News
Religious Life



Loreto Sr. Patricia Murray (CNS / Courtesy of the International Union of Superiors General)

by GSR Staff

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Editor's note: *On March 5, Global Sisters Report held a discussion with Sr. Patricia Murray, member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and executive director of the International Union of Superiors General. In the nearly two-hour conversation, Murray discussed UISG's goals for 2020, the increase of the number of women in Vatican positions, interculturality, changes in religious life and more. This is an edited and shortened transcript of that discussion.*

***GSR staff*: To start off, what are some of UISG's key goals in 2020? What are the resolutions from 2019 from the plenary that are being carried out?**

Murray: One of the key goals is to continue finalizing the issues that were raised at the plenary. That's the area of interculturality, *Laudato Si*' and care of the Earth, and interreligious dialogue. Then, to continue our ongoing service and support for religious and women's congregations, particularly in the area of canon law and focusing particularly on the whole question of the care of persons. That's the new focus that has entered the arena.

We began at the plenary, but we have established a new office two or three weeks ago for the care of persons. It has a double focus. One is to give general support to congregations in developing guidelines and protocols and various support and also to offer ongoing formation, particularly from the canonical and the theological perspectives.

We have set up an international office to support the Catholic Care for Children initiative, an initiative of the GHR Foundation. They have developed Catholic Care for Children in Kenya, Uganda and Zambia. This is focusing particularly on the whole area of institutional care for children in orphanages.

The Catholic Church has about 10,000 orphanages, and I presume the majority of those are probably run by religious sisters. The statistics would say that 80% of children in orphanages are not orphans; they have a family or an extended family. There's a worldwide movement. GHR has its own initiative in this field, and we've set up the international office. We look to expand the initiative in Africa, but also in Asia.

We've been doing a lot of formation in the area of interculturality, both online and on-site. We have a two-week workshop planned for Nairobi from July 19 to July 29. That's aiming at teams of sisters from the ACWECA region, and we have invited a

team from Europe and a team from the United States to participate.

It's following on the initiative we had in January 2019 here in UISG, where we had 45 teams of four people per team. That was 180 sisters, training them in the whole area of interculturality. The whole thing is explaining that it is actually a theological concept. It's not just a mechanism of getting people together.

We're living multiculturally, but often, in our multicultural living, we're living side-by-side and we're not interacting. Theologians have developed the concept of interculturality to the intentionality of wanting to live and share and be transformed by one another. That's an insight, in a sense, that we as religious women can give prophetic leadership in that area.

We can witness to the fact that this living together from our different cultural experiences brings a level of oneness and diversity, which is certainly at the heart of Gospel living. I'm very convinced from my own experience in South Sudan, which was an intercongregational, intercultural experience. Often, the students in South Sudan in the teacher training and in the training school for nurses and midwives, while they were very grateful for the education they were receiving, they often said to us, "How do you from different tribes live together?"

The witness of living together with differences is something that makes a profound statement in today's world, and maybe it's one of the areas in which we as religious women and men are called to be prophetic. Not only just to live it, but to intentionally engage in reflecting on this kind of living. How are we being called to be transformed personally? At the level of our intergroup interactions and on the level of shalom peace-building, we are creating a world where we can be together and enjoy the richness of life.

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It brings me back to my own beginnings in ministry. At an earlier stage, I worked in Northern Ireland. I worked with teachers, particularly, and we had a very simple

program for teachers in a primary level, which was that differences enrich the human community. In a way, that's kind of the vision that's behind the whole thrust to learn how to be intercultural.

People think that just by coming together from different cultures, that you automatically learn. There's a whole body of knowledge at the level of culture, at the theological level, at the level of communication, in terms of looking at different paradigms and models. There's an enormous amount of knowledge there.

It's very clear to me and to others that this needs to be an essential part of formation and a training for living religious life because our religious life has become so multicultural and intercultural. It's not enough to say, "We'll all come together, and we'll learn how to do it together." There's knowledge, there's attitudes, there's values, and there's behaviors to be learned.

In creating an office of the care of persons, is there something specific about care for vulnerable persons that UISG wanted to look at?

What everybody's grappling with is the understanding of this term, "vulnerability." In the past, at the legal level, "vulnerability" would have applied to people who are challenged at a physical or at a mental level. But now, in a sense, there's a growing understanding that vulnerability can be there, can exist precisely because of power relationships in a society or in an organization, and also in terms of education and levels.

There are different levels of vulnerability. We've all experienced it in aspects of life where one can feel at a disadvantage because of certain factors in life. This is a very good way of reflecting.

It's no secret that around Vatican II, religious life would have been extremely hierarchical, and the vows would have been understood in a particular way. In a sense, we've moved from hierarchical in many parts of the world to a much more circular, a much more engaged team, yes, but a mutuality of proceeding, which requires actually great maturity of living. There's been learning in terms of taking personal responsibility for oneself at every level, then having the personal tools to negotiate life because of the challenges of life and being able to set boundaries, being able to engage in relationships appropriately.

As human beings, we don't realize that by virtue of education or by virtue of status or by virtue of position, that we actually have a hierarchy.

I can remember being part of an organization, of a reflection group in Ireland. It was called Women of the Church, and we were engaged in reflection with the National Conference of Priests of Ireland. We began to talk about how women felt disengaged from the church or felt a certain powerlessness in terms of engagement.

In fairness to the clerics we were dealing with, they began to talk about how they felt: disempowered or disengaged or powerless within their structure and institutions. So there's a way in which all of us who are engaged in the human community at any level have to look at power relationships and look at status and look at the structure of our organizations and see how we create a community in this society where people really feel they can speak their truth and be listened to.

It applies to congregations. It's very clear in the document "New Wine in New Wineskins," which was issued by the congregation for religious, that the whole understanding of obedience needs to be looked at in the context of the living of religious life in contemporary society. Religious life is a group of mature women who are negotiating the challenges of living together and of ministering outward in the world. What are the competences and the self-awareness, the awareness of the other that is needed to bring about the fullness of life that the Gospel calls us to?

In the context of religious life, it's the kind of human and spiritual formation that helps us as women religious to be robust and self-assured and self-confident, well-grounded, aware of who we're called to be as living religious and what we bring to the world, and what we have to learn from others.

There's a collaborative element as lay and religious. We're long gone from the days of the sister on the pedestal in many parts of the world, but not in other parts of the world. In some cultures and some different contexts still, the named leader or the person with the title, so to speak, is seen to have an authority that sometimes puts him or her at a distance from their confreres. This is an area in terms of authority and leadership and membership of an organization, membership of a religious order that we're growing into a kind of understanding and growing in personal awareness and personal growth.



Loreto Sr. Patricia Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, speaks May 6, 2019, at the UISG plenary assembly in Rome. (Courtesy of UISG)

What are the issues, new and old, that UISG faces globally?

The new commission for the care of persons will be a joint commission with the Union of Superiors General. One of the things that commission will begin to look at is the whole question of theology of care from a theology of the child.

We have to look, too, at the fact that we have to be much more grounded in our theological awareness. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child is not that many decades old, so in a sense, we need to match that with sustained reflection on putting the child at the center and what that calls us to do.

I'd also be looking at theology of care, of creating cultures of care. Whether that's care at the level of family or any unit of society, how do we actually create the kind of culture of care that we will never see people abused or misused or taken

advantage of? What's the reflection we have to do as a human community on the care of the person, putting the person center?

That's what Pope Francis is trying to do. It's not the economy that's at the center. We have to put the person at the center. The economies have the service of the human community, whereas when money becomes central, then people become just subjects. The person becomes an object. In a sense, it's a whole question of the objectification of the human person that leads to war, abuse. The person is there for use for economic gain, for pleasure. The person is not respected.

What's the timing on the creation of the commission?

We hope in the next couple of months, that commission will have its first meeting. It includes people with different backgrounds: theological, canon law — practical experience, so it will be a good reflection on things.

Sr. Maryanne Loughry did a webinar for us on the area of stress in religious life. Somehow, the creating of the commission and the question of stress in religious life got conflated. People were asking for help, because you have many religious who have worked and are working in very difficult situations.

The challenge to our self-care is being aware of my spiritual and human needs when I'm in situations that are really demanding. What I'm aware of is what a very demanding role and very demanding position sisters can be in, particularly people working with migrants and refugees.

If you can think of ministries where you are, in a sense, people living in situations of conflict, post-war situations, you're listening and reading stories, and in a way, you're suffering from a secondary trauma. We as religious often don't realize that has an effect.

Sisters and religious have always cared for and about people. How is this commission and this program different than other programs that sisters have been involved in?

One of the tasks in the UISG office supporting the commission is providing support for congregations who are developing guidelines and formation and training programs for the members of their congregations in the area of the protection and care of minors and vulnerable adults.

There's intentionality there because of the mistakes that have been made in the past. One of the areas we have to become aware of as sisters is that we reach out to help very quickly without sometimes doing what I might call a risk assessment and seeing if this is the appropriate response that's needed at this time in this place, but also to look at their culture.

In parts of the world, there are practices — for example, corporal punishment — that's accepted now in cultures. But in 10, 20 years' time, that practice will not be accepted. If we are to judge from the experience of other parts of the world, people will say to the sisters, "You should have known better," even though the practice is accepted now in a particular cultural context.

So in a sense, what we're calling on ourselves as sisters is to be leaders of care reform in institutions, but also leaders of care wherever we're in ministry. We've always cared, but the focus is on seeing that we have to reflect on our practices of care and also learn from what's happened in different parts of the world in terms of standards of care and methods of care.

Even though often, resources are stretched in areas, this is where the human community, the Catholic community — I'm talking about sisters — really needs to help support sisters. In parts of the world where there aren't resources, we're expecting people to do extraordinary things on minimal resources and not having enough adequate training, professionalizing the work that we're doing.

We don't want to become professional people, but we want to have the professional skills needed in the areas in which sisters are working. I often hear people saying about religious orders and sisters, "They're supported by the Vatican." I say, "They're not." When I look at parts of the world, I see sisters managing schools and clinics and hospitals and programs for women on a shoestring.

I've also heard local Catholic communities criticizing them for charging fees for schools because they think somehow the resources come from somewhere else. I'm very concerned because we talk a lot about sustainability and sustainable programs for religious so that their communities can survive and thrive, but often, the sustainability programs other organizations are suggesting for them are taking them away from their basic charism.

Therefore, I think we need much more connected, we as sisters, in spreading out our needs. If I was to look to the past, one of my learnings is we made very little go a

very long way. But people outside often didn't appreciate the sacrifice that was within in order to provide what was needed. We can look back, and I can hear people saying, "The students weren't fed adequately," or whatever criticism.

The resources weren't there, and we don't, as a body of women, tend to be very open about the challenge that's there. We say it in a very general way, but we need to be much more particular and say, "We really do need X, Y or Z to help the people we're ministering to." It's a new model of church, a new model of being together where, as religious and lay, we bring the best of who we are together to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable in today's world.

That means building mutual relationships. It's actually going back to some of the interculturality work from our different cultures' perspectives and our different gifts and our different resources to meet human needs.

At the level of the global compact on education, which is a follow-up to the synod on youth, it's mobilizing young people today and calling them to be part of and central to movements for change, whether it's care of the environment or care of the human person and the community and the growth and nourishing of human community. I see a lot of these things coming together.

I'm particularly challenged, too, by the area of interreligious dialogue. Very recently, we had a wonderful event, the launch of Wells of Hope, which is both a project and a documentary. It's an anti-trafficking project from the Mediterranean Basin in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and probably reaching into Egypt. This is where women of different faiths led by Catholic sisters are coming together to attack the question of human trafficking.

For many of those women, they were unaware that sisters were involved in this work. So this is sharing the resources and the knowledge. These are incredibly impressive women.



Sr. Carmen Sammut, superior general of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, gives an address alongside Pope Francis on May 10, 2019, during a meeting of the International Union of Superiors General, of which Sammut was president at the time. (CNS / Reuters / Vatican Media)

What developments can you share about UISG sisters' appointments on Vatican committees?

There's an increased number of sisters being appointed. It's been growing over the years. For example, Sr. Carmen Sammut is on the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. You have five superiors general on the council for the dicastery of religious life. You have three sisters who are consulters to the secretary for the synod.

I was appointed to the recent Pontifical Council for Culture, and there's a sister from Uganda also appointed. So there are definitely increased numbers. Sr. Bernadette Reis, a Daughter of St. Paul, is working in the Vatican communications department. So, in a sense, there certainly is an increased number of appointments of sisters to commissions.

So you think they're in proportion. Would you like to see more?

I would always like to see more. I do think they're in proportion, really, because I think people are being chosen for the expertise that they would bring to a particular area or topic. There are several now who are speaking, for example, on the Economy of Francis. There's a Salesian sister who's very involved. She's an economist. People are being invited into areas in which they have expertise.

Part of it is the challenge for us at UISG to identify sisters who have particular competence in areas and to encourage superior generals to help sisters become professionally trained in new areas that are emerging. I think of areas like interreligious dialogue, for example. I think of areas like the whole area of care of the Earth in terms of environmental sciences.

That's a sacrifice for religious orders because often, to be at the cutting edge of new, emerging areas, you're training some of your best people for areas where they will not be remunerated, where there isn't necessarily a paid position. That's the challenge, again, for congregations in the "global south." They have to train sufficient people for positions, which will bring some remuneration to the congregation, while at the same time knowing that many of the members will be serving at positions in which there is no remuneration.

So it's not an easy pathway to travel, and therefore, I'm always very grateful to foundations and organizations that support the professional educational of sisters in traditional areas, but also in new fields and new cutting-edge areas because that enables them to be a professional voice in different parts of the world.

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Looking at the whole world, are there any new developments in religious life that you've seen coming?

There's an increased awareness of the importance of discernment of vocation and of formation. Many are realizing that just wanting to be a sister is not enough. In a sense, you need a good process of understanding religious life and a process of entry into undertaking a discernment about whether this life is for you and what this life involves.

This is long-haul life at a time in the world when long haul isn't in. It's very countercultural to say, "I want to join this way of life for my whole life." I feel you only choose something when you have a real choice. You have to be choosing between this and something else that is parallel. That's why I think some congregations are moving not to take candidates during secondary-school years and, in some cases, are saying, "Unless you finish university or have worked for a year or two and have gained maturity, then you're not ready to undertake a discernment journey."

Every person is different, so it depends on the level of maturity of the person, and it depends on the context. Therefore, people who are helping young men and women to discern vocations need to be skilled. There needs to be a good process of accompaniment over a period of time. This isn't something you enter into very quickly; you take time.

The period of formation allows for time, and therefore, some people may go for a certain number of years within the process of wanting to become a religious and may discern that this isn't for them. Then they go, hopefully blessed with the experience they've had of living a life of prayer and action, and bring that to the next stage of their lives.

We're putting a lot of stress on the training of formators. That's why at UISG last year, we reintroduced, because it had been there in the past, a training program for formators. Last year, we had 33 sisters. This year, we have 44. I think we had over 75 applications. It's a five-month program here in Rome. The sisters are largely from Asia and Africa, then one or two from Latin America, the United States and Australia.

In a sense, it's a very multicultural experience for them. They're learning about the challenge of interculturality, but they're also learning practical skills for working in formation at different stages, whether it's the initial stage before somebody enters or during the period of novitiate or in temporary profession, before a sister will take final vows, or in ongoing formation.

It's equipping them with tools and skills to be better able to be members. Generally, lots of congregations now have teams rather than putting the responsibility on just one person because in many ways, the formation team and formation personnel are some of the most important people in the congregation. They're ensuring the future of the congregation.



Sisters talk with their tables between presentations May 8, 2019, at the International Union of Superiors General's plenary assembly in Rome. (Courtesy of the International Union of Superiors General)

What new ideas regarding sustainability of local congregations are emerging?

The question of sustainability — it's not an easy question. I have a sense that the model of religious life that has emerged was a model of expansion. But that expansion is particularly dependent on having resources.

I've often felt that we need a task force to look at the level of economic sustainability for a congregation because we have many, many small congregations, and it's a challenge that each would be economically sustainable. The problem is so much effort can go into sustaining oneself economically in order to train new members, and that can take you away from the charism of the congregation.

Yes, it's fine to be running agricultural projects in order to be economically sustainable, but that may not be what your charism is. We have a lot of work to do. I think congregations shouldn't be allowed to begin unless it's clear that they're economically sustainable. In many ways, young women could be encouraged to join existing congregations rather than increasing the number of local congregations.

I don't think there's an easy solution. I think if you're economically vulnerable, it's very difficult to proceed. On the one hand, from my position here, I see congregations coming to conclusion who may have resources. I have congregations who are in their very initial stage who are searching for resources. But it's not always easy to bring the two together. Sometimes, the two don't know one another at all. Their life paths haven't crossed.

We raise the questions at UISG. At the level of different dicasteries that have to do with religious life, we certainly raise this question continually. The sisters themselves are really aware of the need to be spiritually sustained.

One of the things we've initiated here at UISG is a small project with Dublin City University to look at the viability of providing good online theology for the formation of sisters at a low cost. It's something I would love to see so that every sister worldwide got the opportunity to have some significant theological studies. Every sister today needs a good theological formation and a good grounding in spirituality. It needs to be lifelong.

What's the most effective way, or what are the multiple ways in which opportunities can be offered? We're looking at things like blended learning. We've had a very good experience since Talitha Kum with the Antonianum, a university here in Rome, and now with the link with Tangaza University College in Nairobi. This is an 18-month training program for leaders of Talitha Kum networks. We're training sisters to lead networks.

We had read the article in Women Church World in February blaming abuse of sisters as the key reason for the decline in vocations. What was your reaction?

There's multiplicity of reasons, I think, for choosing vocations. It's very hard to put a finger on it. Anybody could put up a list. As women become educated, they have more choice in terms of a career, even in pastoral fields. They don't have to become

religious women to minister pastorally or to minister within the church. That's one whole area.

Look at secularization and also the impact of secularization on the loss of value for roles within organized religion. Family is the place where vocations were nourished. Family is weak, and parish life is weak, so they're contributing factors, too. Yes, I suspect in different parts of the world, there are different reasons. I don't think you can say it's X or Y. I think it's a whole mélange, really, of changes.

Yet at the same time, I'm looking at women I know who are committing themselves to religious life in parts of the world where it's certainly countercultural to do so. I think they're incredible. I always say I gave up possibilities. These women are giving up houses and cars and jobs and so forth to pursue religious life.

In other parts of the world, where there has been a flourishing of vocations as the countries become more developed, as there are better educational systems, as there's more choice, then that also affects how people decide what they're going to do with their lives and how they feel called.

When I entered religious life, if you wanted to serve overseas or in a pastoral capacity long-term, there weren't nongovernmental organizations. There were volunteer organizations, but there weren't fully fledged caring organizations to meet various needs in societies.

What you see with younger men and women joining today, they've often done the things. They've been in the justice and peace groups. They've worked with migrants. They've served the poor in their localities. What they're looking for more and more is a meaningful life lived in community with a spiritual base of prayer and reflection. They're being drawn by the interior aspects of the life more than the external doings.

Maybe that's part of the shift I see in parts of the world — not everywhere. Again, I go back to context. Still, in many parts of the world, if you want to serve or make a difference, religious life is very key. It particularly allows women to give their lives and their gifts in that capacity.

Ritual is very important, and discovering new ways of ritualizing in our need and responding to that is the challenge. My hope would be that as women religious and as laywomen, that some of the frontiers we can begin to explore together is how to

ritualize in a good and well-grounded way the search for meaning, but also reaching out and finding God in all things in the different cultural contexts in which we find ourselves.

That's been my experience in traveling. It's not one size fits all. People are at very different stages and in very different parts of the world in their spiritual journeys and their understanding of their relationship with God and with the rest of humanity. So it requires a creativity, and that's where I see grounding sisters in theology because you begin to stretch your own imagination in terms of how to introduce people to prayer and reflection, images of God, and how we as a church are to be. It's to engage in that so that you bring a broader perspective and a broader vision to the daily work that you're doing.



Pope Francis attends the final session of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon on Oct. 26, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS / Paul Haring)

Anything else that we didn't ask you that you wanted to cover?

The only thing I would say is that I see very definite connections between *Laudato Si*' and the synod on the Amazon and *Querida Amazonia*. I see that this is going to be the emerging area because it also is putting the person central.

When you're looking at the challenge in terms of our environment and the care of Earth and the care of people, you're looking for a multiplicity of expertise, and you're also looking at the whole area of the lifestyle of people in poverty. It really covers everything we're grappling with. But we can only do it if we do it together.

We do it together in a synodal way, which is a discerning way of: How do we bring about change? I see this as a kind of pathway into the future. I really do. The Economy of Francis and the global compact on education and all these other things, they're possible feeders for actually creating this new level of awareness and this new level of engagement.

We as sisters need to be ready for that. Sisters are very well-placed at the grassroots with communities who are suffering, and they can be the voice of the Earth and the voice of the planet and the voice of the people. Then I think the challenge is to begin to create fora, to begin to ask to be part of fora, to insist on being part of fora that emerge that seek to bring about change.

Already, I've heard Cardinal Peter Turkson saying, "We're depending on religious, and particularly religious women, to show leadership in the area of *Laudato Si*'." We have to begin to use our imagination in a whole new way.

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences is also beginning to look at things that are out there at the cutting edge and the effect they might have again on the human person and on the human environment. There are good things happening. Keep your eye on that whole area.

Thank you. We really appreciate the insights.