

International Union of Superiors General

The Transformative Power of Embracing Vulnerability

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More than seven hundred religious women leaders of congregations from around the world gathered from 2-6 May 2022, for a rich discussion on the theme, *Embracing Vulnerability on the Synodal Journey*.

There was a joyous atmosphere in the Ergife conference centre in Rome and a deep sense of gratitude to the IUSG (the International Union of Superiors General) board. During these three years of the pandemic, the IUSG board was able to keep hundreds of congregations together by reaching out to the most distant and smallest institutes to offer training and concrete support. "This online relationship," stressed Sister Jolanta Kafka, IUSG president, and Sister Patricia Murray, IUSG executive secretary, "fostered the establishment of new contacts between different congregations, across diverse cultures and geographical boundaries, as well as with various dicasteries, foundations and movements. More than 65,000 sisters have joined. Although "it has been an economically challenging time for the IUSG," added Sister Patricia, "we managed to donate about two million euros (2.1 million dollars) to congregations that were in dire need." This experience is a fruit of the miracle of the communion of charisms.

Multiple talks by speakers accompanied session reflections: Psychologist, Ted Dunn, opened the proceedings by saying that "embracing our vulnerability is part of an interpersonal, inner transformation". If today "religious life is at a tortuous crossroads, in grace it will rise again."

Three sisters shared personal experiences: With the pandemic, Sister Carmen Mora Sena, came to the belief that "community leadership models today must be nurtured by an awareness of vulnerability." Missionary sister, Anne Falola, spoke of finding herself a minority in her place of mission: "Living the *kenosis* of Christ places women religious in a situation of objective vulnerability." And Franciscan Missionary Sister of Mary, Siham Zgheib, spoke about her civil war experience in Syria, where one lives "in perennial danger of being kidnapped, tortured, raped, forced to wear a hijab, but especially in fear of being forced to deny one's faith." She found her strength in the contemplation of the cross, the Eucharist and in the words of her congregation's foundress: "Decisions made in a time of

light are not to be changed in moments of darkness." These words resonated repeatedly among those meeting together, with other sisters sharing similar experiences of war and violence.

Other contributions also served for reflection and dialogue: Jessie Rogers, dean of Saint Patrick College in Maynooth, Ireland, emphasized that women religious render "God's footprints" more visible through recalling the past in a living way while forgetting "just enough to create space for the newness of God." This is possible through contemplation and the conviction that the 'folly of God' is wiser than human wisdom.

Sister Nathalie Becquart, under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, and Jesuit, David McCallum, stressed the important contribution that women religious can make to the synod process, adding that this journey could radically change religious life.

Cardinal João Braz de Aviz and Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, prefect and secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, participated in the work of the assembly, presided at the Eucharistic concelebration and offered reflections on the theme.

Participants held topic-centered discussions at their tables that were enlightened both by their respective communities and by the ongoing challenges encountered daily.

The joy-filled and moving meeting with Pope Francis took place in an atmosphere of family. The Pope extemporaneously responded to questions, but in his prepared speech which he left with the sisters afterwards, the pontiff concluded with the following, "I count on you, dear sisters, to accompany God's holy people in this synodal process as experts in building communion, in fostering listening and discernment. [...] We go ahead faithfully together, in the lightness of Mary's footsteps!"