News

Religious Life



Nuns take a photo during a break May 3 as superiors of women's religious orders meet for the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superior Generals in Rome. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Vatican City — May 5, 2022

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The leaders of religious orders around the world are taking very seriously not only preparations for the Synod of Bishops assembly in 2023, but the whole idea of making the Catholic Church more "synodal" — a place where everyone is called to prayer, discernment and responsibility for the church and its mission.

More than 500 leaders of women's congregations met in Rome in early May for the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superiors General and focused on the contributions they can bring to the synodal process, particularly given their "vulnerability" with declining numbers in most places and their lack of power and status.

"There's a huge amount of energy in religious life, both from the men and the women, and a tremendous investment in the synodal process," said Sr. Gemma Simmonds, a member of the Congregation of Jesus, who is one of four religious charged with synthesizing contributions from hundreds of religious communities for a joint contribution to the Synod of Bishops from both the women's and men's international unions of superiors.

"Some of the responses point out that of course, synodality is part and parcel of religious life," said Simmonds, director of the Religious Life Institute at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge, England. For instance, she said, the Rule of St. Benedict allows an abbot or abbess and his or her council to make decisions on unimportant matters, but requires them to consult the whole community, including the youngest monks or nuns, on anything important.

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They also model for the whole church a life animated by personal and communal prayer; living and working in a group of people of different ages and from different cultural backgrounds; constant collaboration with bishops, priests and laypeople in carrying out their mission; outreach to the poor and those on the margins of society; and, increasingly, joint projects with other religious congregations that may have

vastly different charisms.

The "vulnerability" of religious orders also means their members are used to change or transformation, something which the synodal process also envisions.

Jessie Rogers, dean of the faculty of theology at St. Patrick's Pontifical University in Maynooth, Ireland, told the sisters May 4 that adapting their mission and structures in light of modern challenges requires wisdom and fidelity — not rigidity — and the same virtues are needed in moving toward a more synodal church.

"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," Rogers told the sisters. "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 recognize God's footprints. 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," she said, adding that believers cannot "trap the future in the cage of the past."



Sr. Gemma Simmonds, a member of the Congregation of Jesus and director of the Religious Life Institute at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge, England (CNS/Paul Haring)

And, particularly relevant to religious orders and the church as a whole is a recognition that "not everything in the past can be brought out as a treasure," she said. "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," she said.

While Simmonds could not share details of the synod input from the women's and men's communities because the report has not been completed, she said "everything" resonated with her and her experience or observations of religious life, including reports by women of doing the heavy lifting in a variety of pastoral projects or even fundraising and then being "airbrushed out of the picture" when success is reported.

Sisters also reported problems with bishops deciding to close schools, hospitals or other institutions without consulting the sisters who had operated them for decades, and even bishops or priests using "access to the sacraments" to force sisters into accepting their decisions.

"This is a grotesque injustice that should not be tolerated among the people of God," she said.

But while the submissions to the synod were honest, they did not focus exclusively on problems, Simmonds said.

"What also came across is the appreciation of how powerful it is when religious do collaborative work with laypeople, with clergy, with bishops," she said. "It is there over and over again, the evidence that this works; it's good. It's good for the people. It's good for the mission. It's good for the church. What's not to like?"

The responses make clear that charisms given by God to the founders of religious orders and shared with their members for decades or centuries can remain alive and active in the church by sharing them with others, she said. Through the religious and the laity who share their spirituality, "Benedict and Francis and Mary Ward and Louise de Marillac are still alive in the world."

This story appears in the **UISG 2022 plenary** feature series. View the full series.