News

Religious Life



The two moderators of the Aug. 13-15 virtual assembly for the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious, from left: Passionist Fr. Tarcisio Gaitán, member of CLAR's team of advisory theologians, and Sr. Daniela Cannavina, CLAR's general secretary and a Capuchin Sister of Mother Rubatto (GSR screenshot)



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The virtual assembly for the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious was a three-day study in what it means for a modern religious life to be intercongregational, intercultural and itinerant. It was also a demonstration of those three values in real time.

If done in person, the triennial gathering would have included dozens of religious leaders from each country's religious conference traveling to a Central or South American city to meet in person and share side conversations and laughs between presentations, with a late-night cultural celebration as the weekend's intermission.

Little of that was lost in the virtual adaptation, with the assembly living up to its theme, "Now is the time for synodality!" Rather than the usual roomful, this year, 9,000 men and women religious from all over the Americas — including guests from Europe and Africa — were able to participate in the Aug. 13-15 gathering, making it CLAR's largest assembly ever. And the energy matched the numbers, with 20 minutes dedicated to participants waving their native flags and sharing their excitement. Even the cultural celebration with videos of dancers kept its place in the agenda.



The second evening of the 2021 virtual assembly for the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious concluded with a cultural festivity. Each conference was invited to share a representation of their home country, with this Colombian dancer also representing CLAR's headquarters in Bogotá. (GSR screenshot)

The material at hand, however, was a profound theological discourse via three keynote speeches. Claretian Missionary Luis Alberto Gonzalo Díez, director of the Spanish-language magazine Vida Religiosa, spoke on intercongregationality; Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda, provincial superior for the Missionary Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit of South Argentina, spoke on interculturality; and Sr. Teresa Maya, general superior of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and former president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, closed by speaking on itinerancy.

Following each of the keynote speeches and theological reflections, the assembly discussed a priority issue each day: ecology, the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, and synodality, respectively.

To everyone's surprise, Pope Francis kicked off the weekend with his first address to a CLAR assembly, focusing on the challenges and importance of an "inculturated religious life," one that embraces its many cultures.

"How much good it would do for us to discover that unity is not uniformity, but a multifaceted harmony," he said in his native Argentine Spanish.

Pope Francis kicked off the weekend with his first address to a CLAR assembly Aug. 13. (YouTube/Vatican News)

"Let's not forget that an uninculturated faith is not authentic. For this reason, I invite you to participate in the process that will provide the true sense of a culture that exists in the soul of the people. Enter into the life of the people of faith, enter with a respect for their customs, their traditions, seeking to carry out the mission of inculturating the faith and of evangelizing the culture. To inculturate the faith and to evangelize the culture go together," he said, adding that "peace, joy and a sense of humor" is the greatest witness to offer one's people.

Sr. Gloria Liliana Franco, president of CLAR, officially opened the gathering by urging her fellow religious to return to the missionary itinerant roots of religious life. In a time when the vocation's numbers are declining, Franco's invitation is to "update the commitment, renew the options, unite so that with our gaze fixed on Jesus and minds open to his word, we can strive to live with authenticity, simplicity and joy.

"We are invited to heal the cracks through which life, peace, dignity and hope bleed," said Franco, a Sister of the Company of Mary Our Lady from Colombia.

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Gonzalo's keynote speech Aug. 13 highlighted that intercongregationality is not an "artificial response to the delicate moment" of modern religious life, but rather, a reality and development that is both consistent with the charisms of each institute and necessary to effectively respond to the world's needs today.

"The process is slow but unstoppable," he said, adding that this direction is ultimately an expression of the Second Vatican Council, "when the church began a dialogue with humanity."

From there, "the ecclesiocentric understanding of society disappears, and we feel invited to become part of a shared table of humanity and fraternity."



Sr. Cristina Robaina, Company of St. Teresa of Jesus and a member of the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious' team of advisory theologians, bottom, reflects on the Aug. 13 keynote address of Claretian Missionary Luis Alberto Gonzalo Díez, director of the Spanish-language magazine Vida Religiosa, top left, who spoke on intercongregationality at the 2021 CLAR virtual assembly. (GSR screenshot)

A lively discussion on the environment and the *Laudato Si*' movement ended Day One, only for Day Two to open with news of the 7.2-magnitude earthquake that had struck Haiti that morning. Prayers, a moment of silence and words of solidarity ensued before the assembly had to continue without the attendees from Haiti, who sent updates throughout the day regarding the destruction.

Milmanda's Aug. 14 keynote on interculturality — "a horizon of construction and deconstruction for religious life today" — was grounded in the realities driving mass migration, including violence, climate change, political or religious persecution, poverty, nationalism, xenophobia, and lack of opportunities. Now, the pandemic "has intensified the effects of this global interconnection and has deepened the gaps that separate us," she added.



Logo for the 2021 virtual assembly for the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious, which had the theme "Now is the time for synodality!" (Courtesy of CLAR)

Such challenges, she said, call for an intercultural religious life that embraces differences. "Let's open ourselves to the new universes that these encounters bring, full of melody, full of screams that cry to be heard. It will not be a romantic path, but one of kenosis and conversion."

Acknowledging and welcoming differences is only one side of the coin, however; recognizing our likeness is the other.

"We are no different from our sisters and brothers who are on the move for a variety of reasons," Maya said in her Aug. 15 keynote speech on an itinerant religious life. "We are their family," and therefore, the current reality of migration "demands our presence, our conscience, our action."

Religious life is invited to live the itinerant life of Jesus, she said, because "accompanying is an art always in motion."

"The itinerancy of Jesus was not one of flight nor isolation, but approach. Jesus moved to get closer, to accompany, to be with, to go where the others are," and in doing so, presented humanity with a version of a "pilgrim God, joining those on the road as they are, where they are."

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Franco wrapped the three-day gathering with a plea for the religious leaders in attendance: "The assembly cannot end here. It's vital for us to bring it to life in the everyday," becoming broken bread to share among the people.

Like Mary, "we are called to open horizons of new relationships" through intercongregationality, interculturality and itinerancy, she said, proposing 10 courses of action:

1. Choosing to be present: "Being is a condition for epiphany, for the manifestation of God. ... Going out, traveling is a condition for bearing fruit. Through habit and paralysis, we sterilize ourselves."
2. Choosing closeness and becoming an "ethical shelter that dignifies," encountering the fullness of the other with receptivity, welcome and hospitality. "Responsible ethical decisions that are respectful of human dignity spring from a caring closeness."
3. Choosing to listen, which "frees you from being the protagonist; from mediatic, populist and messianic actions; from the sufficiency of those who believe they have the answers."
4. Choosing the word, "a narrative therapy that heals," as well as the Word, the Incarnation, which heals, liberates and dignifies.
5. Choosing discernment, paying attention to the rhythm and movement of the Spirit. "Among the poor, on the borders, the exposed, through the territories of migration and trafficking, where children and young people see their rights violated and women lack the possibilities of participation — there, the Spirit cries out," urging religious life to give their all with a consistent "yes."
6. Choosing processes and the "unfolding of potential life." Isolated actions often end up being sterile, where interrelated and interdisciplinary processes enable a continuity of actions.
7. Choosing community, "making communion, purifying relationships and positioning ourselves ... so that everyone fits and everyone's voice resounds to

open paths and possibilities."

8. Choosing mercy, as the missionary way requires "letting ourselves be disarmed by reality, reorganizing structures, community projects and activities based on the echoes of reality."
9. Choosing the inner being and rediscovering one's purpose, diving into the depths and placing oneself before reality "in the manner of Jesus."
10. Choosing the "Common Home," which does not "offer a truce; this is an option in which there are no excuses. It is up to all of us to commit ourselves to this task, from the conscience of the interrelation and the sacredness of everything created."

The list of choices and proposed actions that arose from this assembly, Franco said, could go on and on. But "what is clear is that this is a propitious time to choose."

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