Blog

Religious Life



Women religious gather in groups as part of the UISG Constellations Meetings during its 2019 plenary in Rome. This year's plenary includes an in-person assembly planned for May 2-6 in Rome; online sessions in March and July will open and close the plenary. (Courtesy of UISG)



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The theme for the upcoming plenary of the International Union of Superiors General — Embracing Vulnerability on the Synod Journey — is very appropriate, given that we are still living in the worldwide COVID-19 environment and preparing for the upcoming Synod on Synodality of the entire church.

To introduce the theme of the plenary, a variety of leaders, congregational and others were asked to give testimony to their personal experience of vulnerability since the last assembly. This year's plenary includes an in-person assembly planned for May 2-6 in Rome; online sessions in March and July will open and close the plenary. Who would have dreamed a pandemic would take over our lives in so many dramatic ways since we met in Rome in May 2019 for the last plenary?

As I read and listened to the testimonies on the UISG website, not only from the anguish of COVID-19 but of other experiences, I was touched by the sisters' transparent descriptions of their feelings of vulnerability and how vulnerability has led them to deeper solidarity with other leaders and the whole people of God. They spoke of feeling solidarity with the desolation of the people of the Amazon, of our natural world, of those still being abused by those more powerful.

They are learning that the synodal theme invites us to walk together, needing each other on the journey. They shared the feelings of comfort too, realizing they do not have to walk the leadership path alone. Hope and courage come from journeying with others who also experience the dark fragility of our times.

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Another aspect of preparing for the assembly includes monthly interviews with some leaders from various parts of the world sharing how they have personally been impacted by vulnerability. During 2020, UISG focused on congregational experiences of vulnerability as sisters encountered the pandemic. UISG Executive Secretary Sister Pat Murray addressed this in an interview with Global Sisters Report in December 2020: "We as UISG have been listening to those struggles and difficulties

that the congregational leaders or the provincials are dealing with," she said. "We've tried to respond by offering different webinars to leaders and members … One of the things I'd like to highlight is that sisters are experiencing the very same reactions as people everywhere. They're dealing with fear and anxiety, and there's a real challenge at various levels … even coping with doing ordinary tasks within their communities has been very difficult," said Murray, a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as the Loreto Sisters.

This year focuses on leaders themselves, of vulnerabilities experienced through COVID-19 and other moments and how they may have emerged from them or what they are learning as they endure them.

The UISG theme of vulnerability resonated with me, too, as I have been reading a new book, *Desire, Darkness, and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse*. Seven essays of Sr. Constance Fitzgerald, a member of the Carmelite Community in Baltimore and a contemplative theologian, give spiritual/theological perspectives based on St. John of the Cross on the darkness and vulnerability we probably all experience individually and as a society. Other writers are included, using Fitzgerald's theological/spiritual insights to elucidate and give meaning to a variety of social issues in need of transformation: confusion, conflict, racism, environment — issues many of us do not know how to move through.



Sr. Constance Fitzgerald, a member of the Carmelite Community in Baltimore, authored "Desire, Darkness, and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse." (Courtesy of Constance Fitzgerald)

The book calls all of us, religious and lay, our entire societies, to let go of thinking we can solve the complexities of these problems with technology and usual ways of doing things. It is only deeper prayer and contemplation that can help us face ourselves and our societies and release and broaden our imaginations to do something different and creative.

I have also heard this theme of prayer and contemplation in the testimonies. Sisters are feeling the pull to deeper and deeper relationship with the Spirit dwelling within. So, I expect we will hear this as even more as the interviews are posted between now and May.

The first interview I listened to was between Patrizia Morgante, UISG Communications Officer, and Sr. Guadalupe Ramirez, Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence, was very interested to learn that her congregation is the first founded in

the U.S. for women from Mexico to minister to immigrant families from Mexico.

Ramirez shared that she resonates deeply with the plenary theme as she and her sisters live and work among immigrants suffering from the impact of climate change and discrimination, particularly along the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

In Ramirez' role as coordinator of a Master of Arts in pastoral ministry program, she mentors immigrant women and Hispanic women already working in diocesan roles. The vulnerability she experiences in the immigrant women preparing for parish ministry is in their unfamiliarity with U.S. education structures and struggles with limited finances. She noted that Hispanic women already in diocesan positions struggle with the challenge of feeling undervalued by colleagues, often with little or no voice, something common to many Mexican or Hispanic women in ministry. These vulnerabilities call her to solidarity, compassion and empathy.

Ramirez shared her personal experience of vulnerability in suffering from glaucoma, night blindness and arthritis. These conditions require dependence on others around her, eliciting deep empathy for her elder sisters who find it painful to lose autonomy.

What has she learned from vulnerability? Touching the vulnerability of others has taught her about the strength of faith — that the human spirit is unlimited when connected to God: Both anger and love can move us to action because we breathe in God's love in nature and in people. When I heard this comment, I was drawn back to Fitzgerald's book, which reminds us of John of the Cross' image of how our breathing with God leads us to see the face of God everywhere.

Ramirez remarked that for her, the experience of synodality is most present in storytelling, ritual, music art and laughter. These release imagination, which in our time desperately needs nurturing, particularly among youth. She shared a lovely story from some years ago when she had an eye condition that prevented her from seeing. She had been asked to sing at the liturgy of a young woman who was becoming a novice that very day. Her eye condition had prevented her from preparing and now she had no one to help her search as other sisters were engaged elsewhere.

Feeling sorry for herself, she was crying out to God in desperation: "Give me a song" for this young woman. Suddenly, to her surprise, she began to hear a melody rising within and then "words dropped out of my heart." She took her guitar and the song

was born: "How Beautiful Love Is." She was able to sing her own song at the liturgy, and it has since been used on many occasions, particularly weddings and birthdays. Ramirez has never written another. For her this experience is a story of how when we are in darkness, in impasse, God comes to our rescue through our innate imaginations, as Fitzgerald suggested.

Morgante's last question asked Ramirez for one word that echoes the plenary theme. She chose "challenge" — to embrace vulnerability in order to make space for imagination and creativity.

That is an important message in preparing for the plenary, and resonates with the insights I am gleaning from Fitzgerald's book. I am looking forward to other interviews and testimonies with leaders in the weeks leading to the plenary.

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