

Women in the Church and the world

An all-out effort

Interview with María Lía Zervino

Argentinian María Lía Zervino is a sociologist and member of the Asociación de Vírgenes consagradas Servidoras. She was president of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) from 2018 to 2023, and a member of the National Justice and Peace Commission of the Argentine Bishops' Conference. Pope Francis appointed her to the Dicastery for Bishops in 2022, and in December 2024 as a member of the XVI Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod. She speaks here of her ecclesial experience.

In contact with Pope Francis and women from around the world

From 2011 to 2023, you served in the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations. How did Pope Francis perceive the situation of women in the ecclesial community?

In encountering diverse cultures among women in the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO), but with hearts all beating in unison for Jesus and his Church, I was won over immediately, like someone falling in love at first sight.

Of course, not everything was always "rosy" over the years, just as in any relationship. There were lights and shadows as we marched along a common path. In 2018, I tried to avoid being voted in as president, but finally realized that this would be the place from which I could concretely collaborate with the pontificate of Francis, so I accepted. It would fall to me to be a bridge between some nine million Catholic women and the Argentine pope who was opening new doors and initiated unprecedented processes in the Church.

In March 2021, for the eight-year anniversary of Pope Francis' pontificate, I wrote him an open letter as a daughter of the Church, to thank him for all that we had received from him as women and, at the same time, expressing those key issues that we, as women, still felt were outstanding. It was clear that we expected more from his pontificate. To my surprise, he responded with a hand-written note, in which he thanked me and encouraged us to continue along the path we had undertaken.

So, we journeyed to the peripheries. Among other initiatives, we built water wells, including one for a Muslim tribe whose women were walking ten kilometers daily in search of clean water. Our love was challenged during the pandemic, but the resilience typical of women

prompted us to organize, among other activities, moving experiences of prayer suppers in diverse languages.

Every year our celebration of International Women's Day is ecumenical and interreligious, with women leaders of diverse faiths now networking for a *culture of encounter*. The 2023 audience with Pope Francis in the Paul VI Hall during the WUCWO General Assembly, was also unforgettable. Nearly two thousand women participated, present with their traditional costumes, flags, and songs. They shared with the Pope their experiences of best practices, both in evangelization and integral human development.

World Women's Observatory

In 2021 you created the World Women's Observatory. What is the focus of this initiative?

The *World Women's Observatory* (WWO) was born as a response to the profound pain of so many women, women whose stories reach WUCWO daily! They suffer from human trafficking, faith persecution, domestic violence, illiteracy, lack of human dignity, hunger and the impossibility of providing food for their children. They even reach the point of forced migration and risk losing their children at sea or in the desert... These are heartbreaking stories!

How can their lives be redeemed and transformed?

The Holy Spirit prompted us to give visibility to women, especially the most vulnerable who bear seemingly "invisible" sufferings and lost potential. We focused upon pastoral strategies within the Church, synergies with civil society NGOs, governmental public policies, and fostering the integral human development of women and their families, and communities at an international level.

The *Observatory*, for example, tried to respond to the cry of 10,000 African women against gender-based violence on their continent. We filmed their life stories, such as that of Agnes, a single mother managing to raise her semi-paralyzed daughter. Or that of Fleur Dorcas, who founded an orphanage twenty years prior, and of 32-year-old Noeline with six children, who learned hair styling to support her family and escape domestic violence.

In the documentary, '*In-Visibles*' we also give visibility also to those nuns who dedicated their lives to these women, and thus allowing these women to provide for their own families. Women on different continents are mobilizing their faith communities and making their voices heard at national and international levels, including at the United Nations. (cf. www.worldwomensobservatory.org).

In Vatican circles

More recently you have found herself at the Vatican, as a member of the Dicastery for Bishops and a part of the Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod. What is your experience as a woman in these environments?

My experience in these environments, in which Pope Francis involved me in a totally unexpected way, is one of an apprenticeship.

In each plenary session of the Dicastery for Bishops I learned a lot by listening to the cardinals, bishops, and the two extraordinary women who also share this same task. This was also true for my relationship with members of the Synod Council, as we engaged in serving the Church in the most complex of implementation stages.

I seek to witness to the nearly five hundred women co-responsible for the synod process at the diocesan, national, continental, and 2023-2024 Synod Assembly levels. Thanks to the Synod secretariat and the Observatory, I was able to get to know and value these women.

I am convinced that "the air we breathe" is the atmosphere of the Spirit, by which we are able to work side by side, men and women, in a synodical manner reflective of the Church's mission.

Prospects for a renewal of priestly formation

You are now part of two Study Groups established in the context of the Synod on Synodality. One study group is focusing on priestly formation. With an eye towards a synodal, missionary Church in which men and women harmoniously contribute, what steps are needed?

This is an enormously rich experience. For my part, I listen to women from different continents, in order to bring their contributions to this study group. Sometimes we invite these wise and experienced women formators – as well as men – to the meetings. I also learn from other group members of diverse cultures, and from the bishops' conferences. Through listening and based on passages of the Synod's Final Document referencing priestly formation, we are identifying criteria and best practices for a formation in synodality, one to be carried out with Conversation in the Spirit throughout a priest's formation process.

We are also discerning how the People of God can more concretely contribute to this process, to avoid seminaries becoming the only formative module, and favoring insertion of seminarians in the daily life of communities. We believe the presence of women in priestly formation will be vital, if they participate not only as teachers but also as formation team members, as well as having a voice and a vote. A method of ecclesial discernment for digital mission will also need to be put in place. There is need to ensure the virtual realms become a prophetic place of mission and proclamation, beginning already from the seminary.

This implies bold, ongoing change in formator preparation, including ordained ministers and laity.

Consecrated virgin among the *Servidoras*

*Can you share something about your personal choice as a consecrated virgin in the *Servidoras*? What is your experience as a woman in this vocation?*

As members of the Association of *Servidoras*, we belong to the *Ordo Virginum* (Code of Canon Law, canon 604, 2). Our donation to Jesus Christ is realized in the world by constantly collaborating with his priestly action. Our charism consists in living the priesthood received

in baptism and confirmation, with a consecration that impels us to give ourselves to Christ and to serve the Church as an ecclesial family. We seek to sanctify by sanctifying ourselves. Based on fifty years of consecration among the *Servidoras*, I can say that our spirituality moves me to seek to live every day in an intimate spousal-priestly union with Jesus, thinking, evaluating, deciding and acting with Jesus in order to be able to bring him to others in the context of each mission received.

My church family formed and facilitated my dedicating myself particularly to women, so that through them we can reach out to humankind and together sacramentalize all social relationships, transforming the world into God's Home and God's children. I feel an urgent need to respond to the cry of the planet and the poorest of the poor.

Our founder, Argentine priest Luis María Etcheverry Boneo, now Servant of God, used to say that one of the functions of the *Servidoras* is to make the Church's motherhood present to every person and in every place, because the calling of this vocation is "to unite heaven and earth."

Pope Leo XIV

We had concluded this interview prior to Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops of which you are a member, was elected as Pope Leo XIV. Can you also add a word about your contact and collaboration with him?

As I began attending Dicastery meetings, I was struck by then Cardinal Prevost's spiritual depth and identification with Jesus. This inner beauty attracts and I always saw him seek the good of the Church. He conveys and creates an atmosphere of peace. He listens a lot, and speaks as much as is right and necessary. He welcomes input from others and then makes decisions. He facilitated teamwork because of the respect with which he treated each one of us, his serene smile, his humility, and his equilibrium. He trusts his collaborators, both men and women, and this, in turn, generate trust in him. One feels a closeness to the People of God through his missionary heart. My work with him in the Dicastery for Bishops was a wonderful gift from God and a pleasure.