to do so, the word has to spring from the interiority and be the bearer of the truth that inhabits us. That is why the word is always accompanied by gestures, looks, a tone of voice, that reflect the emotions it conveys, the experiences throbbing beneath the sounds and the objective meanings that are transmitted, which are thus nuanced and enriched.

However, if the word is to be the true mediator of dialogue, it must also be “born from listening” and not primarily from one’s own vision. The word is always a second moment.

So, we must once again turn to humility. Only a humble word is capable of entering into the construction of a dialogue. A word which, after the listening, sets out on the path of a quest that, starting from its own truth, tries to co-construct with the heard word a new word, a greater word.

The word that dialogues does not fly out like an arrow sure of reaching its goal, but it lets itself be shaped by what is heard; it stops and waits for the right moment; knowing that it is incomplete, groping and trembling, it tries to stammer out what—in the conjunction of the word heard, of the lived experience, and of the experienced shock—emerges as an answer; now that word, in some way, no longer belongs to me because it sprouts as a consequence of an encounter and a joint creation.

Dialogue is always the co-creation of a narrative that is different from the narratives of the subjects who meet. A word attentive to life, to others, and to everything that happens through it is the one that can get involved in this construction and create a true dialogue that tries to generate “something new,” in a joint and open narrative, which passes through the possible polarities—where we always tend to settle—, without dwelling on them, and to reach common meanings that turn words into referents on which we can rely because, after this encounter, they have acquired a new meaning in which we find ourselves more deeply. They allow us to look at reality together, to express it, saying the same thing, and so also to “take charge of it.” In this sense, the spirituality of dialogue is essential for us on this synodal journey.

However, in order to enter into this spirituality, we must take *the risk of dialogue*: the “*risk of being together*.”

This means taking the risk of “*letting ourselves be affected*,” which has already begun in listening but does not end there, since it is not enough to let ourselves be moved, to welcome the diversity of others and their ideas, motivations, arguments, feelings, and experiences... “*Letting ourselves be affected*” must transform us, “move the floor under our feet,” shaking our securities and our convictions—not because they unavoidably have to be converted or changed, but because it is necessary to be open to the possibility that there is some truth in what I do not share, do not see, or do not understand. It is a matter of allowing the perspectives and experiences of others to enter me, to open my horizon of understanding, to help me understand other ways of reading reality—that reality we want to take charge of. These “*other ways*” must not necessarily be better, but not worse either. In any case, if I can let them in, they will enrich my horizon and my perspectives, and make me capable of dialogue.

Letting myself be affected means that I am able to feel and sympathize with others, take charge of their situation, their vision and their feelings.

Letting myself be affected softens my positions and my arguments because I feel that the other’s perspective interests me and concerns me, and I want to understand it, even if I do not share it or may be moved to share it, in whole or in part.

Letting oneself be affected supposes admitting that allowing others and their world to meet mine and to enter into dialogue requires opening oneself to the possibility of *transformation*.

We will not be able to engage in dialogue unless we take this “*risk of letting ourselves be affected*,” and without embracing this spirit of dialogue, we will never be able to move towards a synodal way of life.

AN ICON: Emmaus. A Dialogue on the Way

"And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them." (Lk 24:15)

Dialogue appears here as a "theological place". The Risen One becomes present "in the space of the shared word," in the search for unfound answers that remain open questions, in the deep communication connecting two wounds, in the "despair" that provokes the flight which, through dialogue, becomes an "exit" that, in turn, through the "repairing encounter" leads "back" to the community, to communion, and makes them "witnesses of hope."

Dialogue is shown here as a proper space for "the appearance of the Risen One." Yet, this is possible because the dialogue was open enough to welcome and include the stranger, the other, the unknown, and humble enough to listen, not only to the stranger who comes to meet them and apparently "knows nothing about what is happening," that is, someone "without knowledge and experience of their experience, of the 'object,' of the subject of their conversation."

They have been "listened to" with empathy and attention, by the one who has interrupted their conversation. Now, they open themselves to listening: without prejudices, without criticism, without arrogance—What can this guy tell us, since he knows nothing about what everybody else knows, nothing about what we have personally experienced and that has ruined our lives, our future projects, our love, and our hope...

They listen with such humility that they make it possible for the truth to emerge and to come through as a novelty that is made possible when personal perspectives and readings of reality are offered and delivered.

Deep listening. That of the stranger who speaks from his open side—from his wound. And the listening of those travelers of Emmaus, who speak from that other wound that ousts them from Jerusalem, from the community, from the project dreamed of and cherished with Jesus, desolate and without hope.

This dialogue "from the wounds" is healing because it allows the truth to emerge, because it sheds light on the past, gives hope for the future, and creates communion in the present.

This dialogue is a profound acceptance of the other, to the point of asking him to "stay," to "remain." It is an empathetic and attentive dialogue—"it makes the heart burn"—, and also creates bonds that in turn seek to recover other bonds.

In the Emmaus scene, we see how a conversation becomes a dialogue, and as it does:

1. it becomes a theological place
2. it reminds us that every dialogue calls for an outward movement and, at the same time, for openness that is ready to include the "stranger," the "other," and to situate oneself with "humility," from below and from nearby, so that it can be finally done from "within."
3. Dialogue requires recognizing the other as "other," as a person: her dignity and her ability to bring me something.
4. A real dialogue calls for a deep relationship, which from self-knowledge and from the depths of oneself, enters into the other's interior. A dialogue is always a heart-to-heart relationship. It will be all the more authentic when the communication is established from common vulnerability. The pilgrim connects his wound (already resurrected but wounded) with the wounded heart of the

- pilgrims of Emmaus. The encounter from our vulnerabilities makes a deeper, more authentic dialogue possible that is more able to generate “newness.”
5. A dialogue creates a new space, where it is possible to recreate the meanings not only of words but also of experiences, emotions, situations, and points of view... This space is a “among” that is called to move towards a “we” and to make this “we” ever greater. In this “among,” it is possible to “think together,” and so generate a common worldview and a common project.
 6. Finally, this kind of dialogue is essentially healing: it restores lost identity, transforms the sadness of failure into joy, the hopeless flight into return and proclamation; shame and fear into witness. The dialogue changes their outlook and reality; a new light shines on them, and everything becomes new.

c) ***A Spirituality of Discernment***

Synodal spirituality invites us to take charge of the world by listening and dialoguing. That is why we have spoken of a spirituality of listening and dialogue which demands, in turn, the attention and gaze of the heart that all discernment requires, so that we may together truly take charge of reality.

Why Should Synodal Spirituality Be a Spirituality of Discernment?

The reason is very simple. We cannot take charge of the world, together, on the road to universal communion—which is the goal of this process of synodal change—simply through agreements, soundings what the majority thinks, groping for points of alignment... If we are willing to live a spirituality of listening and dialogue, in the demanding terms of which I have spoken, this listening and dialogue are to be open to the Spirit and allow Him to permeate the newness born of the dialogical “among”, so that the dialogue consciously and explicitly becomes a theological place that includes the Other—written with a capital O—, welcoming and hosting the Spirit who descends on that “among,” while emerging from that “among,” thus permitting a true spiritual discernment in the search for concrete ways of “taking charge” of the world.

The Spirit guiding the synodal journey is the Spirit of the Father who, like Jesus, guides him by being “above him.” Yet, the same is the Spirit of Jesus, who dwells in him and moves him “from within.” This Spirit has been given to us as a body, as a Church, and also as the Baptized. Hence, in this journey, we believers have to become aware of the presence that guides and illuminates us from above (inclines its ear and descends) and of the presence dwelling in us as a Body and alive in each one of us, and that through discernment—as the arrival point of a process begun in listening and dialogue—now allows himself to be finally found in that “among” jointly created among all.... opening us to a light and a newness that confirms and expands, sustains and strengthens, enlightens and consoles, and makes the Next Possible Step in this Synodal journey feasible.

Synodal spirituality is a spirituality of community discernment, in which each and every one of us is invited to enter, precisely through listening and dialogue with others and with the Other who dwells in us and visits us through the Spirit, who is always the Spirit of Communion in Love, because that is the task of the Spirit in the divine life.

Living a spirituality of discernment implies knowing that we have to do our utmost to make it possible, and at the same time convinced that we will not be denied the light that will allow us “sufficient clarity” to advance by taking “the next possible step” with the joy of knowing that we are searching together and together receiving something that is not in our hands but in our willingness to allow ourselves to be visited simultaneously

by the Spirit who cries out—so often with ineffable groans—from within each one of us, from within history and events, and also from within creation! and who speaks to us in a special and decisive way, descending into that “among” which is the fruit of our dispossession and surrender.

Discernment should be our guide in this synodal journey, so that we do not fail to take the “next possible step”, which, although small, laborious, and difficult, gives us fullness, identity, and consolation: that of walking together, building communion, and strengthening bonds while “searching for the ways” of this call to take charge of reality.

Yet, this reality is also inhabited by many who do not share our faith or any faith at all, but who walk with us through life and also live in this reality, who should also be included in this “among” and can be mediators of the Spirit for us.

The more we dare to walk new paths, the more rooted we need to be in our own tradi-

Tenderness as a form of care can become an essential element for living in the key of synodality, since all relational fabric is based on trust.

tion, and at the same time more open to others and their traditions. This does not mean denying our own tradition, but enriching and nourishing it, while confronting it with critical entities that may lead to further deepening or invite us to new conversions.

Now, “all” should do this, by embracing difference and escaping from the generalizing indifference that pretends to generalize and universalize what is not, while hiding the existence of what is different and making it inaccessible. This prevents so many people—and especially so many women—from recognizing themselves in their own identity or experiences... losing, in these generalizations, the specificity that they could contribute as if it were something non-existent.¹⁶

Hence, the call for a true discernment of the presence of limited and contextual theories, which evolve from listening into concrete experiences, of “powerless” ways of accessing reality that could in fact be very fertile... and yet are usually suffocated, reduced, and hidden by the “supposedly universalistic” bias of a masculine, western, theoretical, rich, and powerful universe.¹⁷

All this demands of discernment a “great openness” of spirit, also of the Spirit present in the diversity of the “little stories” of minorities, of those who are different...

This means discerning together with the God who speaks, but who also listens, and prompts a living word that transmits through the “most vulnerable and abused” lives (the poorest, marginalized, discarded and, of course, women) stimulating the emergence of a new, more inclusive, more differentiated, more nuanced, “more dangerous” language.

Only when “the difference” is incorporated in the conception of the universal is justice done to those who are different; only then can we say that we are really walking together towards that communion which can only be conceived in the image of the life of the triune God, one in the difference of persons.

If synodal spirituality demands that we walk together and think together, in order to discern together, this will require incorporating the differences and embracing not just the dominant stories but also the small stories of minorities.



d) ***A Spirituality of Care: Tenderness, Care, and Reparation***

The next characteristic of synodal spirituality to which I am going to refer has to do more directly with the invitation to embrace vulnerability that the Assembly's motto addresses to us. We now need to become especially aware of the fact that the reality of which we must take charge is vulnerable and, in fact, violated in practically all its areas. The awareness that we are creatures, fragile, fallible... I am writing these pages at a time when Ukraine is being bombed and invaded, when thousands of men and women have become newly displaced, forced to abandon their homes (or the rubble to which they have been reduced), their land, and their hopes in order to flee towards a very uncertain future. I am typing these pages as attempts at dialogue fail again and again, and words seem to be worthless because they contradict each other and further inflame fear and mistrust. At a time when all our interests are confronted with the desire for help that never materializes. In this context of war and violence, of wounds, rupture, and death,

this call to “take charge” and “bear” by trying to alleviate the burdens of others becomes clearer; the call to “take charge” of so many men and women who are suffering in our world today. And to do so knowing that we too are vulnerable, we too are wounded, and we too are capable of hurting.

We are, likewise, in an ecclesial moment, on the one hand, so full of hope that we are really able to get involved in this process and challenge that synodality poses to us and, on the other hand, so wounded by the issue of “abuses.”

In this situation, two words become especially meaningful to me in this task of spirituality—“taking charge”—and in the intention to include “synodality” in our way of being in the world and in the Church: proximity¹⁸ and care¹⁹.

“Proximity” is a good antidote to *indifference*, and “care” is the reverse of “*abuse*” in its multiple forms, as well as one of the most beautiful ways to take charge of others, of reality, of nature, and of ourselves.

Care that distances itself from both “paternalism” and “clericalism” because, far from entering into contact with the other as a passive subject, it is a stimulus, a provocation of word and decision, a source of trust, the facilitates autonomy.

Care is related to the idea of sustainability, understood in the substantive sense. It not only refers to issues regarding ecological, energetic, and natural sources. The idea of sustainability reminds us that when speaking about caring we are not referring to a precise act but rather to something that must be sustained over time and requires a change in the relationship with the nature-system, the life-system, and the Earth system.

Care also takes on greater importance because of its relationship to love. It is, in fact, our capacity to love that is questionable when we are uncaring because we care for whatever we love; and that is why caring is the fruit of love: “We care for what we love.”²⁰

Hence, it is important for synodal spirituality to activate a spirituality of sustainable care that helps us to reinvent a new way of being in the world with others, with nature, with the Earth, and with the Ultimate Reality, with God.²¹

More concretely, what can this perspective of “care” contribute to synodality?

Every day I am increasingly convinced that a synodal way of being the Church, of relating to one another in the Church, and of living the *Missio Dei*, starting from the Church, is based on a firm commitment to make “care” our specific way of “taking charge of reality.”

It is, as I have said, a category destined to become a new paradigm for a world that is showing signs of exhaustion and extenuation, consumed by the violent and degrading consequences into which the paradigm of “success-power” has plunged us.

It is a polyhedral concept, capable of connecting with practically all orders of reality.

- 1) *Care for ourselves*, our interiority, our “spirit,” our wounds and fractures, so that we may be free and ready to care for others.
- 2) *Care for our relationship with God*. Caring for our connection with the source of life, with the One who takes care of us, rooting our trust and our hopes in Him, abandoning to Him our worries, in order to be able to “take charge” of the mission that He leaves in our hands.
- 3) *Care for the bonds with others*, but also care for the social fabric. Care not only has to do with interpersonal relationships, but it is also a concept with a deep political dimension. In fact, people are already talking about “caregiving.” The pandemic has exposed not only our vulnerability but also

the importance of the care networks that sustain our social life. The commitment to “care” should also affect our intra-ecclesial relationships, and it implies, in any case, deconstructing the paradigm of self-sufficiency and self-defensive care contracts, seen as a political demand.²²

- 4) *Care for the earth*. The common home that we are also called to take care of.

Here I will dwell on three terms that point to three existential dispositions that could become fundamental axes for introducing the spirituality of care²³ into the synodal spirituality: tenderness, guardianship, reparation-reconciliation.

Tenderness: as a care relationship that generates trust (an unavoidable basis that sustains all bonds and without which it would be impossible to pursue any synodal project) and even more necessary because of our condition as vulnerable beings.

Tenderness is an experience that every human being encounters at the beginning of his or her life through so-called tutelary or diatrophic tenderness, i.e., the primordial relationship of love that flows between the guardian figure and the newborn in the first months of life. It is so named because the language of tenderness is the only means by which a mother can transmit the loving and tutelary impulse that inclines her towards her child. Tenderness is thus constituted in a relationship established between the giver and the receiver, built on the basis of an experience of unconditional acceptance that makes a response of absolute trust and “total abandonment” possible.

A. Spitz defines it as “an enhanced capacity to notice and perceive the anacletic needs of the child both consciously and unconsciously and, at the same time, to perceive an impulse (*Drang*) to be of help in this neediness.”

Much of the strength of this category lies in its grounding in the biological process of origin. Through this tenderness, the “basic trust”—to use Erikson’s terminology—, which is essential for the development of a healthy self, is forged in the person. Basic trust is formed when the baby learns to trust that guardian figure who, through tenderness, gives him security and is attentive to his needs. Yet, above all, it enables the child to feel loved and, therefore, worthy of love,²⁴ and so contributes to the development of a strong self and healthy self-esteem. Moreover, it is created as a relational pattern, so that the security acquired in this first relationship enables the child to approach other relationships positively and to look towards the world with openness and trust.

The importance of tenderness persists throughout life, as our daily exchanges of tenderness serve as continuous renewal of basic trust, since people cannot nourish themselves all throughout their lives on the confidence established in their early childhood.

Basic trust provides ontological security that allows people to bracket their worries with regard to social environment’s unpredictability and to cope in situations of uncertainty. The tenderness given and received throughout our lives will maintain that level of trust so essential in our existence, and it will also be needed to balance aggressiveness, to activate our capacity for integration, for incorporation into society, while enabling healthy relationships and even exercising healing functions.²⁵

Moreover, *we give care as we have been cared for*. Hence the importance of tenderness in the family nucleus at the origin of life, but no less that of our experience of having been loved with tenderness by God. In short, the first relationship that unites us with Him is this: a relationship of tenderness, that of the One who gives us being towards us his creatures, in His way of caring for us, the experience that He is our support, our rock and our refuge... This relationship with a God of tenderness who cares for us, welcomes us, and

sustains us like a loving mother, gives us the fundamental experience of being cared for with tenderness and the possibility of reproducing it in our relationships.

In this sense, tenderness as a form of care can become an essential element for living in the key of synodality, since all relational fabric is based on trust. It will be essential to strengthen the bonds of trust in order to enter into the synodal proposal that the Church is offering to us. We will need to trust one another; and tenderness—note that we are not talking about pseudo-tenderness full of ambiguity or cheap sweetness—proves to be a both powerful and time-demanding instrument that helps us to grow in trust. True tenderness:

- demands us to be attentive to the others, to their needs and possibilities, with exquisite care to avoid going beyond what they want and need... for, if tenderness... —like a caress, one of its most common mediations—, grabs or tries to possess, it becomes a fist and an aggression...
- activates in us simultaneously the impulse of care, the “diatrophic or tutelary impulse” which is the tendency to cover the weak, to help or protect, postponing our own needs while attending to the needs of others...
- gives security and protection but does so in such a way that it is able to promote, with shelter, openness, freedom, and risking.
- demands proximity and, at the same time, the reverent distance that the other needs in order not to feel enclosed but rather boosted.
- confirms us in our individuality and at the same time creates bonds of belonging.
- Visits more spontaneously those who need it the most, the most fragile, the diminished, the lonely, the marginalized, the isolated.

Activating tenderness in us, as a relational style in the way of “taking charge of reality,” of taking care of others... can be one of the contributions that the spirituality of care can make to synodality.²⁶

Guardianship: The term “*custodiar*”²⁷/to guard refers to the task that the Creator gives to human beings, inviting them to care for the earth and to protect it.²⁸ As LS points out, we are called to praise the Creator and, together with Him, care for and guard His creation.²⁹ However “guarding” also means “to keep something or someone with care and vigilance” (RAE). It speaks to us of giving protection, security..., but also of recognizing that which must be guarded as valuable, as worthy of attention. It expresses the relationship with the land, with the common home, which should be a welcoming and hospitable environment for all; a source of life, but also a *source of identity*, because the land in which we live, the land where we were born, its geography, its climate..., all this shapes us and gives us our identity. And we all have the right to it.

Taking care of the earth means caring for it so that every place, every space can be a common home for all. And preventing the looting that destroys natural areas and, along with them, the possibilities of life for many men and women, of particular identities.

Guardianship also implies mutually caring for one another, for every “other” is also entrusted to the care of the human being, and it is a responsibility that affects us all. We must be each other’s guardians and also the guardians of all creation (cf. LS 236).

Reparation: Care must be characterized by effectiveness, as rescuing dignity, and being reconciling.³⁰ For synodality, understood as the ecclesial way of being and acting, digni-

ifying every human being, it will be necessary to live it from the point of view of care, and in caring a special way for what, in fact, is already violated (persons, situations, relationships). Hence, in the face of the wounded, the broken, the fragmented, care becomes... a call to heal,³¹ to repair. The spirituality of care especially invites us to exercise a particularly loving care for the oppressed, the damaged, the wounded, the hopeless; to build and rebuild the relational bridges that have been broken and, indeed, to do so effectively.

Yet, more concretely, the call that we are living in this historical moment to convert to synodality is made in a highly pluralistic Church, where there are greatly differing sensibilities—more or less in affinity with this project—, and which has, behind her, a history of failed attempts, of misunderstandings, and of multiple wounds....

If we intend to take charge of reality, of the *Missio Dei*, as a Church with a synodal way of being and acting, we cannot but “include everyone” and take into account the wounds. If we want to embrace our vulnerability, then we cannot forget that it is a vulnerability that is abused, and that we tend to protect the wounds with closed-mindedness, violence, and aggressiveness. Hence, the need to redouble our care, a care full of tenderness, but also restorative care. Care that approaches the other in order to “take on his situation,” by taking the risk of forgiveness, approaching the pain that it will have to calm, seeking to build bridges in situations of rupture, reunification of the dispersed, healing of wounds to restore a fabric of trust so often broken, and without which it will be impossible to enter into the adventure of synodality.

Embracing from below, from within, from humility, so that this embrace can be healing and restore the broken or damaged relationships that we carry in our history. Embracing the risk of forgiveness, in order to make reconciliation possible.³²

e) ***Spirituality of patient endurance or resilient patience***

Synodal spirituality can only be a spirituality full of *hypomoné*. This is a biblical term that gives a name to patience, resistance, endurance, permanence, and perseverance as dimensions proper to hope, to the point that the NT replaces the Greek term *elpis*—the usual term for hope since the LXX—with *hypomoné*, when referring to hope lived in the here and now, in difficult situations.

I have chosen to emphasize this dimension, instead of speaking of hope in general, because I believe that it reflects *a highly necessary disposition in our ecclesial moment*, and because the synodal journey will demand, of us who wish to go on this path, a great deal of *hypomoné*.

The synodal journey is a path of conversion, change, abandonment of ways and structures that gave us security but that have become, on some occasions, fruitless and, on others, constitute obstacles if we intend to advance in synodality, together in a search for more participative and inclusive forms that allow us to walk “with everyone,” and to take charge of reality “with all.”

Walking together as “distinctive”, different, with diverse life experiences, in the encounter of a great plurality of cultures, sensitivities, perspectives, and visions...

Walking together, attentive to the needs of others, taking care of them at the same time as we take care of reality, taking the next possible step without letting the rush of urgencies, the brakes of doubts, nor the hindrances of difficulties disperse or break those who walk together, in synodality.

The synodal spirituality, consequently, needs to be a spirituality of enduring patience, or

of patient endurance, full of persistence and perseverance, sustained as a passion, as a burning fire that persists despite the winds that try to blow it out.

Hypomoné is, therefore, situated at the antipodes of resignation.... “It is that patience in suffering... which gives us hope in Jesus Christ our Lord,” as Paul reminds us in 1 Thess 1:3.

It is not something passive; it is always active, but with an action that is endurance, fortitude, active and persevering resistance, and that supposes “standing up” to adversity. For, it is precisely there, in adversity and in trial, that it is exercised.

- This call to “*patience*” is a challenge to our “impatience”, to those who are tempted to think that they have waited long enough, that this does not change, that the steps we are taking towards synodality are not rapid and decisive enough, that it will not succeed... to those who do not have patience with themselves, and pretend to be converted in one go, and do not struggle with their own limits and frailties... to the former and the latter... “*hypomoné*.”
- It is called for those who do not understand God’s *hypomoné*, His infinite patience with us, for those who miss a radical divine intervention that would put each and everyone in her place. For those who want to separate too quickly the wheat from the tares by judging who is or is not called to the synodal process.
- However, it is also a call to those who have “given up,” to the tired, the disappointed, the disillusioned. To those who are tempted to give up because of the futility of their efforts, because of the scarcity of their success, because the synodal walk will not bring about any change... to these too “*hypomoné*.”

Synodality calls for specialists in “patience”. It calls us to be women full of *hypomoné*, capable of remaining, enduring the dark times, the misunderstandings of many, the short steps of others, the lack of light, and the setbacks... In many aspects, within the Church, religious life has already made a certain synodal journey “*ad intra and ad extra*” - still incipient, with still a long way to go—; but there are advances. A path of greater participation and listening, of leaving the responsibility of many of our works to the laity, integrating them in the decision-making processes... and also among ourselves (more listening, more co-responsibility, more circularity in our ways of proceeding, more joint searching...). I have the impression that this path, at the level of the clergy, is—with some honored exceptions—newer, more difficult, and therefore slower. We need patient endurance to get ourselves into harmony with the rhythm of its dense and slow times.

In recent decades, philosophy has been rediscovering the idea of “resistance,”³³ and it translates well the content of the biblical *hypomoné*.

The synodal spirituality needs women full of *hypomoné*, resistant women with the joy of hope on their lips.

- Resistance to the difficulties and conflicts that this process of synodal conversion will undoubtedly entail.
- Resistance to the precariousness and the limits of our own human condition.
- Resistance to the obstacles that our synodal aspirations will encounter.
- Resistance as “endurance,” but above all “resistance as strength,” as fortitude in the face of the processes of hopelessness, disintegration, and corrosion that come, at times from the environment, sometimes from ourselves....

- Resistance in the face of frustration, broken projects, unachieved goals... in the face of failed attempts to move forward, to change... both on a personal level, as well as on a community, institutional or ecclesial level...
- Resistance to the attempts of immobility, of leaving everything as it was... that try to convince us of the uselessness of our efforts and aspirations; but resistance also to the laziness and negligence that can knock at our doors, insidiously trying to convince us that we are wasting our time, that we have already fought enough, and that now others should fight...
- Resistance to the cultural waves that tempt us with more individualistic proposals, in search of self-realization and personal fulfillment, as a substitute for the existence that supposedly gives happiness, understood as individual fulfillment, achievement and success.
- Resistance also as a pause, a halt and depth that gives us space to discern and remain... even when it seems that nothing and no one takes steps towards what is discerned.
- Resistance as a place, as a space where it is possible to welcome and give hospitality to those who can't take it anymore, to the disenchanting, to those who no longer have the strength to fight...
- Resistance to the polarization that surrounds us, trying to maximize the distance between our positions, suffocating patience, and turning it into violent radicalization in face of the opposite. Resistance to thinking without nuances and without tonality, for whom things are black and white. Resistance to the temptation to elaborate hasty syntheses that superficially appear easy but in substance do not satisfy anyone because they are born of an artifice, lacking in listening, dialogue, and discernment. It is necessary to resist in paradox, in the difficulty of uniting opposites, in the dissonance that seeks to embrace sounds in a new harmonization, which is sustained in the perplexity of seemingly contrary thoughts which are in fact called to enrich the vision of reality and call us to live in that unstable equilibrium that does not rest on any pole, in order to avoid eliminating the opposite... until we find the path of inclusion.
- This type of resistance is an invitation to live "tuning the senses," "attentive" to reality, to what is happening. Resisting means "becoming aware", living "vigilantly"—watch and pray, says the "quintessential resistant" in Gethsemane, in an hour that was certainly calamitous for Jesus.
- Enduring patience is what allows us to "remain" whatever happens, knowing that our dream of synodal communion is not absurd, that are our efforts sterile, although we do not know, nor see how and when it will bear fruit, or where and when it will germinate.

This permanence will make this spirit of synodality sustainable. It will not allow this attempt to remain merely a beautiful two-year effort, after which everything will return to its place; but it wagers on small steps that remain and patiently await the next step.

That is why there is no enduring patience without humility and generosity. Presumption and selfishness undermine endurance. The resisters know that they resist not only for themselves, nor only for the group of resisters; they resist for the generations to come,

for the future Church, for the world to come... They contribute their grain of sand to a project that is much greater and that escapes their gaze.

This spirituality of resistance invites us to take charge of the world in the manner of the “resistant” who remains firm in his intention and trusts in the fruitfulness of his action, even if its fruits are not immediate because, in the end, he knows that the fruits are given by the OTHER.

Synodal spirituality thus reveals itself as a spirituality that—*through listening, dialogue, and discernment*—takes charge of reality, *cares for it, and resists* in this endeavor, without ceasing to walk with others, with those who are different, advancing patiently, with effort, step by step, in *sustained resistance*, building together a communion that is vulnerable, but that resists because it is embraced by all men and women.

- 1 The noun “spiritus”, which can be translated as “soul”, but also as breath, life, force, drive, spirit. The particle “-alis” is used to express “relative to” and the suffix “-ty” means “quality.”
- 2 The spirituality of a person, of a community, and of a people constitutes their motivation in life, their mood, the inspiration of their activity, their utopia, their causes: P. CASALDALIGA - J. M^a VIGIL, *Espiritualidad de la Liberación*, Editorial Envío, Managua, 1992, 23. In this same line, “Spirituality is the motivation that permeates the life projects and commitments, the motivation and mystique that permeates and inspires the commitment.” S. GALILEA, *El camino de la espiritualidad*, Paulinas, Bogotá, 1985, 26.
- 3 It is the “macro-ecumenical” spirituality spoken about by CASALDALIGA-VIGIL, op. cit., 23–25, or “the fundamental theological dimension of spirituality” as J. SOBRINO calls it in “Espiritualidad y seguimiento de Jesús,” in: *Misterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*, Trotta, 1990. T.II, 476.
- 4 J. SOBRINO, op. cit., 449–76.
- 5 Ignacio ELLACURÍA, “Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico latinoamericano,” *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 322–23 (1975) 411–25, here 419: Ellacuría understood the formal structure of intelligence as the “apprehension of reality and facing it,” which unfolds into three dimensions: “assuming the charge of reality” or the intellectual dimension; “bearing reality” or the ethical dimension; and “taking charge

- of reality" or the dimension of praxis. However, when looking at Ellacuría's life and work, according to Jon Sobrino, a fourth dimension needs to be added: "letting oneself borne by reality" or the dimension of gratuitousness. Cf. José LAGUNA, "Hacerse cargo, cargar y encargarse de la realidad," Cuadernos CyJ 172 (January 2011).
- 6 See INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n° 70: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html (orig. Spanish in COMISIÓN TEOLÓGICA INTERNACIONAL, La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia: Texto y comentario del documento de la Comisión Teológica Internacional, Estudios y ensayos 244 [Santiago Madrigal Terrazas, Autor, Redactor], BAC, Madrid 2019).
 - 7 Not only is it the broadest, but it is the cornerstone of the other two.
 - 8 The word synod comes from the Latin *sinodus*, a word derived from the Greek σύνοδος (encounter, meeting, assembly), composed of the Greek prefix συν- (meeting, joint action) and the root δος (route, road, walk).
 - 9 FRANCIS, Message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications: Listening with the ears of the heart.
 - 10 P. ALONSO, The Woman who Changed Jesus: Crossing Boundaries in Mk 7:24-30, Peeters, Leuven, 2011.
 - 11 Vida en comunidad, Sígueme, Salamanca, 2003, 92.
 - 12 Cf. Nelle MORTON, The Journey is Home, Boston, 1985.
 - 13 In such a way that with STEPHANIE KLEIN we could say that the talk of God and the evangelizing proclamation itself can be understood as a listening, a renewed style of accompaniment. She even ventures to affirm that "theological knowledge – practical, inductive or empirical – does not arise from the word of God, but from the listening of God to the theologian and from the listening of this, in turn, of other women": Virginia R. AZCUIY, "El método cualitativo en la teología feminista. La experiencia de las mujeres y un diálogo con Stephanie Klein sobre la escucha": *Perspectiva Teológica* 53/3 (2021) 671-700, here, 692. "A proclamation understood as a way of listening and receiving the other person as a way of encouraging one's own language" in coherence with a sinodality that implies listening as a fundamental practice of the Church's life and mission. *Ibid.*, 693.
 - 14 The Pope in his Message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications: Listening with the ears of the heart, finely notes some uses of the ear that are not true listening: Listening secretly and spying. That knowing everything when we are not summoned to listen. Store information, saving its use for self-interest. Listening to ourselves when others speak. Distorting what others say, interpreting on the basis of my own points of view, leaving no room for others to speak to each other, or making them say what they did not say or did not want to say. Selective listening that erases what does not interest me and only leaves room for what fits my way of seeing. Instrumental listening, used as a springboard to make my response shine.
 - 15 *diá* is a preposition meaning "by means of," "between," "through," and by similarity to *dyo*, also "two" and *Logos* comes from *legein*, "to speak" but also "to think."
 - 16 Stephanie KLEIN, *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung. Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie* (Praktische Theologie 19), Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1994, 64: "the origin of knowledge shaped to suit androcentrism disappears behind the generalizations."
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 J. M. ESQUIROL, *La resistencia íntima. Ensayo de una filosofía de la proximidad*, El Acanalado, Barcelona, 2015.
 - 19 F. TORRALBA, *Antropología del cuidar* (1998) and *Ética del cuidar* (2002).
 - 20 "If 'being spiritual means awakening to the deepest dimension that exists in us, which makes us sensitive to solidarity, to justice for all, to cooperation, to universal fraternity, to veneration and unconditional love; and control its opposites,' then it is spirituality that connects and re-connects us with all things, that opens up the experience of belonging to the great All and that makes us grow in the hope that meaning is stronger than absurdity." Cf. L. BOFF, *El cuidado necesario*, Trotta, 2012.
 - 21 A new way of taking charge of reality that starts by learning to be more with less and to satisfy our needs with a sense of solidarity with the millions of people who go hungry and with the future of future generations.
 - 22 Pepe LAGUNA, "'Cuidanía' los cuidados que sostienen la vida," *Padres y Maestros* 386 (2021) 12-17. "The transition from the paradigm of citizenship to that of citizenship requires at least three essential displacements: an anthropological one, from self-sufficiency to vulnerability; another ethic from formal morals to responsive ethics and, finally, a socio-political displacement of care as a benevolent virtue to care as a political requirement."
 - 23 Whatever the way of caring that we must always activate may be, it is always an art and has its demands: The

scrupulous respect for the autonomy of the other. Knowledge and understanding of the circumstance of the subject cared for. The analysis of your needs. The ability to anticipate. Respect and promotion of the identity of the subject cared for. Self-care as a guarantee of correct care. The empathic link with the vulnerability of the other. Cf. F. TORRALBA, *Torrallba, Ética del cuidar. Fundamentos, contextos y problemas*, Institut Borja de Bioètica/ Mapfre Medicina, Barcelona, 2006. ID., *Esencia del cuidar. Siete tesis*. Sal Terrae, Santander-Bilbao, 2005, 885-894.

- 24 Winnicott was a pioneer in pointing out the importance of this loving primary care with the term "sufficient maternal care;" D.W. WINNICOTT, *El hogar, nuestro punto de partida*. Ensayos de un psicoanalista, Paidós, Barcelona 1996, 145. The particular dynamic of tenderness within the family influences the forms of trust instilled in the child. A mother who tenderly attends to the needs of her baby creates a favorable environment that produces "in the child a high degree of trust in his mother" Ibid., 36. On this foundational trust established in the home, relationships with the extended family, neighbors, colleagues and society in general are built.: John BOWLBY, "Psychoanalysis as art and science", *Higher Education Quarterly* 35/4 (September 1981) 465-482, aquí 414.
- 25 Cf. Nurya MARTÍNEZ-GAYOL, *Un espacio para la ternura miradas desde la teología* (Biblioteca Teología Comillas), Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao, 2006.
- 26 "I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35)" (EG 99).
- 27 It is derived from the Latin word "custodia": guard, safeguard, quality or action of guarding and protecting. This word derives from *custos*, *custodis*- (guardian, the one who is put as protection or cover of something).
- 28 Creation is not a human patrimony; it is a sacred reality that makes the mystery of God visible. God speaks through each of the creatures, and in each of them, there is a trace of God's eternity.
- 29 Pope Francis said "The vocation of being a 'protector' [...] is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live" (Homily at the beginning of his pontificat, 19 March 2013).
- 30 This is how it is proposed in, Alberto CANO ARENAS – Álvaro LOBO ARRANZ, *Más que salud. Cinco claves de espiritualidad ignaciana para ayudar en la enfermedad*, Sal Terrae, Maliaño, 2019, 100-106.
- 31 Caring and healing are two etymologically close terms. In fact, "cure" derives from the Latin "curāre," which means: "to care, to worry." On the other hand, caring has the meaning of "paying attention to something or someone" and comes from the latin *cogitare*.
"Caring" would be the broader concept that somehow embraces "healing" which, in turn, encompasses the idea of healing, healing, and salvation... but that refers more directly to a previous situation of harm, damage, rupture, disease that cries out to be restored.
- 32 "The culture of care thus calls for a common, supportive and inclusive commitment to protecting and promoting the dignity and good of all, a willingness to show care and compassion, to work for reconciliation and healing, and to advance mutual respect and acceptance. As such, it represents a privileged path to peace" (FRANCIS, Message for the celebration of the 54th World Day of Peace, 1 Jan. 2021).
- 33 Josep María ESQUIROL. *La resistencia íntima*, Acantilado, Barcelona, 2015.

WISDOM FOR THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

Dr. Jessie Rogers

Dr. Jessie Rogers made history recently, becoming the first lay person and the first woman to be dean of St Patrick's College, Maynooth. Dr Rogers, originally South African, undertook her graduate studies at the University of Stellenbosch and came to Ireland in 2007 to teach in Mary Immaculate College before joining the Faculty of Theology at Saint Patrick's College in 2014. As a Scripture scholar specialising in the Old Testament, her academic work focuses on biblical wisdom literature. In recent years it has broadened to include spirituality and a focus on the theology of childhood. Dr Rogers is a member of the Irish Biblical Association, the South African Society for Near Eastern Studies, the European Society for Catholic Theology, and the Godly Play International College of Trainers.



1.

Wisdom is a rich concept. It is so much more than a body of knowledge; it refers to ways of being and acting in the world. Wisdom is an aptitude and a disposition. The wise person both knows the right action *and* desires to do it. Wisdom is the ability to choose the best goals and to discern the best path to get there. Wisdom entails living our lives in alignment with what is real so that we are able to achieve the highest good. Wisdom takes account of the deep structure of reality and chooses goals and methods in harmony with that.

That is why I would like to begin with what we believe about God, the world and our mission in the world. That reality provides the fundamental contours for true wisdom. Israel's sages taught that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; Sir 1:14). Fear here means reverence; it means to take God seriously so that our lives and our commitments are consciously shaped by what we know of God's will and calling, for us and for the world.

Developments in human knowing invite us to see the cosmos as an interconnected web that is on a journey of becoming. Our faith assures us that this is God's world and that God is at work to reconcile and to restore all things in Christ (cf Col 1:15-20). We confess that the final destination is universal *shalom*: peace and wholeness and blessedness.

Knowing this, we can discern God's Spirit at work in every impulse toward life and love, even in the midst of brokenness. We also know that our mission is to build up the body of Christ, understood in the widest sense, and to be a channel of God's blessing to the world.

But there are many different ways in which this can be done. The Holy Spirit bestows diverse gifts and there are numerous possibilities for faithfully living out our calling. On top of that, we are journeying with the God of surprises who comes to meet us from an unknown future. We cannot predict ahead of time where the journey will take us. God is both faithful and creative, always true to Godself and a keeper of covenants, and yet bigger than any box we may make for God. How do we journey in an emergent cosmos with a trustworthy yet radically free God who has chosen to involve God's creatures in the creative process and who has given us free will so that we can choose against, as well as for, life and wholeness? That is the challenge of synodality, of journeying together.

2.

The only way to proceed in wisdom is to keep close to God and what God is doing. That requires both rootedness and openness. Listen to words addressed to God's people in exile which outline this dance of discernment:

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:16-19)*

God's people are told to remember as, with a few evocative phrases conjuring up the crossing of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, the poet reminds them that the God who addresses them is the God of the Exodus, the God of their ancestors and the God of the Tradition. This is the God of faithfulness in times past. But then, after explicitly reminding them, the poet tells them: '*do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.*' They are to forget just enough to create a space for God's newness. If, in their imagination, they hold on too tightly to how God acted in the past, they might overlook the new thing that God is doing in the present. They need to remember so that they can recognise God's footprints, but then not remember lest expectations based on the past blind them to what God is doing now. It is the same God and the same story, but in a different key. Where the journey of the Exodus led through the water to freedom, this journey will take them out of exile, through the desert and back home.

Can you hear the wisdom here for your own synodal journey? You are nourished by the traditions which have shaped you, by your founding charisms, and by your own personal stories in which you have come to know God. That history gives you a firm place to stand; it has shaped your understanding of God and how God works. Such knowledge is key to being able to recognise God's footprints. But, like a tree putting out new branches, you need to be open to the future, a future that you cannot predict in advance, but one whose new shoots you can recognise in the present if you pay attention. The God you have come to know is the God who will take the story further. But this God cannot be limited to what you know already.

We are invited by the biblical text to create a space in our remembering to stop us from trying to trap the future in the cage of the past. We are called to be open and responsive to the new thing that God is doing. In the present moment, which hangs in the gap between the past we think we know and the future that is still becoming, we can embrace uncertainty with curiosity. We are being asked to pay attention because what God is doing cannot be named in advance, but it can be perceived if we are alert and attentive. There is a continuity in the work of God which, although it eludes prediction, can be intuited in the present and confirmed in hindsight.

What dispositions and attitudes of heart will help us in this dance of discernment, this remembering and forgetting and noticing? I am reminded of Jesus' words to his disciples after he has been inviting them to discern the Kingdom of God through the lens of parables which stretch, provoke and entice into a new way of experiencing God in the world: *"Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* (Matthew 13:52). When we are wise, we are neither rigid and stuck in the past nor carried along by every new fashion. We are both rooted and responsive. We are able to discern what to cherish in the old and what to embrace in the new. We know our stories and our history. But we have also caught a glimpse of the glorious future toward which God beckons us. Suspended between the past and the future, we are attentive to the signs of God at work in the present.

Not everything in the past can be brought out as a treasure. Freedom requires the courage to face the darkness in our past, individually and collectively. For what do we need to give and receive forgiveness? What must we relinquish? We can remain rooted in the life-giving dimensions of the past without trying to justify those parts of it that are broken and harmful or that no longer serve us well. But let us celebrate those elements that continue to be life-giving. Wise women sing and dance their stories of liberation, like Miriam on the far side of the Red Sea who took up her tambourine and led the women in the dancing: *"Let us sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider thrown into the sea."* (Exodus 15:21).

What will help us to see the new thing that God is doing in our midst and in the world? An attitude of contemplative wonder, compassionate attentiveness, and hope. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis exhorts us:

"Let us believe the Gospel when it tells us that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways: like the small seed which grows into a great tree, like the measure of leaven that makes the dough rise, and like the good seed that grows amidst the weeds and can always pleasantly surprise us. The kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles

to flourish anew. Christ's resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world; even if they are cut back, they grow again, for the resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain." (EG par 278)

If we believe that, if we trust that God is at work, and long to be a part of this march of living hope, then we will catch a glimpse of the new thing that God is doing.

3.

The God of the Exodus is revealed to us as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The paschal mystery is a powerful reminder that God works in surprising ways. It must be at the core of our remembering, because followers of Jesus Christ are called to embrace the wisdom of vulnerability. St Paul reminds us that the good news we proclaim is Christ crucified. What the world calls weakness, foolishness and failure, is actually the power and the wisdom of God in action. *"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."* (1 Corinthians 1:25). In the face of fierce opposition, Jesus avoided the instinctive reactions to danger of fight or flight. He did not seek to overcome violence with force, which is the way of the revolutionary. Nor did he choose pacifism by running away or allowing himself to be silenced. Jesus embraced the third way of nonviolent resistance. He remained faithful to the end. By absorbing the violence without retaliating or backing down, by neither fighting nor fleeing but by persevering in faithful obedience to his Father, Jesus unmasked the lies of the powerful and suffered in solidarity with the powerless. His death created the possibility for reconciliation and new possibilities for oppressed and oppressor alike to have their humanity restored. That is the transformative power of vulnerable solidarity to which God says a resounding 'yes' in the Resurrection.

How can we embrace the wisdom of vulnerability? It means sowing seeds hopefully, even when we are weeping, and entrusting their growth to God (Psalm 126). It means risking ourselves and our future for the sake of the world and its future. It means accepting that change comes about not by force, but by embracing the other, through the offer of reconciliation. We need to imbibe Jesus' countercultural way of being in the world. Conventional wisdom may tell us that we can only bring about change from a position of power and influence, or that we need to control the narrative, or that the end justifies the means. But that is not how God brings about newness.

I want to note, though, that In a patriarchal world, the temptation faced by women is often inverted. Jesus tells us that the one who wants to save her life will lose it, but the one who loses her life will save it (Matt 16:27). But there are different motivations for losing one's life. Others will want to take it from us by asking us to sacrifice ourselves for their agendas or desires. To deny oneself to enable the selfishness or destructiveness of others is not to live out of a Christ-shaped vulnerability. We must be convinced of our own inestimable worth in God's eyes to find the inner freedom to give ourselves in love. When we have heard the Father's affirmation "You are my beloved daughter, I delight in you" (cf Luke 3:22), we will have the strength to say 'no' to the temptations that would take us off mission, just like Jesus did in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-12). Sometimes the temptation is fueled by pride, but for women in particular, the voices that must be resisted often come from a sense of inadequacy, or from an internalised cultural expectation that we live our

lives according to the will of others. Jesus was not a doormat, and neither are we. Wisdom calls us to act out of a place of genuine freedom. When we know that our lives are God's and that they are precious beyond measure, we will lay them down for the right reasons.

4.

Wisdom embraces the best goals and chooses the optimal paths to achieving them. What actions and values does living wisely and journeying synodally in an interconnected, emerging, God-infused, struggling and beautiful world call for?

If the Christlike God is at work in and through God's creatures and if God is reconciling all things in Christ (Col 1:16), then wisdom does not consist of power over or of abstract truths to be imposed. Instead, it is found in accompaniment, in coming alongside. Where there are green shoots struggling toward the light, the wise woman waters, weeds and waits

How can we embrace the wisdom of vulnerability? It means sowing seeds hopefully, even when we are weeping, and entrusting their growth to God (Psalm 126).

in hope. She pays compassionate attention and responds to needs by empowering and encouraging. She has the patience and the courage to hold the tensions while something new surfaces. She taps into her God-given creativity and draws forth the creativity of others. She does not work alone. Deeply aware of the links that make up life's web, she celebrates the life and love that flow through them, repairing weak links, unblocking clogged one, grieving broken ones, and forging new ones. She builds community and is herself nourished and supported by others. She keeps widening the circle. Such a life takes root and grows in hearts that are open, creative, trustful and willing to venture along new paths.

There are two practices that are of particular importance for synodality: knowing when to speak and when to be silent, and the practice of hospitality. The preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us that *'for everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven,'*

including *'a time to keep silence, and a time to speak'* (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b). It would be so much easier if some actions were always right and others always wrong! But wisdom consists in knowing the opportune time. The synodal path is a process of connecting, of listening and discerning, and of speaking our truth with courage. The time for speech is after we have listened deeply. It is when we open ourselves in truthful vulnerability to the other. Honest speech is authentic presence. It is also a time for speech when our voice can bring the perspective of the excluded into focus. We are to speak against oppressive or careless acts of silencing.

The wrong time to speak is before we have listened - to God, to ourselves and to others. Foolish speech comes from an unreflective, complacent place where we think we know and have nothing new to learn. Words can be a way of drowning out what we do not want to hear, because we are arrogant or fearful, maybe even both. *"A word fitly spoken is like*



apples of gold in a setting of silver' (Prov 25:11). The right word at the right time creates the possibility for connection.

And what of silence? To be silent when we should speak is to refuse connection, or to deprive others of our unique insights. When one perspective on a complex issue is not heard, communal discernment toward a solution can be lopsided and incomplete. To be silent at the wrong time can allow evil to flourish and deprive the needy of an advocate. Good silence is in the service of listening attentively. It creates a space for understanding, for conversion and for growth. Attentive silence is an act of radical hospitality.

Hospitality is one of the hallmarks of the Gospel in action, particularly when it is extended to the stranger (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2) The practice of synodality mirrors Jesus' own practice of inclusive fellowship at meals; it makes room at the table. Hospitality does not just feed the stranger; it makes room for them in our lives. Hospitality is to

be humbly received as well as offered. The wisdom of vulnerability recognises the ways in which we are dependent upon the radical hospitality of others. I am thinking about how Jesus sent out the 72, telling them to take nothing for the journey, and instructing them to stay where they were welcomed and to eat whatever they were offered (Luke 10). Hospitality reminds us that we are not self-sufficient; it weaves threads to overcome division and isolation. Hospitality is essential for synodality because it creates possibilities for transformation through encounter.

5.

I conclude with an extravagantly generous invitation from the letter of James, a New Testament wisdom text:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:5-6 NRSV).

Do you need wisdom? Well, ask and you will receive! God longs for us to walk the synodal journey wisely. Our generous God delights to give us whatever we need as we grow into a synodal way of being and ministering. The invitation could not be clearer: ask for what you need!

We are reminded that we must ask in faith, never doubting. How can we do that? Perhaps even before we ask for wisdom for the synodal journey, we should ask God to help us to trust, to trust that God is at work, to trust that the Kingdom of God is taking root and growing even in the most unlikely places, and to trust that we can hear the Spirit's invitation in the experiences of others, particularly at the margins.

James stresses that faith is not what we *say* we believe, but what we *do*. Faith is seen in action (James 2:17, 26). By implication, to doubt is to refuse to take the action that faith demands. If we ask for wisdom and then do not take the first step, however wobbly it feels, then we will be asking without faith, and we will never discover the wisdom that God offers us. Do not fall into the temptation of thinking that talking about synodality is the same as practising it. Do not study synodality without experiencing it.

To become a synodal church means to journey together. It means to open ourselves to others, to listen and to speak, to reflect and discern, and to take the next step together. The road is made by walking. Wisdom is found in responding to the Lord's invitation to journey with the Spirit, with one another and ultimately with all of creation as we co-create a future which is God's dream for the world.

THE LEADER'S VULNERABILITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Sr. M^a Carmen Mora Sena, HCSA

Sr. M^a del Carmen Mora Sena, Superior General of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Anne, Vice President of the Health Commission of the USG-UISG, (native of Seville, Spain), has a degree in Medicine and Surgery from the University of Seville (1988) and is a Specialist in Family and Community Medicine. She obtained a Master's Degree in Bioethics from the Catholic University of Valencia.



When I received the invitation to participate in this panel, I felt that I could not say no because precisely *vulnerability* has accompanied me throughout my life, and I think it is the word that best defines my personal experience in the performance of the service of Superior General of the Congregation of which I am part, the service I started in July 2019, just a few months before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The truth is that, from the very beginning, even before the pandemic started, I felt small and *vulnerable* and had practically spent the first year of this service wondering why I said Yes at the Chapter, upon being elected. I remembered Samuel asking Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" (1 Sam 16:11)

I had some experience of Government, but I had never been a "Superior" in my life, not even in a local community... I could easily feel my limits in everyday life: a certain personal insecurity, attachment to my image, desire to "do well," not knowing how to manage my emotions properly, nor expressing myself very well when affected by them..., and I felt that there were other Sisters who could render this service better than I could.

However, during the *Spiritual exercises* that I experienced during the Pandemic, the "choice" was to "say yes" to the service that I now carry out, from the perspective of vulnerability, convinced that this is the type of leadership that religious life needs today.

I am Spanish and, in my country, a "state of alarm" was declared in March 2020 because of the Pandemic. I had returned from Venezuela a week earlier—with accumulated fatigue

and delayed issues waiting to be resolved—and was not aware of the situation, so the news surprised me.

Beyond the initial recommendations, protocols, and guidelines for action that we sent, together with the Councilor in charge of Health, to communities and centers, I confess that it was difficult for me to react:

- on the one hand, I felt that I was “not coping enough,” that I lacked the time to look everywhere, that I missed important details, and that it was difficult for me not to be as generous, available, or creative as other Sisters... And I simply had to accept my reality with humility;
- on the other hand, I needed to make arrangements with my family to care for my mother, who had Alzheimer's and was totally dependent... It was hard for me not to be present, but I understood that it was better for her to be cared for by those who were closest to her, and I was grateful for the help of my siblings;
- moreover, I felt insecure because I did not know what my role was, whether to offer myself as a doctor to take care of infected people, as some suggested, which would have meant putting at risk the many elderly sisters of the house where I live; or whether it would be better to keep my hand on the helm of the ship without knowing the course... Without much clarity, I chose the second option.

After discussing the matter with my Sisters of Council, I wrote a circular letter to all the Sisters explaining what was known at that time about the COVID infection: I called for calm and responsibility, invited trust in God, and intense intercessory prayer, encouraged solidarity from the creativity of love—citing examples of what our Sisters were already doing in different places—, and I asked those who were not especially vulnerable to the virus or lived with people who were to offer themselves to their Provincial Superiors to care for those infected wherever necessary, to carry out tasks to support vulnerable people or to respond creatively to other needs being caused by the pandemic.

We also opened communication channels to share, among Sisters, information related to the pandemic and to welcome prayer requests from those who wanted our prayerful support. Both were used extensively.

The good news of solidarity actions carried out by our Sisters was soon followed by news of complex and difficult situations that were arising:

- The contagion made its appearance **in our communities and centers**, mainly in the houses of elderly sisters, homes for the elderly and hospitals. Sisters, people we cared for, some workers... became ill and died from COVID.
 - o In some large communities of elderly sisters, almost all the elderly and the caregivers were infected, and it was necessary to send reinforcements to take care of them; those sisters who were also infected, including one from my community of the General Council. Most of those who went to the hospital did not come back alive, and that made us fear their admission... Moreover, it was hard not being able to accompany them there—because that was not allowed—and they died alone... Some communities lost as many as nine Sisters to COVID in one month...

At times, we were afraid to turn on the computer and find more obituaries of sisters who had died.

Added to this were the repeated confinements within the houses that kept cognitively impaired sisters in their rooms because one or another had been found positive, and this made them sadder and decline faster.

- In the homes for the elderly, it hurt a lot to lose some of those with whom we had lived so long; their relatives asked not to take them to the COVID centers because they felt greater trust in the sisters, even though the means were scarce at that time. There were infected sisters who continued to run the residence from their isolation, while others who, even when ill, continued to work caring for the infected...
- Our own hospitals were put at the disposal of the authorities to treat COVID patients. This generated a great economic loss that led us to request credits that require the permission of Rome because of the amount (because the programmed surgical activity that could bring us income was suspended, and the expenses increased, since the patients were sent to us, but we did not receive material or protective equipment, nor support to acquire it); but, above all, it also meant contagion and death of young sisters who cared for the affected—the first of them, was one of my group.



- The sisters in educational centers adapted as best and fast as they could to virtual teaching; but, in many places, the students lacked the means to follow on-line classes, and they had to be creative and risk sending them pedagogical guides, while offering material and psychological support to them and their families.... Due to the lack of attendance, family relocations, and because parents lost their jobs, we lost students and, in some countries, we had to postpone the payment of part of the salaries of the workers because we were unable to pay them at the time...
- Our presence in remote places with poor communications also caused us to lose very young sisters, one of whom had made perpetual profession just a year earlier.
- The provincials, some of whom became ill with COVID, kept me informed about the situation, and there were some who did not want to let the sisters

of their Province know, and so avoid alarming them more; however, they did ask for this information, and this meant that I had to make compromises in order to offer it.

- **Some sisters unexpectedly found themselves confined outside their communities**—with their families, in other communities, or in places where there was no community nearby, and it took them months to be able to return home; **some remained alone for over a year** in their community, thousands of kilometers away from other sisters... It was hard to search and not find how to resolve these situations.
- **Other Sisters lost fathers, mothers, brothers** or several close relatives in a few days and could not accompany them, say goodbye to them, or attend their funeral.... I also lost my mother, but—in the midst of grief—precisely because of her dependency, it was easier for me to travel; I had the grace to accompany her and take care of her as a doctor at home during the days before her death, although I was affected
- by the restrictions regarding burials, which did not allow close relatives such as my mother's brothers nor the sisters of my community to accompany us in that difficult moment...
- **Confinement** kept sisters obliged to join the houses of formation from doing so, Provincials from traveling to receive first vows or perpetual professions, and some temporary professed Sisters from renewing their vows as usual in their community, before their Superior; and, so, creative solutions had to be found.
 - o **The process of the redesigning and unification of the Latin American Provinces and Delegation and the Provincial chapters were also affected.** In the first case, meetings that we wanted to be face-to-face were postponed up to five times because of border closures or contagions. Those with the weakest number of sisters were also those who suffered the most were, until we finally found the bimodal formula and safer places to meet, which allowed us to unblock and complete the process.
 - o The Chapter of the Delegation of Africa had to be postponed twice: first for a trimester and then for another year. It was going to be their first Chapter of elections, and the Council that was leaving was asking us to “name” a new Government Team... I understood that it was more pedagogical for them to elect it in Chapter, but it was very difficult for me to communicate to them the decision of not granting them what they were asking for; I knew that I was asking a lot, particularly of the Delegate Superior and her Secretary. When I picked up the phone to tell them, I did not really know what I was going to say or how... and the Lord opened my ear to listen, to understand, and to say it, offering at the same time “green spaces” and unconditional support from my poverty...
- Due to border closures, it was necessary to **postpone several canonical visits** in which certain delicate issues had to be addressed with sisters... And it had to be done by zoom or by telephone when there was no more time left.
- When, at last, **the vaccines arrived**, although the majority received them with hope, **we found some “negationist” sisters** who did not want to receive them but did want to continue working—some in health services or with vulnerable people—and, in addition to trying to persuade them, (providing confirmed scientific information, resolving doubts, and offering authoritative testimonies, such as the Pope's call not only to vaccinate ourselves but also to generate confidence among the poorest so that they would also do so), we had to find a way to combine

respect for each one's freedom with the protection of vulnerable third parties and the safeguarding of the Congregation's accountability to their families.

It is true that, in many of these difficult circumstances, I easily felt pain, bewilderment, smallness, fragility, insecurity, helplessness, but, at the same time, I discovered that, deep down, we shared the fate of many and that we were, in fact, more fortunate because of the Congregation's the support.

Little by little, I trained myself to live with uncertainty and learned to accept not being able to have everything "under control", to accept and support reality as it came, to leave myself

in God's hands, and to seek—relying on the enlightenment of others, especially the sisters of my Council—solutions that were sometimes prudent and sometimes more risky, but which had to be explored.

At the same time, the awareness of my limitations, weaknesses, and shortcomings made me more human and broadened my capacity to share and understand the pains, insecurities, weaknesses, and frailties of my sisters and of others.

In many situations of loneliness, illness, death, loss, I could only be close, reach out with a message or a call, offer my ear and heart to listen and welcome—more often virtually than in person, accompany by affection and prayer... But, what seemed small to me, was a great relief for many.

I was also able to welcome the help and solidarity of others, and to be a channel for sharing it with others. I remember with emotion the many packages of masks and gloves that our sisters from China and Macao sent us in successive shipments, when it was almost impossible to obtain them in Spain and many other places.

I also felt the need to acknowledge and thank others for their support and help, their involvement in the work of the sisters, and the lay personnel of our Centers... And, even without having control of the media, counting on the help of my sisters, on May 1st, through social networks, I sent them all a message of recognition for their effort and dedication, of gratitude, encouragement and stimulus.

What I have experienced leads me to discover that **vulnerability makes synodality possible** because it makes it clear that we need to walk together and to count on the wealth, support, light, and contribution of others; and it strengthens my conviction that this is **the path of leadership that Religious Life needs today**, it is the one that brings us closer and opens us to others and lets God take the reins of our Congregations and of the service we offer to the world.

It is the same path that He chooses in His Incarnation and at Easter to approach us, heal our wounds, and send us to continue His mission, counting on His Presence and His encouragement.

VULNERABILITY AS A MISSIONARY

Sr. Anne Falola, OLA

Sr. Anne Falola is a missionary sister of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA.) She holds a B.Ed. in Guidance/Counselling and Masters in Christian Spirituality from Heythrop College, University of London. Her areas of missionary engagement include: teaching, pastoral and social work, inter/religious dialogue, and missionary animation. She has worked in Nigeria, her country, Argentina and briefly in the United Kingdom. She is currently a General Councillor in her Congregation and resides in Rome.



Introduction

Vulnerability is a fundamental quality of every authentic Christian mission, because we are called to follow Christ, *'who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave....'* (Phil. 2:6-8). The *Kenosis* of Christ makes *vulnerability a way of being missionary* and an important means for mission. The dictionary explains vulnerability as *being exposed to the possibility of attack or hurt, either physically or emotionally*. The vulnerability of Christ was not imposed; it is a condition He willingly assumed, from his birth in the manger as a defenceless baby to his death on the Cross as a common criminal. I invite us to hold in our minds any of the numerous ICONS of the vulnerable Christ as I share this reflection.

I approach this reflection by considering two aspects of vulnerability as experienced by missionaries. The first is what I call ***vulnerability from above***, which I define as the decision to empty oneself of the power and honour which one legitimately possesses; it contradicts our innate desire to hold on to power, to dominate and to be triumphant. The second, which I name, ***vulnerability from below***, is an invitation to embrace our human condition in its woundedness, fragility, limitations, sinfulness, and imperfections. While the experience of the pandemic brought the fragility of the human family close to everyone, we can only transform the pain brought by the pandemic when together we learn to embrace both forms of vulnerability. The first is something we have to ***let go of*** in order to follow the *Kenosis* of Christ, while the second is a reality imposed on us by our human condition which we learn ***to embrace for transformation***.

I would like to share these two levels of vulnerability in my own life as a woman, consecrated for Mission *ad gentes ad extra*. This implies a geographical movement to lands and peoples of other cultures. It also implies a movement to the existential periphery, as enunciated by Pope Francis in *Evangelium Gaudium*, inviting the Church to go forth to all the human peripheries where people suffer exclusion and experience different forms of dehumanizing hardships as a result of economic inequality and impoverishment, social injustice and environmental degradation¹. This mission *ad gentes* from the existential perspective is an urgent call for us all as Consecrated people in today's world.

Pope Francis' call to the Synodal Process is ultimately a renewed call to mission, but not from the hitherto held position of power and authority. It is an invitation to a *Synodal Church in communion, participation and mission*. This cannot be achieved without accepting and embracing our vulnerability. For us as missionaries, vulnerability is an asset for mission, rather than a burden; because it permits us to enter into the human reality more deeply through our own participation in what is weak, oppressed and poor. When we embrace our own vulnerability, we become closer to the people in need of light and liberation. Perhaps the most exigent journey for us as missionary-disciples is not the physical distance we cover, but the inner journey towards letting go of our securities and embracing our own vulnerabilities. We are not master builders as Oscar Romero puts it, and we are wounded healers according to Henri Nouwen.

The New Springtime of Mission – Reciprocity

The request I received was to speak on ***Vulnerability as a Missionary***, specifically from an African perspective. I am grateful to the organisers of UISG Plenary for including Africa, a continent which until quite recently was considered to be ONLY at the receiving end of the missionary thrust of the Church. My missionary journey has been greatly enriched by the diversity of cultures and realities in Nigeria, my country of origin, as well as in Argentina, my country of mission, where I lived for eleven years. I have also been marked by my study and interaction in Europe. I seize the opportunity to thank my Congregation, the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles for giving me the opportunities to fulfil my missionary dream beyond my wildest imagination!

Africa is sometimes called the 'garden of the Church in the 20th Century', because of the fascinating growth of the Church in the African continent the 19th and 20th centuries. This golden era of Christianity in Africa is manifested in many ways, and the most palpable is the increase in the number of Christians and Church institutions; for example, from an estimated 4 million professing Christianity in 1900, African Christianity has grown to over 300 million adherents by the year 2000.²

One of the implications of this is that there are no longer exclusively mission sending countries or exclusively mission receiving countries; we all give and receive, in mutuality. This change affects the power dynamic, since we all are vulnerable in one aspect or the other. The geography of mission has changed! Thanks be to God, Christian mission is now divorced from its historical link to colonization and westernization. The past three decades have been particularly eventful in this regard, especially with the ground breaking missionary document, *Redemptoris Missio* by St. Pope John Paul II in 1990. Quoting the Latin American Bishops in Puebla, John Paul reinforced this new vision of

mission whereby all peoples and all local Churches, even from the poorer nations, are called and encouraged to respond to the specific missionary vocation *ad gentes*, *ad extra* – *projected beyond frontiers*. The Latin American Bishops affirmed: *although we have need of missionaries ourselves, nevertheless we must give from our own poverty*³.

This assertion re-echoed by John Paul, definitely gave energy to missionaries from Africa and I imagine from the entire southern hemisphere to respond to the missionary vocation with generosity. I have often been asked why Africans would bother going outside their continent as missionaries with the myriads of problems we have. To this I respond that the call to mission is NOT a rivalry of self-sufficiency, to which only those who are strong and have no problems can respond. This exclusive tendency is problematic because it associates mission with power, political influence, material wealth, colonization and domination. As an African missionary I see myself called to change this narrative, to bring newness, simplicity and energy stripped of economic and political powers.

*I know many of us would disagree with me that we are living a new springtime of mission, because many of us are having dwindling and aging members. But remember I am writing from an African perspective! We are just beginning to spring up!! For example, in the past year, my Congregation opened two new missions, one in Liberia and the other in Central African Republic; they are both international and intercultural communities of Sisters coming from Togo, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria. For us mission *inter-gentes* ⁴is just beginning, with its beauty and challenges.*

Becoming aware of my own vulnerability

While vulnerability is vital for mission, it does not come easy. The missionaries I grew up to know in my childhood, were not considered vulnerable men and women. My missionary vocation was inspired by the Irish missionaries who in my homeland, pioneered initiatives in education, health, pastoral and social frontiers, they were loved and highly respected. However, my notion of being that heroic missionary admired by all suddenly crashed! When I stepped out of Africa in 1994, I realized that I was not received as a missionary; rather, I was considered a migrant worker who had come looking for a better life. My desire for total self-giving was shaken when I was often hit with the fact that it is believed that an African has little to offer. I realized that for many outside Africa, the continent was only associated with poverty, war, violence, disorder, primitive life, diseases, ethnic wars, political unrest, and corruption. While these realities cannot be denied, Africa is also a land of promise, for its vibrant life, its resilience, youthfulness, love of community, hospitality, generosity, and religiosity. As a missionary from Africa, I learnt to embrace this vulnerability which prejudices impose on me, while I humbly assume the dignity to change the narrative. We are all victims of ***the single story syndrome***, built on the biases of others about us. We all carry the burden of our identities and this become more apparent when we step outside our own milieu, we are affected by the judgment of others. The Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie beautifully articulated it: *It is not that the single story is not true, but it is not the only story*⁵. As missionaries, we have to learn to embrace our vulnerability by not building on the prejudices of the popular press and by remaining comfortable with both the lights and shadows of who are.

Today, with the proliferation of the media, people are quick to remind us of the dark side of our own history as Church. For example, our conformity with four hundred years

of Slave Trade, some alliance with colonisation, our silence on racial discrimination and apartheid, our tolerance of unjust structures and our own cover-up with injustices and abuses within our system. All these weaken our power of witness and make us vulnerable when we set out to be the moral voice in the world.

Instances of Missionary Vulnerability – African Perspective

Being a missionary today is about our openness to work with others to build a new humanity, missionaries are men and women of communion. Our tendencies as Church to hold on to our positions and scorn other people's contributions had to give way to the recognition of the truths of others. Mission today is *inter-gentes* – among the people of other faiths and cultures, it is a renewed call to listen to others with respect and not with arrogant self-deceit. These are some of the situations which make us more vulnerable today:

- **The space of 'Nothingness'** – In the effort to adapt to the circumstances of mission, there is a period of transition which involves emotional, psychological, social and sometimes physical and language adaptation. At the entry point to a new mission, one has to let go of the past (this may include affective and professional status) and embrace a new reality. A missionary is like a child who has to learn in an unfamiliar environment with many uncertainties. These movements from the known reality where we are in control to the unknown where we are dependent make us vulnerable and require a lot of humility, but which ultimately can transform us as Jonah was transformed after his mission to the Ninevites.
- **Lack of missionary antecedents:** Coming from Africa, many of us are probably the first generation of missionaries from our communities. The expectations are not clear and in many cases, our missionary models come from other cultures. We have the difficult task of setting up structures which can support and sustain our missionary vocation – giving and receiving. We find ourselves writing a new script, walking uncharted paths and sometimes ill equipped for the task. For example, there are few missionary preparatory, renewal, and sabbatical programmes which take African reality into consideration. This has prompted some international Congregations to set up some renewal centres in Africa⁶. African missiology is not quite developed to respond to emerging challenges. We use western models which place non-Europeans at a disadvantage, because we cross double cultural barriers - the western culture and the host culture.
- **Missionaries today are a vulnerable minority:** In the past decades, religious and missionaries in areas of primary evangelization were a major force in the society. They were respected for their contributions to education, health and empowerment of all forms. In many cases, they determined the standards, set the rules and laid down acceptable norms, sometimes with little regard for the local cultures. Today, in almost every part of the world, missionaries are minorities, we are like remnants within the society, whether Europeans in Africa, Asia, the Pacific or in the Americas, or Africans in other continents. Today, there are anti-Christian and sometimes xenophobic tendencies, which partly target missionaries. With reduced numbers, missionaries are an endangered species.
- **Insecurity and Violence:** The ongoing violence and global security has increased the vulnerability of missionaries who often fall victims of kidnapping, torture and gruesome murder; the experience of dear Sr. Gloria, a Colombian Franciscan missionary who was held hostage in Mali for over 4 years is still fresh in our minds.

Hundreds of thousands of missionaries of all races are living in areas of high risk, which often present the difficult decision of either quitting the mission or remaining in danger. According to the Vatican Catholic News Agency, twenty-two Catholic missionaries were killed around the world in 2021, half of them in Africa⁷ (Those murdered include missionaries of other continents working in Africa). The same report stated that from 2000 to 2020, 536 missionaries were killed worldwide. Religious and lay missionaries and pastoral workers are often killed not just because of hatred for religious, but for various political and economic reasons, for example, criminals in search of non-existent treasures or attracted by the mirage of easy redemptions or to silence uncomfortable voices. It is truly challenging to discern the appropriate response to negotiations with the criminals. The difficult choice not to passively submit to the evil regime, while we uphold nonviolence principles, is a moral dilemma which makes us more vulnerable, and violent people continue to flex their evil power.



- **Funding Challenges:** Financial unsustainability of many missionary projects was made more apparent during the pandemic due to reduced foreign and local funding. The concern for sustainability creates tension between the service to the poor and income generating projects. The charisms of many Congregations suffer on the altar of having projects which are self-sustaining. This financial dependence denies missionaries the freedom to discern and choose projects which truly respond to their charism, *as 'he who pays the piper...dictates the tune'*.
- **Prophetic Vulnerability:** As prophets, we sometimes must ruffle the status quo and question the abuse of power by the political and sometimes religious leaders. The unjust socio-political, cultural and economic systems in most African countries may be rooted in their own cultural practices, but there were also those installed or reinforced by the colonial systems whose main aim was to subdue the masses. We have governments and sometimes local Churches that do not share the pain

of its people, lacking in compassion and sensitivity. We as religious are often guilty of abuse of power and spiritual abuse of the faith and trust of our people; in this situation we require the self-emptying of Christ to let go of our privileges and embrace prophetic vulnerability.

- **The interface between African culture and Christianity:** There are many areas of convergence between the African cultures and Christianity, but there also areas of tension which require continuous discernment. For example, the African culture places much emphasis on respect of elders and submissiveness to authority. This may lead to abusive relationship when leaders may become dictatorial and insensitive. Since children and youth do not speak in front of elders, African leaders may have more difficulty listening and allowing themselves to be challenged by those they are called to serve. Similarly, this may reduce the voice of women and the less influential persons into a silent murmur and sometimes



a groan for life. We are not alone in this struggle, it is the way our Church has operated for centuries and African culture is very much at home in this structure. This may be the reason why the call for a synodal Church would require many layers of reflection in the African reality.

Conclusion

This reflection will conclude with the **ICON of Jesus and the Samaritan woman**. According to the American Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Bruggeman, the story of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman is an encounter between two vulnerable persons. The story opens with the two persons in a situation of need and emptiness. **Jesus was in a situation of vulnerability**, with more explicit needs: he was

hungry, thirsty with no jug to draw water, tired from his long journey and a stranger in need of some help (Jn.4:6). The **woman's need and emptiness were more implicit**, but were gradually uncovered in her encounter with Jesus as the story unfolded.

By embracing his own vulnerability, Jesus led the Samaritan woman to a journey of a new discovery of her deepest and real desires. She became capable of recognizing the long awaited Messiah and was energized to share her new experience with others. In Walter Bruggeman's interpretation of the mission of Christ, this encounter highlights a major approach of Jesus' ministry, *'the radical criticism is about self-giving emptiness, about dominion through loss of dominion, and about fullness coming only by self-emptying'*⁸ This scene concurs with the prophetic imagination of Jesus in his affirming solidarity characterised by helplessness and vulnerability, especially with the people at the margins of the society.

In this episode, Jesus teaches us once again the importance of vulnerability not only as an ideal for spiritual life, but also as a tool for mission. As missionaries, as we cross boundaries of countries, cultures and languages, we become more keenly aware of the light and shadows of our own cultures and those of others. We are all vulnerable before a human history that classifies us as victims and villains, oppressed and oppressors, rich and poor, civilized and uncivilized, etc. As missionaries, we are called to build communion in this diversity embracing its beauty and fragility. As I draw this reflection to a close, I challenge myself and each one of us to embrace our own vulnerability. My own vulnerability as a woman within a patriarchal society and Church, an African in a world of global power tussles, a religious in a world of growing religious indifference and intolerance, a missionary in a xenophobic world and one called to the periphery in a world where only the centre matters. This for me is embracing vulnerability from above and from below.

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- 1 Two documents extensively treat this perspective of Mission: in *Evangelium Gaudium* (2013) and *Laudato Si* (2015). These two documents set the tone of Francis' Pontificate.
- 2 Baur, John, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History*, Nairobi ²2009; De Gruchy, John, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, London 2005; Gray, Richard, *Black Christians and White Missionaries*, New Haven 1990; Groves, Charles P., *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, London 1958; Hastings, Adrian, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950*, Oxford 1994; Isichei, Elizabeth, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, London 1995; Sanneh, Lamin, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, London 1983; Shaw, Mark, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: a short history of African Christianity*, Grand Rapids 1996.
- 3 Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Redemptoris Missio* - On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, 1990.12.07, No 64.
- 4 The "missio inter-gentes" which was developed by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a missionary approach, applicable in every context, which sees the "gentes" not as the object of our effort to convert, but as "guests" to whom we can offer hospitality and "friends" who can, in time, welcome us and offer us friendship. 'inter' means among other cultures and religious. It is a missionary approach which needs to be further explored in African missiology.
- 5 https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
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TESTIMONY

Sr. Siham Zgheib, FMM

My name is Siham Zgheib. I'm a Sister of Lebanese origin, responsible for the community of FMM Sisters in Aleppo, Director of the center "the source" for autistic children, on the pastoral and psycho-spiritual accompaniment level. With the Sisters of the community, we work with women's groups, families, and young people, and in the service of welcoming groups.



On September 14th, I celebrated the silver jubilee of my consecration as a Franciscan Missionary of Mary. In 2004, I pronounced my perpetual vows and was sent to the mission in Syria: I spent two years in Damascus, the capital; 7 years in Hassaké, a city in the north of Syria; and I am currently in Aleppo.

Our Institute: At the Service of the Mission in This World

Founded in 1877 by Mother Mary of the Passion (Hélène de Chappotin) in the great missionary impulse of the 19th century, the Institute of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) is today an international Catholic congregation that works in 73 countries on the 5 continents. It is part of the Franciscan family.

Syria:

Located in the Middle East, Syria's capital is Damascus, a city mentioned in the Bible; at its gates, Saul (Shaol), received the Lord's mandate to enter the city and be converted. (Acts 9,1-20).

It was in Antioch (located in Syria until 1917), the believers were first called "Christians" (Acts 11,19-26).

I live in Aleppo, one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Tradition has it that Abraham came from Ur in Chaldea through Aleppo.

The Syrian population is a mosaic of ethnicities and religions. It is composed of over 17 communities: the Sunnis (the majority), the Shiites, the Alawites, the Druze, the 6 Catholic

and 3 Orthodox communities, and several Protestant communities.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Christians represented 25% of the population. Nowadays, we have become a tiny minority, that barely appears in the statistics.

It is the land of great saints in the history of the Church, such as St. Simeon the Stylite, St. Maroon, St. Efren, and many others. In the various archaeological sites, one discovers a whole Roman, Byzantine, Syriac, and Assyrian Christian tradition.

Several hours would not suffice to tell you about Syria, a country that, in the last few years, has been in all the world's media, talking about the dirtiest war of the beginning of the 21st century.

Syria's population was 24 million, half of which were young people under the age of 15.

The war came through this human and social fabric to destroy, raze, and annihilate everything in its path: changing not only the numbers but also breaking community bonds, destabilizing people, and above all creating huge challenges for the future.

The Invitation:

Your invitation to give testimony of my life during the war in Syria coincides harmoniously with the celebration of my 25 years of religious life.

It is an exceptional grace because it allows me to reread my life during this period and to discover His life-giving presence in what I have experienced. In doing this review, I discovered that His strength dominates in my weakness, and that His power is revealed in my precariousness and His victory in my failure.

I found myself in two communities where we were exposed to dangers at various levels: siege, kidnapping, displacement, bombing, cutting off essential public services (water, fuel oil, bread, gas...)

I want to share with you two experiences: the first one extended from September 2011 to May 2013, in Hassaké, a city located in northeastern Syria, on the border between Iraq and Turkey, where the Khabour river flows through.

The second lasted from 2014 to 2016, in Aleppo, in the north of Syria and considered the economic capital of the country.

Hassaké: 2011 - 2013

"It is in the midst of impossibilities that God's work is done" (Mary of the Passion, our foundress).

Our community was formed by 4 Sisters of different nationalities (Polish, Pakistani, Syrian, and Lebanese). We lived in the center of the city.

We began to feel that the situation was getting worse and worse. The first groups of terrorists (Al Nosra, a group affiliated to Qaeda), invaded the Christian villages surrounding the city. Christians also began to be displaced and kidnapped: Doctors, children, young people, for whom very high ransoms were demanded.

Faced with these dangers, our faith began to wonder: Are we ready to die? Are we ready to give our lives for Christ? How should we react if we were called to deny our faith?

All these questions and many others invited us to personal and community prayer. We shared these moments with the young people and the families. We felt our powerlessness

and our inability to respond. But the Gospel answered us: "Do not be afraid... The Holy Spirit comes to your aid."

Faced with the danger of being kidnapped, raped, tortured, forced to wear a veil, my one and only concern was not to weaken and deny my faith. My daily prayer is: "Lord, do not subject me to a temptation that is beyond me." In my heart, it was clear that I was not ready to die or to be a martyr; but I did not have the courage to ask Him to protect me.

One day, in the midst of the turmoil of painful suffering, before the Blessed Sacrament, while I was arguing with the Lord and asking Him about the meaning of all that was happening, I received the announcement of the death of my brother, a death without notice. I had to choose between traveling to Lebanon to accompany my family in mourning or staying with the community in this perilous situation. I decided to stay with the community and the people, while offering this sacrifice as sharing with my family.



We suffered a 3-month blockade: no contact with our families, with the congregation, no electricity, only a candle for light. The darkness we lived through invaded me. It made me sink without knowing the way out. There, too, what sustained me was clinging to the Cross and drawing strength from its vulnerability. Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament sustained my faith at a time when violence prevented me from seeing the light of the Lord's presence.

As a leader, I was faced with a great responsibility towards my sisters, the people, and the children. I was afraid. However, I did not surrender. As a community of consecrated women, we had to be witnesses of Hope for those around us.

We organized activities for the children, right at the entrance of the building, mornings of gospel sharing with the women, adoration in our community. That's where we drew our strength from.

Aleppo 2014-2016

When we arrived in Aleppo in 2014, the community was composed of 14 Sisters, (3 were French, 2 Jordanian, 2 Italian, 3 Lebanese, 2 Syrian, 1 Pakistani, and 1 Polish).

Our house in Aleppo is equipped to receive the elderly sisters of the Province.

At that time, Aleppo was under siege and going through one of the most difficult moments because everything was lacking (bread, fuel oil, gas, water...).

We had no time to think. We were afraid. Our only concern was to help, to the best of our ability, the people who were living in a state of shock, anxiety, and fear.

My presence among my sisters taught me to draw strength from their weakness, their courage, their faithfulness to God and to the people to whom they were sent. They refused to leave Aleppo, wanting to stay with the people as witnesses of Hope. Elderly—it is true—but active despite their weak health and the danger that surrounded them. The presence of our elderly sisters was a tangible sign of God's presence, through their silence and prayer. They were convinced that the Lord would protect the house.

Our sisters' obedience was revealed in a painful abandonment: they accepted to leave Aleppo to avoid being the cause of danger for the community. Our sisters did not flee from danger because of fear of war. It was by decision of the superiors who wanted to assure them a more peaceful life and care more adapted to their age. This decision also allowed the sisters who stayed to be more mobile, to take initiatives with the population, and to foresee a possible departure in case the armed forces invaded the city. They agreed to leave Aleppo to ensure the best conditions for the mission in Aleppo.

I will not change in the hour of darkness the decision I made in the hour of light. (Mary of the Passion)

Our life today: We are, as yesterday, 3 Sisters of different nationalities (French, Syrian, and Lebanese). We have decided to stay and continue the mission despite the difficult conditions, in solidarity with the local Church and the people to whom we have been sent.

As in the past, we put our skills at the service of those in need without any discrimination.

We live in a family spirit with all those who collaborate with us and those who come to us (Christians and Muslims). We share their joys and sorrows.

On two occasions, the Major Superiors have asked us to leave Aleppo if we felt in danger or if we were afraid.

Each time and after a moment of discernment and prayer, we chose to stay; and our answer was: "In the time of darkness, we will not change a decision we have made in the light."

We have offered our lives to Christ. We shall not take them back.

REPORT ON UISG INITIATIVE: SOWING HOPE FOR THE PLANET

Sr. Sheila Kinsey, FCJM

Coordinator of Sowing Hope for the Planet



Vision Statement Sowing Hope for the Planet

*We commit ourselves to both personal
And communal conversion and
We wish to move forward together
In an orchestrated and coordinated response
In listening to the cry of the Earth
And the cry of the Poor
As we go forth as instruments of hope
In the heart of the world.*

(Accepted by Acclamation by UISG Superior Generals at 2019 Plenary)

Report on UISG Initiative: Sowing Hope for the Planet - May 2019 - May 2022

Sowing Hope for the Planet is a project in which all Sisters whose congregations are members of UISG and their connections, are provided an opportunity to actualize Laudato Si' and to make a difference in our care of the planet. Our goal is *"to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."* (LS 19)

The UISG Board in June 2018 endorsed the UISG initiative which was to be coordinated by the JPIC Commission of USG-UISG. At the 2019 UISG Plenary the vision statement was accepted by acclamation by the over 850 Superior Generals assembled for the meeting. To carry this vision forward, the various constellations met in their respective groups

to determine their actions regarding the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. Many of these were collected and placed on the website of Sowing Hope for the Planet as a public witness of the work of the religious in their respective areas. The website, [Sowing Hope for the Planet](#), is very interactive and includes a mapping of the various advocacy initiatives which are focused on the seven Laudato Si' Goals. This interest also served as a basis for the skill training on advocacy sponsored by the other UISG Project 'Sisters Advocating Globally'.

A number of webinars have been developed throughout these years to update our participants on new developments, to become aware and to be included in events such as the Season of Creation, the Amazonian Synod, and COP's, and provide timely updates. To date 17 webinars have been presented since 2019 and more are scheduled for this year. Some of the topics have been on sustainability, synodality, realizing the entirety of the Laudato Si' goals, and responding to the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. The webinars were planned to provide information on these events and promote a spirit of networking. These experiences were developed to be practical, informative, challenging, inspirational, and encouraging.

Special tools have been developed for contact persons to use in their own development of plans and experiences of their local communities and congregations. Emphasis has been placed on building on the congregational charism, planning the transitions to the Laudato Si' Goals which are regularly evaluated and being public about these commitments. To keep religious leaders informed, regular mailings have been sent to the Superior Generals to keep them updated on what has been happening with new developments with SHFP and the Laudato Si Action Platform.

The LSAP was developed through much input from the experience of religious. We participated in the panel when Pope Francis launched the LSAP in May of 2021. We are leaders of the Religious Sector, members of the Laudato Si' Steering Board and on the Ecology Task Force of the COVID-19 Commission. All of these opportunities have contributed to the development of the Vatican sponsored LSAP.

The resources developed for SHFP are also being shared with the LSAP website. [Sowing Hope for the Planet](#) continues to take special care of the religious, both men and women, even as we strongly support the involvement of congregations in the LSAP. We have developed for religious the LSAP guide, tools for planning, and the best practices notebook. These joint efforts continue because the LSAP is inclusive of 7 sectors with their various needs. Sometimes in the effort of being universal, there are still particular areas that will need special attention of various individual sectors. This is shown as we list them: 1) Families, 2) Educational Institutions, 3) Economy, 4) Religious Orders, 5) Parishes & Dioceses, 6) Hospitals & Healthcare Centers, and 7) Organizations & Groups.

A beneficial relationship is growing between the project of Sisters Advocating Globally and the advocacy efforts of the participants of Sowing Hope for the Planet related to the Laudato Si' Goals. Based on advocacy data from its mapping survey tool, SHFP has hosted seminars on biodiversity, climate change, mining, migration, and ecological economics. The seminars provided a space for members to share information about their work and create networks. In partnership with SAG, SHFP is currently hosting a series of Advocacy Training Sessions focused on further developing these important topics. Case studies are provided by participants in the course. This is another way of enhancing our work with the LSAP and sharing our efforts with a wider concerned audience around these areas.

The goals of SHFP have been impactful and largely have exceeded expectations. We have helped to develop the capacity and the flexibility of the LSAP. Our Congregations and the Local Communities together comprise the highest number of enrollment. A survey was sent out to the representatives of the constellations asking for specific feedback as to what the members have been doing regarding their specific actions as well as an evaluation

of the fruits of Sowing Hope for the Planet and their experience of the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform. A majority, 32 constellations responded and filled out the survey. The pertinent information is summarized in March 2022 as follows:

The constellations have responded to the call of Laudato Si' in a variety of ways. The largest responses where the constellations have increased focus have been in education efforts (75%) and environmental actions (72%). The congregations have also had large responses with congressional planning (66%) and pastoral services (56%). Other actions include relief operations for calamities, work with Religious Conferences, training members in ecological sciences who work on land restoration and regenerative agriculture, health care, divestment from fossil fuels, political advocacy, environmental actions on water, and conservation and recycling. The emphasis on education and the environment shows that the constellations need support on these issues ranging from networking to funding.



The greatest challenge regarding the realization of Laudato Si' goals reported by the constellations has been in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications (56%). Following are the economic crisis (47%) which is partially resulting from the pandemic, and the burden of too many responsibilities (45%). From within the communities, environmental disasters are a serious issue along with lack of interest. Other factors listed included decreasing financial resources, limited foreign languages, and political insecurity in their country. These factors call for more support of members as well as education and community building. Support could be offered by sharing resources, translation services, and political advocacy training and support.

Most congregations (85%) still hope to continue developing opportunities for their Laudato Si' goals. They responded further that some of the possible ways to fulfill their commitment could be inter-congregational collaboration, developing educational programs on caring for the earth, pastoral care and services, developing financial self-supportive programs, green energy development, work with refugees and asylum seekers,

exchange of information at meetings, policy advocacy at the federal level, and ecological restoration involving bee keeping and tree planting. There is enormous support within the constellations about their commitments, especially concerning the environment. The constellations could benefit from access to more educational resources and support materials to further their work in this area.

Most congregations (70%) responded that their members are not working with other sectors of the Laudato Si' Action Platform. The constellations whose members were involved reported the ways that they are working with the sectors of the Laudato Si' Action Platform. The largest response was with working with educational institutions, parishes and dioceses, and intercongregational and local religious communities. The other sectors of commitment to healthcare, families, economics and organizations and groups also showed some response. The response to this item on the survey may not accurately reflect the constellation involvement but may be due to lack of information about the LSAP sectors. Since the involvement of the sectors is a goal of the LSAP, more



creative and coordinated ways need to be considered to help this process among all of the sectors.

The majority of the constellation respondents (90%) find that Sowing Hope for the Planet and its programs are helpful and should continue. Comments included caring for our common home, increasing awareness on our contribution to caring for the planet and what we need to do to sustain it, helping us respond to the changing times, increasing commitment to ecological issues and the protection of life, and helping with the common struggle to protect life and creation. A small percentage responded “no” to the question about Sowing Hope for the Planet. However, when reading their feedback, it is more suggestive of the Laudato Si' Action Platform and the need for more information and clarity. Their comments said that they already had another platform in their country, there was no need to double the platform, and that to participate in everything was too much.

From this experience these are the suggested future directions:

1. Continue to offer assistance through personal contact and specific tools as needed. The work of Sowing Hope for the Planet has shown that there are many voices waiting to be heard, if there is a place for them to speak. By offering acknowledgement, support, and outreach in multiple languages, a larger community continues to grow.
2. Offer webinars that provide timely and relevant information. The webinars offered by SHFP have been well attended and attendance is increasing. The webinars are recorded and posted on our website, YouTube channel, and on the JPIC Workshop website hosted on the Thinkific platform. The videos continue to be viewed.
3. Enhance the opportunities for networking both local and international through the organizational format of the Constellations and national religious organizations. Networking can be enhanced by organizing around issues such as mining or biodiversity, or by language outreach, such as to the Francophone countries.
4. Promote collaboration with the other sectors of the LSAP in actualizing the Laudato Si' Goals
5. Strengthen the journey by developing programs and tools based on requests and the needs for skill development.
6. Encourage enrollment each year as members of the LSAP, as this is the place where the efforts of all seven sectors is coordinated to help reach the tipping point for change. (3.5% for action and 21% to 25% for systemic change). In our efforts to reach this point all sectors are challenged to double enrollments each year.

Thank you for all of the ways you have made the world a better place through your efforts to actualize Laudato Si'. Your work is making a difference. This has been a remarkable and fruitful journey in the movement of the Holy Spirit. May God bless your efforts as you move forward Sowing Hope for the Planet.

REPORT FOR PLENARY ASSEMBLY 2022



Sr. Yolanta Kafka, RMI
UISG President



Sr. Pat Murray, IBVM
UISG Executive Secretary

Looking at the Context:

The words of Charles Dickens from a Tale of Two Cities seem to best describe these past years.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way..... ~ A Tale of Two Cities (Charles Dickens)

First the impact of Covid-19 on health and wellbeing and now the deadly war with Ukraine have changed our focus and created new horizons of different vulnerabilities in both the world and religious life.

Alongside these difficulty horizons, new ways of proceeding like “mutual help,” “collaboration” and “partnership” have become key within our congregations and our institutions. We have experienced great generosity both within our congregations and from organizations that believe in the human and evangelical witness of sisters. That is why today we can celebrate the fruits of our interconnectivity within religious life. Combining our riches and our fragility at the service of the Church has been an

extraordinary experience of inter-charismatic complementarity. It has brought us to sit at and share at many different tables to plant and nurture various seeds of hope. But first of all, let us look at our gatherings around the table.

First of all, at the TABLE of the EXECUTIVE BOARD, where we have gathering more than usual, either in person, or on line during these past three years. We have gathered to dialogue, to accompany each other, to vision from different perspectives and to pray for the wisdom needed to face our present reality. We have sought ways to promote the orientations which emerged from the 2019 Assembly and to answer the calls of the Church especially with the Delegates We have been learning at the table of Zoom which has provided us with the possibility of meeting together despite the challenge of different time zones and different languages.

At the second TABLE, we have the two Executive Boards of USG and UISG, who have met together twice a year to discuss the urgent issues facing both the Church and religious life. They have included the UISG Delegates in several of these reflections. In addition, the Presidents and General Secretaries often communicated in order to share conversations, opinions, positions and proposals. We can say that the joint online Assembly (of USG and UISG) (May 2021), which took place over three days, confirmed that the path of greater exchange is a path from which there is no return. With God's help we will continue this synodal journey together as male and female religious, seeing it as a joyful and hopeful opportunity.

Then there are the many other Tables including those of the JOINT UISG/USG Commissions where collaboration together has led to growth in different areas of the life and mission of USG and UISG. These Commissions focus on Care and Safeguarding, Dialogue, Education, Health and Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation. Their task is to support General Leaderships worldwide in these key areas of mission and ministry through offering workshops, seminars and conferences.

This interconnectivity and shared collaboration at many tables has extended to other institutions and entities within the Church, especially with Vatican Dicasteries and Pontifical Commissions. We have had a formal dialogue with Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) twice a year on important themes related to religious life. During the Covid-19 a task commission was formed to study the modalities of online chapters and councils. We have worked with the Migrants and Refugees Section on anti-trafficking and migration which increases during times of conflict. With the Dicastery for Integral Human Development there has been extensive collaboration on the creation of the Laudato Si Action Platform. We have had meetings with the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples on matters of importance to missionary and diocesan congregations. We have collaborated with the Pontifical Council for Culture in the preparation for the Conference on Charism and Creativity which unfortunately takes place this week having been postponed from 2021.

We have had many collaborative partnership and relationships with Embassies to the Holy See, with international organisations like CARITAS, JRS, and San Egidio and with many Pontifical Universities in Rome and elsewhere and with the Discerning Leadership Programme established by the Jesuits at the request of Pope Francis.

More and more, we realize that through our contacts with the reality on the ground, through our interdependence as congregations, that we can bring our concerns about the needs of people and the planet to many different meetings and contexts. The prophetic nature of religious life, calls us as Superiors General/Congregational Leaders to mobilize ourselves as a global sisterhood. Our interdependence and our growing understanding of the importance of our intercultural prophetic witness, invite us to develop ways of building communion in diversity, in today's world.

Our experience of interconnectivity is leading us to deepen the relationship between our various charisms and to emphasise our shared witness through our commitment as religious for the sake of the Reign of God. For many years we have already had the experience of sharing together in God's mission, putting in common the gifts of the Holy Spirit, weaving them into the life of the Church. This experience of interdependence and interculturality is having a life-giving impact on the life of our communities.

In the light of Fratelli Tutti we feel called to a renewed interpretation of our relationship with the Church on the basis of the common vocation of the baptised and on the basis of our equal dignity as daughters and sons of God. On this basis we must continue to rethink our responsibility to build relationships that heal wounds, that promote safety, that prevent abuses and that develop a climate of cooperation and a culture of care.

Our Reality During these Past Three Years

During the two-year period from 2019-2021 for long periods the majority of the UISG staff worked from home while a small group of around 5 went to the office daily. Yet we were able to distribute almost \$2 million to needy congregations on every continent thanks to the generosity of many religious congregations gathered here and present online and the generosity of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters. We would like to thank you all for your support and generosity that helped so many local communities across the world. The gratitude expressed by so many communities of sisters who experienced this solidarity and generosity would warm your hearts.

We thank the Finance and Grant Office which worked tirelessly to see that the money was distributed to where it was most needed. This was not a small task and was not part of UISG's usual work but when such need is being experienced, the staff members wanted to ensure that sisters had money for protection and cleaning materials, for basic medical equipment and for food. During this same time UISG suffered the loss of almost \$700,000 due to the reduction in receipts from the annual dues due to postage difficulties, the closure of the restaurant and the request for rent reduction from the two other tenants. The GHR Foundation helped UISG to meet its immediate costs.

You have all shown great trust in UISG, to help meet the needs of congregations but also in helping UISG to continue to meet its worldwide mission. Once again, we are meeting the needs of the people of Ukraine by supporting the sisters working there and in neighbouring countries.

The mission of UISG went forward despite the many challenges posed by Covid-19. You will remember how well we responded by providing an incredible number of webinars each year aimed at supporting leaders of congregations and their members, practically, spiritually and inspirationally. Again, we owe a debt of gratitude to two religious' congregations in the US who first offered support funding for the installation of the technology to allow UISG to literally reach the end of the earth. Additional funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and GHR enabled us to build on the initial technological frame work so that now we can offer online events in multiple languages. The online sessions which were part of the first steps in this Assembly provided translation in XX languages.

Between 2019- 2021 we had at least 65,000 online participants. This number is an indication as often whole communities participated. The following table does not include all events organized.

	2019	2020	2021	Total
No. of Events	14	72	62	148
No. of Days	44	92	75	211
No. of Participants	5.615	43.563	15.670	64.848

*Please note this is only an overview it does not include all the events organized.

Since then there have been an additional XXXXX participants.

The topics offered were both inspirational and practical as we responded to many requests. Some of the webinars offered were as follows:

- Canonical Consultation Services Team - Power, Authority and the Good Institute
- Intercultural Workshops and Leadership in Intercultural Communities
- Communication Course for Justice and Peace Promoters
- Religious Life in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Europe and the USA
- Querida Amazonia and Integral Ecology
- Talitha Kum General Assembly
- Building Bridges and Reconciliation
- Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons
- Day of Worldwide Solidarity and Prayer in time of Covid-19
- Training on how to use Zoom and other technological tools
- Online Leadership Course
- CCCI "Transitioning from residential care for children to care within families
- Communication for Advocacy
- Synodality – a new way of being Church
- A wide variety of webinars offered by the Joint Commissions of UISG-USG

The presence of participants from across the globe and the different perspectives shared have given us a new sense of who are and who we can be as we pray, act and advocate on behalf of the world and its people.

We have mourned together, prayed together, reflected and planned the future together. We have listened to each other's searching and learnt from the perspective of continental Conferences. Despite this difficult time there have been many positive outcomes:

- We have been the building new relationships online across congregations, across cultures and across geographic boundaries
- We have been journeying together through our experience of vulnerability, fragility and a sense of powerlessness

- We are now supporting our sisters who are in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries who are welcoming refugees who are leaving their homeland in their millions. We decry this and other senseless wars and pray to the God of Peace to intervene and to soften the hearts of those who promote division and destruction.
- We are now reflecting together on how to nurture synodality within ourselves, our congregations and within the Universal Church.

All of these efforts would not have been possible except for the expertise of the Technical and Communication Departments at UISG. We can't thank them enough for their generosity and availability often at most unsociable hours. Together with a faithful group of translators they expanded the scope of UISG's work and influence. They helped us to truly become a global sisterhood.

Since our last Assembly in 2019 and its theme Sowers of Prophetic Hope – we have been

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sowing new seeds, nurturing growth and gathering fruits. These next sections will explore what is new and what is being nurtured.

A: Sowing New Seeds:

Alzheimer's Initiative:

With the help of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation the UISG in partnership with LCWR will shortly launch a new worldwide initiative to support Sisters living with Alzheimer's. The aim is to help leaders, communities and families and caregivers and to identify the needs specific to different parts of the world. These initial steps commenced some months ago when an international committee was formed. The Alzheimer's Initiative will be officially launched next Monday 9th May at 2.00 pm (Rome time) by Sr. Jane Wakahiu LSOSF during the delegates meeting. We invite you to register and to join us on that day.

Elderly Sisters:

More recently UISG and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation have launched a consultative process to determine the needs of aging sisters. With the title: Our Sisters, Our Future: Health and Spiritual Care for Aging. These aims to identify the needs of elderly sisters and to seek ways to respond appropriately with cultural sensitivity. Needs different in our different parts of the world and so we need the broadest possible participation in order to help the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to plan the best use of future funding. We have already had two webinars to begin to identify how to the support that congregations and their leaders. Shortly based on what has already emerged from the webinar, a survey will be circulated. We need a very good response rate and encourage you to participate.

Recently Pope Francis created the World Day of Grand-Parents. Saying that each of us must “take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies” he said that the elderly, better than anyone else, can help to set up three of the pillars that support



“this new edifice,” which include dreams, memory and prayer. We know the treasure that the elderly in society have still to share when they are helped to live vibrant and active lives. Sadly, for some their dreams and their memory have faded but it is then that we need to support them all their days long, as best we can, accompany them in living their vocation until their Easter moment.

Sisters Advocating:

A third new initiative called “Sisters Advocating” is supported by the more recently established Global Sisters Fund. GSF aims to foster collaborative partnerships among different sectors of society to advance holistic, inclusive and sustainable human development. It is inspired by the moral leadership of Pope Francis. This initiative is supporting existing UISG ventures – Talitha Kum and Sowing Hope for the Planet by providing training and support to sisters in relation to advocacy and communications. It

also aims to help sisters to develop and strengthen networks dealing with health care. This is obviously a critical area in the wake of Covid-19 and sisters in many parts of the world have seen how crucial it is to be able to respond speedily and collaboratively to crises within the health sector. The aim of the initiative is expressed simply in the following statement: We are your Sisters. We are committed to advocating for you and together with you, sharing a journey of care for people and the environment. We believe in a world where everyone experiences a sense of human dignity. We build our mission on evidence from our work on the ground, inspired by our reflection on the Gospel message, the Church's social teaching and the leadership of Pope Francis.

Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI)

Just before Assembly 2019, the GHR Foundation hosted a two-day workshop on Catholic Care for Children – an African sister-led initiative which aims to help congregations to transition from institutional care for children to family-based or family-like care for children. The initiative began in Zambia and then spread to Uganda and Kenya. The International office opened just as Covid commenced and therefore what has happened in these intervening years has been nothing short of miraculous. You will hear more about this initiative on Friday but suffice to say that the movement has now spread to Sri Lanka, India, Malawi and South Africa. Sacred Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching and scientific research affirm that children grow best in families and therefore CCCI is committed to the global expansion of this movement. We have to learn from the lessons of the past and be leaders for systemic change in this area.

UISG Office for Care and Safeguarding and UISG/USG Joint Commission for Care and Safeguarding:

The UISG Office for Care and Safeguarding was established after Assembly 2019 and seeks to help congregations of women religious to develop policies and guidelines which are really operational. It has achieved an enormous amount in a short time. The Office also supports the UISG/USG Joint Commission whose members include female and male religious who have extensive experience, representatives of the Vatican Commission for Care and Safeguarding and other experts. The main work of the Commission has been to establish a global network of representatives of Religious Congregations (nominated by the Superiors General/Congregation Leader) who meet on a regular basis for updating in relation to canonical matters, best practice and reflection on various aspects of abuse and safeguarding which continue to emerge. We invite you to reflect and discern and nominate someone to join this worldwide network which is an important resource for you and for your leadership team. The various webinars presented in the past two years have been recently published in Italian and will be shortly available in English and Spanish. The topics presented are important ones for your reflection and consideration. The new area emerging is that of spiritual abuse and increasingly the topic is emerging in articles, publications and seminars. It is a topic that the Joint Commission will deal with in the coming year.

Theology of Religious Life and Theological Formation

During these past two years a group of 29 sister theologians have been meeting online, reflecting together on religious life and writing articles on religious life through the lens of their particular disciplines. The aim of the initiative has been to identify and nurture new voices from different cultural perspectives and experiences. The majority of the group will be meeting for a week in June next month to deepen their reflections. They have been led in this process by three theologians who themselves lead institutions or programs

focused on consecrated life. It is intended to identify a second cohort and to begin the process again in 2023.

Reflecting on what had been offered online during the Covid-19 period, it was felt that we needed to focus our presentations more on the nature of religious life itself – consecrated life, the vows, community life – and so future programs will concentrate on these areas.

New Website – New Branding

We hope that you like the new logo and the new website. Thanks to the committed work of the Communications Department, the Executive Board were presented with a range of options. This particular logo was chosen because of its life, vitality and diversity. It seemed to us to express in a creative way the passion for Christ and for humanity that religious women bring to their mission and ministry. We intend to use the private side of website more when communicating with members – therefore you need to know your code and your password – and we have prepared these cards to help you to remember. Here you will find the UISG Bulletin which we are now publishing online. We know that the articles are greatly valued and you will have access to them in all languages. The communications department reached out to you through the website, social media and newsletters. We are trying to streamline out communications so that there is a regular pattern which is not overwhelming.

B: Nurturing Growth and Gathering Fruits

So much has been nurtured and has nurtured us during these past years. Later in the week we will be presented with an overview on the Sowing Hope for the Planet initiative and Talitha Kum worldwide network. At this stage we want to acknowledge the extraordinary growth that has been nurtured in both.

Sowing Hope for the Planet

The Sowing Hope for the Planet website is an extraordinary kaleidoscope of resources, activities and events shared in multiple languages. The members of the Constellations have really taken to heart the commitment that we made together at the conclusion of Assembly 2029 when we promised *“to both personal and communal conversion” and that “we wish to move forward together in an orchestrated and coordinated response in Listening to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor as we go forth as instruments of hope in the heart of the world.”* The responses from your congregations have been extraordinary – let us continue on this journey, playing our part in the Laudato Si Action Platform.

Talitha Kum has reached several important milestones – it has celebrating its 10th anniversary, increased the number of networks in Africa, offered training to leaders and produced the Call to Action document which was approved by the Executive Board of UISG. You will hear more about this later in the week. Talitha Kum is now widely recognized by both the Church and the international NGO and Inter-Governmental agencies. Many Ambassadors to the Holy See are very active in supporting the work of Talitha Kum. The 4 main objectives of the Call to Action contain 4 significant words: CARE, HEAL, EMPOWER and RESTORE. These sum up the identity of this worldwide network which unites 60 national and regional networks and their sisters and collaborators. In contexts of war and environmental disasters, people are ever more at risk. It is appalling to hear of women fleeing the horrors of war in Ukraine, being tricked by the traffickers with promises of care. Having 60 national and regional networks worldwide is phenomenal and those thousands of sisters and their collaborators. Talitha Kum expresses its mission as follows

"We care for people wounded by exploitation and act against inequalities caused by economic and cultural systems." We thank all the members of TK who do this work on all our behalf.

Formators Programme

UISG has been offering a programme for Formation Personnel during the past 4 years. The first programme was in person, the second was a mixture of in-person and online due to the Covid pandemic, the third program was online only and thankfully the current programme is in person. There are 46 attendees for this 5-month programme and over the years the following numbers have participated in the programme:

YEAR	PARTICIPANTS	CONGREGATIONS	COUNTRIES
2019	33	23	25
2020	44	33	25
2021	37	23	22
2022	45	30	22
TOTAL	159	109	94

There has been great appreciation expressed for this well-balanced programme with presenters coming from Rome and from overseas and with participants from over 20 different countries. It is delightful to see that the three past groups are all still connecting with and helping each other through their WhatsApp groups.

UISG Migrants Project

The initiative in Sicily began in 2015 during the first phase of the refugee crisis in Europe as thousands of migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea in fragile boats escaping wars, conflicts and poverty. This project marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of UISG on the 8th December 1965, during the final session of the Vatican Council. The migrants were and still are seeking new opportunities for themselves and their families. Under the able leadership of Sr. Elisabetta Flick – who sadly died during the early period of the Covid pandemic – communities were established in Ramacca, Agrigento and Caltanissetta and more recently in Lampedusa. In total 29 sisters have served in Sicily during the past 7 years and we are so grateful for their dedicated and generous service. However the migrants, who cross the Mediterranean, are no longer brought to Sicily from Lampedusa and elsewhere. Instead they are being transferred to other locations in Italy. Therefore one by one the UISG communities in Sicily have completed their mission. From September onwards only the community in Lampedusa will remain. The focus of the Migrants Project is now on working at the international level, networking sisters and offering ongoing formation to sisters who are working with migrants in different parts of the world.

Solidarity with South Sudan

UISG, as one of the founders with USG of this important inter-congregational initiative in South Sudan, continues to offer support in different ways. From its small beginnings in 2009 Solidarity with South Sudan has continued to expand in order to meet the educational, pastoral and agricultural needs of the people. The focus is on capacity

building so that the South Sudanese themselves can become agents of change within their own country which in such desperate need of peacebuilders and reconcilers. From the start many female congregations have provided personnel and financial resources for the growth and development of this new paradigm of religious life.

We have haven't mention by name all the UISG staff members who actively support the various initiatives mentioned above. We extend to them our gratitude for their extraordinary service and support which helps you as leaders of female religious life to respond collaboratively to the needs of today.

The Challenges Ahead

A: Our Synodal Journey. The Synod on Synodality is the call to collaborate in the renewal of the Church and in the renewal of our Institutes and of our lives. What is the response of the local churches that we are part of? What are the concrete implications for religious life in the discernment and decision - making processes in the Church?

What does synodality mean for new ways of exercising authority so that we can develop the culture of care, of service, of respect. This would require a new understanding of the evangelical councils. Obedience would be seen as the practise of discernment and a commitment to putting the will of God at the centre of our personal life, our leadership, the life of our communities and of our congregations. Evangelical poverty would emphasise the call to share and to being a radical alternative to the culture of consumerism, greed, and exploitation of resources. Poverty would challenge us to share the life of those who have less. Consecrated chastity would call forth the capacity to be the yeast of fraternity in forming communities which are inclusive and which create new networks of relationships within the Church and religious life. We must question afresh ourselves on these various perspectives.

Can the process of the synodality propose changes in the ways of conducting the "at limina" visits; this is an important encounter between the local and the universal Church.

Therefore religious should participate in in the visit itself and in the preparation of the diocesan reports and when providing feedback after the visits to the different Dicasteries and the meeting with the Holy Father.

Our experience of participation in the Amazonia Synod was a good one. There have been various experience of dialogue and collaboration in the this current Synodal process

- We are joining the consultation and participating in the listening meetings and contributing in the local church.
- We are participating in drawing up processes and in using the methodology suggested by the Office of the Synod
- We are taking care to try and listen to everyone. We are often on the peripheries of life, in society and in the church and we will be there to help and facilitate the participation of all voices in the synodal process.
- We are taking advantage of this opportunity of the call to the synodal process to renew the life of our congregations, because synodality is not only a methodology, but it is also the practice of discernment in order to respond to the call of the Holy Spirit today.

Through the renewal of each congregation, through the experience of synodal listening and sharing, we can enrich the synodal journey of the local communities of the Church.

We have been called to place our particular charisms and traditions, at the service of the synodal process because synodal journeys are imprinted in our way of life as religious. Transitions and transformation in the light and process of synodal journeys have inspired our congregations. This has enabled more consultative processes to emerge and has provided spaces and projects of renewal.

On this synodal journey the main protagonist is the Holy Spirit. When we become aware of this, we discover that we must listen to the Spirit and tune into the Spirit's deepest aspirations, letting ourselves be enlightened in simplicity and poverty of heart. because only the Spirit works wonders. Pope Francis regularly repeats that the Synod is not a convention, in which we share our ways of thinking but a process where we listen to the Holy Spirit with an attitude of deep faith and discernment.

The UISG has already had concrete experience of participation in the processes of

**We have mourned together,
prayed together, reflected
and planned the future
together.**

preparation for and celebration of the recent Synods of Bishops. We have a very rich experience on which to reflect and to illuminate the new challenges that are being presented to us. We hope to find ways to do that together as leaders.

In July 2021, the secretariat of the Synod organized the short seminar where various charismatic traditions were present. Congregations of religious life and various ecclesial movements spoke about their historical experiences of synodality. They described the possible tools or instruments that could be useful for synodal processes in local churches. We realized the riches that exist within religious congregations. At the end of those sessions there were some who said how practical and inspiring it would be to discover in each local church what is the contribution of each specific charism and congregational tradition to the synodal path of the church.

B: Dealing with Vulnerability and fragility

Leadership and authority: At UISG we have worked to accompany and form leaders for contemporary religious life. At the same time, we realize that there much to reflect on and to change in our practices. We have understood that the call of Jesus is to exercise “a non-dominant leadership” because He says: there is only one master. This time of Covid has given us the opportunity to reflect on the care and the accompaniment needed in our service of leadership.

We have been called to promote a more circular and inclusive way of exercising the service of authority. This change of paradigm calls for a new model of care and communion

Let me offer two images:

- Firstly, the service of authority is similar to the role of the “sherpas” in the Himalayas that guide the climbers, providing support on the road they have already walked



many times; they are able to carry the burdens of others; however, they will be not be acclaimed as heroes in the newspaper articles which applaud those who have reached the summit.

- Secondly let us think about a boat. We realise how important it is to take care of the team that steers the boat. But let us not forget to take care of the sails, making sure that that they are open, ready to expand to the direction in which the wind is blowing ... for the sake of the mission.

My deepest wish is that all women religious will joyfully live their love and service of humanity! With regard to questions about our mission in the world – so many times our identity and the charism are associated with *doing*, rather than with *being*. We are being called to restore the charismatic identity of the religious life as a gift for the life of the Church.

Vulnerability

As we focus on the theme of vulnerability, we are indeed aware of its different forms. For example, we touch the vulnerability of congregations and provinces that are coming to completion. The general diminishment of vocations is preoccupying many in the Church. The experiences of congregations facing the merging of charisms and institutes speaks reflects a new reality. From all these phenomena there is a need to interpret cycles of growth and diminishment in the light of the graced history of religious life and to read the history of religious life in the light of the Spirit's call to the Church. It is important to reflect on these new experiences and to share about them with each other. UISG provides a space where together we can exchange our experiences, our wisdom and our inspiration.

These changes require wisdom in managing transition and transformation – a transition from the founding culture with openness towards new cultures and new configurations. This transformation requires imagination in creating new ways of forming communities, of providing institutional support, and of searching for new ways of sharing the service of the authority. We need to search for and create a new vocabulary as we are invited to do in the document *New Vine in New Wineskins*.

Our vulnerability is connected to the role of women in the Church. How often it happens that those who should do so, do not care “for the needs of every man and woman, young and old with the care and closeness that marked the Good Samaritan” (cf. *Fratelli Tutti* 79.) We must review our systems and structures to see if there is something within, where abuses may occur? When we speak about vulnerability what does the radicality of religious life ask of us today?

The time in which we are living is bringing us to a deeper realization of our vulnerability; a sign of the human condition that we share with everyone. As the Spanish philosopher J.M. Esquirol has said: vulnerability is part of our human condition. Paradoxically, experiencing vulnerability provides us with an opportunity to become more human. It is not about exalting pain or suffering, instead it is about acknowledging a way of being human that bends, that leans with respect towards one's neighbour, just as the celestial vault bends over the earth; a way of life that knows how to stoop-over and accompany, to wait and give shelter.”¹ These ideas will occupy our hearts and minds in these coming days.

But there is a more radical vulnerability to which we are called. The human person made in the image and likeness of God who is Trinity, has three infinite abysses, or depths which are in reality three unfathomable capacities for infinity. These three include an active disposition for fullness, an awareness of one's radical poverty and the isolation of not knowing and finally the insatiable hunger for his love. Only the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit can fill this triple abyss completely and forever. To be and to live with the Father, to know with the Son and to love with the Holy Spirit. Only in living together, in common union can we be filled with the fullness of God.

Finally let us remember that something new is happening. The 2005 Congress on Religious Life “Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity” recognized that Consecrated life was involved in the process of globalization when it said “Our charisms are rooted in new religious and cultural places and contexts. These differences convert our institutes into transnational communities that enjoy the same global identity.”² The globalization nature of the pandemic became an opportunity that helped us to recognize “the unity in the diversity of the world so loved by God.”³ It has fostered a global sensitivity in us that has opened us up “to real possibilities for an inculturation and contextualization of our charisms and for closer collaboration with other congregations and with other

forms of Christian and human living.”⁴ Now more than ever we recognize the pluralism and diversity that consecrated life now embraces. We see that individual charisms are “recognized, freed and are put at the service of the others.”⁵ Our consecrated life which can hold differences of gender, age, culture, rites and sensitivities can be a prophetic sign to the world and help us all to gain a better understanding of pluralism by illuminating it with the wisdom of the Gospel.

The inspirational words of the document, are as relevant today, as they were when written in 2005. Again, we can acknowledge that while our forms of consecrated life are in a time of transition, we know that we experience a passionate love for Christ and a compassion for our brothers and sisters, that leads us forward together.

We express our gratitude to God for all the times that we have been able to mutually accompany one another during this three year journey...to each one of you who feels part of this experience of shared vocation and mission within UISG,

- 1 Humano más humano. Una antropología de la herida infinita, Barcelona, Acantilado, 2021
- 2 Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity, Scritto da Congresso 2004 Vita Consacrata Publica to: Gen 27, 2006 #20.
- 3 Ibid., # 21.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., #34

FROM LISTENING WITH THE HEART

This is the message written during the Plenary by the Sisters Listeners:

Sr. Maria Cimperman, RSCJ

Sr. Lia Latela, RMI

Sr. Gemma Simmonds, CJ

What we have heard, what our eyes have seen and what our hands have touched, the word made global solidarity, this is our message.

We feel honoured and moved to have been invited to take part in these days of the UISG assembly which, in continuity with the past, is creatively marking the present and passionately motivating the vision for the future of religious life, starting from its vulnerability in synodality with the universal Church.

A simple and meaningful gesture of open arms made us listen to the music of the desire to meet, to get to know each other, to welcome each other beyond the different languages and the challenges of communication.

Our ears rejoiced to hear the intensity of the applause with which we expressed our deep gratitude for the service of the UISG; we stood up as a sign of recognition. We have pronounced the word THANK YOU repeatedly. Thank you: we have felt accompanied, have grown as people and as leaders, broadening our horizons. We feel at home.

We have listened to the voice of silence during the presentations, in personal reflections and in prayer. We have listened to the intensity and passion of what has been expressed and shared in the synodal dynamics of our stories, our reality, our thoughts and feelings... As Pope Francis has said: we have created a culture of encounter

Throughout these days, a mosaic of meanings has been built around the words synodality, vulnerability and religious life, leading us to offer reflection and an invitation:

- Our vulnerability is prophetic. We need to embrace it as a strength, to open ourselves to bold and creative Gospel living in service of vulnerable humanity, trusting in the grace we find in emptiness. This is Parrhesia.
- We are in the process of transformation. We desire to live communion in authenticity and integral reciprocity in our life and mission, following Christ who dared to be vulnerable. We are chosen as leaders with our fragility as well as our competence and authority.
- Walking together in synodality, we take ownership of the story, of which there is no one *single* version, in processes of inclusion, *diversity of perspectives, contexts and cultures*. This needs to be lived at the level of leadership and also of local communities and the Church.
- We want to walk as people and communities of hospitality, giving time and space for listening, knowing when to speak and when to be silent, creating and living in daily life the spirituality of wisdom.
- As women in the Church we desire to live our vocation as a transforming presence, *giving witness* to patient endurance *but also to persistence and resistance*. The Paschal Mystery reminds us that through the non-violent response of Jesus, God acts in surprising ways to build peace in our world.

These days have offered us invitations to:

- A new style and process of leadership that exercises authority by listening, especially to the voiceless within and beyond our communities
- *A recognition of the reality of the abuse of power*. We ask for forgiveness and *encourage* restorative dialogue between wounded people. We acknowledge the strength and vulnerability found in reconciliation.
- *A desire to walk together as a community of belonging*, with the whole people of God, equal in dignity and diverse in vocation, in a world and a planet thirsting for justice and peace in the hope of the Risen Christ.
- *A witness* to a fresh and joyful religious life that is transformed and transformative.

I commit myself to live vulnerable synodality through service as a leader, animating it within the community, together with the people of God.

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