Blog
Religious Life



Superiors of women's religious orders meet for the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superior Generals in Rome May 3. More than 500 superiors were in attendance, with more than 100 participating online. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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The 2022 Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) was unique as it stretched from a virtual preparation in March through the in-person/virtual assembly itself in May and extended into a concluding virtual session in July.

Beginning months ahead of the in-person event, the virtual sessions provided a way to begin building and strengthening a supportive global community among congregational leaders. These early sessions focused on sharing experiences of vulnerability during the years of COVID-19: members and family deaths, isolation and losses of ministries and income, to name only a few.

The assembly itself continued shared reflection on vulnerabilities that congregations face regarding spirituality, membership and ministries into the future. It also focused on the value of synodality being promoted by Pope Francis designed to bring about communion as the dreams and worries of the many are shared and listened to.

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The July virtual session focused on the reports of female and male religious congregations surfacing issues specific to them and their ministries that would be submitted to the Synod Vatican leaders.

At the end of the May assembly, a new UISG president and council were elected. Global Sisters Report invited the new team to share the impact the extended assembly had on them as new global leaders. Below are the responses of three of the six new leaders: Sr. Miriam Altenhofen, Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit; Sr. Theodosia Baki, Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis; and Sr. Roxanne Schares, School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Diversity, unity and sisterhood

By Miriam Altenhofen



Sr. Miriam Altenhofen (Courtesy of Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit)

It was my first UISG Assembly. As a newly elected general superior, I was awestruck to be in one room with more than 500 other general superiors plus the ones online via Zoom.

My first impression was the huge diversity of sisters. There were sisters from all over the world. They came from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Oceania, and the U.S. and Canada. Different races and different ways of dressing were just an outward sign of differences in cultural backgrounds, opinions, and world or church views.

We shifted from Spanish to Italian, English, French and other languages. The well-organized translation system made it possible that all could understand. The gathering was intercultural and multilingual. And yet, there was great unity and sisterhood.

During meals, I sat with sisters from Syria and Lebanon. I heard their stories, their suffering and their great perseverance in difficult times. And somehow, I felt proud of belonging to this great group of sisters who have at the center of their lives and mission the *missio Dei*, the good news. They represent thousands of sisters working all over the world to bring some light and hope into situations of poverty and oppression.

As I learned, it was the first time that the UISG Assembly was preceded and concluded by webinars. Because of travels, I could not participate in the pre-assembly meetings. Yet I was there for the final one. I highly commend the efforts of the UISG staff to connect us.

This meeting was on the topic of synodality. A group of theologians (UISG and the men's Union of Superiors General) presented the synthesis of experiences, dreams, of general leadership teams, male and female, on the topic of synodality. The process as such was an exercise of synodality. May it be the model for the church's future.

Make our voices heard

By Theodosia Baki



Sr. Theodosia Baki (Courtesy of Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis)

The UISG Assembly of 2022 had as its theme "Embracing Vulnerability in the Synodal Journey." During the online and in-presence gatherings, superiors general were reflecting on what it means to embrace our vulnerability and how to walk the synodal journey together.

The conferences were adapted to our context. The themes were interesting and relevant as they were based on the needs of congregational leaderships. Among other things, emphasis was laid on leading from a position of vulnerability so as to show love and care and be close to the vulnerable.

Creating listening spaces and dialoguing with one another would enable us to appreciate what others are doing and to accept that they also have contributions to make.

The purpose of the last gathering on July 11 was to reflect on the summary document on the contributions from USG-UISG, showing the contributions consecrated persons have made and are called upon to make in this synodal journey. Reflecting on this summary, it is clear that I need to encourage everyone to participate in this process of synodality because it involves all the people of God. Hence, I feel invited to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in everyone.

Communal living and community gatherings are aspects of synodality. In this respect, we offer to the world the fact that our diversity of cultures constitutes a richness that, when we put together the good aspects of each, can make a huge impact in our world.

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As consecrated persons, we need to move forward, make our voices heard, support one another and bring justice where it is denied.

I see the need for us to self-critique our own structure and leadership style that may prevent us from listening to our own members. In doing so, we may see that bureaucratic practices may be present, especially if we see ourselves as the "chosen ones, the special ones," making it difficult for people to reach us directly when they need us.

In summary, though consecrated persons are already doing a lot, there is a lot more that we can still do in our congregations, in the church and in the world to set the pace. This needs a change of mentality and conversion.

Vulnerability becomes prophetic

By Roxanne Schares



Sr. Roxanne Schares (Courtesy of School Sisters of Notre Dame)

Our 2022 UISG Plenary Assembly with the theme "Embracing Vulnerability on the Synodal Journey" seemed to capture imaginations, stir hearts and inspire the spirits of several hundred sisters. It surely did this for me.

My awareness of our vulnerability has deepened in the last few years, particularly with the pandemic, growing threats of climate change, and the outbreak of another war. The UISG Assembly created a contemplative space for us to reflect together as women religious on our experiences of vulnerability.

Through this came a greater realization of the grace of vulnerability, that in our fragility lies God's strength with new seeds of God's reign.

I appreciate how our vulnerability becomes prophetic as we open ourselves to the deeper invitation of transformation. In many ways, we — our congregations, church and world — are in crisis. The way through will be a paschal journey of transformation, of our walking together in synodality, listening and learning, letting go and discovering, creating new paths of hope.

Our sharing during the last phase of the UISG Assembly in July focused on religious congregations' contribution to the synodal process and ways we might further our journeying together. What resonated strongly with me was the desire to strengthen understanding and use of processes of dialogue and communal discernment in our congregations and church and to engage in ever wider levels of collaboration to respond to new cries and live the Gospel in ways relevant and needed in our times.

Having lived and served many years in Africa, I have come to appreciate even more the African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Only on the journey together will we witness to religious life that is joyful, transforming and alive for God's mission into the future.

Read this next: UISG's new president speaks on the importance of embracing vulnerability
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