Columns
Religious Life



Attendees of the 2020 General Chapter of the Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk met with Pope Francis at a general audience May 18. The chapter had originally been scheduled for October 2020. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk)



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We were so excited Oct. 4, 2019, when the convocation letter of the 2020 General Chapter of the Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk was sent to all the sisters in the congregation. With only six months to go before the chapter's start, all preparations were in place for our chapter to be held in Rome for the first time.

As one of three assistants on the general leadership team, I had been involved in all the planning stages for the 2020 General Chapter: agenda, meeting place, technical equipment, interpreters for three languages, visas and keynote presenter.

I felt on top of the situation and eager to get the chapter underway, realizing the importance of this announcement for the entire congregation. I was aware that it would impact my life in particular, since my replacement on the team would be elected. After six years of living and serving the congregation in Belgium, I felt ready to rejoin my sisters in the U.S. Province.

You know what happened next? In March 2020, COVID-19 struck, and cancellations were being announced everywhere. Regretfully, our leadership team, in consultation with the provincials, had to postpone the general chapter planned for October 2020. No one expected the delay to last one year and six months!



Participating in a general chapter discussion are, from left, Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk Jane Quinlan, Maria S. Kujur, Espérance Hamuli, Rajni Tigga, Lea Cools and Bridgit Soreng. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk)

It was difficult for me to digest the news, yet I accepted it in good faith as a blessing: It gave me an unanticipated time of transition, leading to deeper trust and hope in God's plan for us. I discovered new insights through reactions I had while coping with the delay. How often I repeated, "All will be well!"

Since my novitiate days, I have relied on the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila for reassurance. I pray it often, especially when everything seems in flux.

Let nothing disturb you,

Let nothing dismay you,

all things are passing.

God alone is changeless.

Patience obtains all things

Nothing is lacking to those who have God:

God alone is sufficient.

The time from the announcement of the pandemic in 2020 to the chapter's convening in May 2022 felt like a roller coaster ride. But we on the leadership team continued to move forward with assurance and to monitor the situation in dialogue with provincials in India, Belgium, Congo and the United States, as well as Ursulines of the Roman Union, at whose generalate the chapter was to take place in Rome.

Coping with the uncertainty of when it would be safe to go to Rome, we watched the daily reports on the pandemic in Italy and the restrictions imposed on travel. At the same time, we carried out our responsibilities, remained calm and focused on the chapter preparation — praying for patience, acceptance, courage and wisdom.

I wondered: How can we keep the momentum going, not knowing if and when we can meet face- to-face in Rome? Would the sisters in the Congo be able to get vaccinated? Would the Indian sisters be able to travel amid the persistent presence of the coronavirus in India?

Now as I think about what was happening, I recognize the significance of my dreams during that time. One dream revealed the reality of the situation: There was a huge obscure event hanging over me, with hurdles and challenges yet to be addressed.

Consoling words came from our congregational leader, Sr. Bimla Minj: "The extended period of time for the General Chapter is giving us an opportunity to go deeper in our reflection and preparation for the General Chapter in a personal, community and congregational level."



The new leadership team of the Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk includes, from left, Matilda Dungdung, Espérance Hamuli, Nirmala Kujur and Bimla Minj. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk)

Our 50 delegates were from Belgium, India, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the United States. To help them get to know one another, we compiled a delegates' profile booklet, providing a photo, short biography and description of the source of each one's vocation. This was made available online for each delegate.

The chapter process was also developed in other creative ways through a series of working Zoom sessions with the facilitator, Ursuline Sr. Ellen Doyle. The delegates were able to prepare and reflect more deeply on the theme of the chapter — "Live a New Life Rooted in Christ" — as they got to know one another. Together we looked at the present realities of our world, our church, and our countries and noted how our communal lives and ministries were being affected by what was happening around us. The clearer direction that emerged would come to fruition at the chapter.

Marist Missionary Sr. Georgeanne Donovan, keynote speaker on the chapter theme, was able to deliver her talk via Zoom ahead of schedule. This gave provinces time to reflect on the questions she proposed.

When the main options of how to hold the chapter had to be discussed and discerned, we asked ourselves: Should we hold a full in-person meeting in Rome as planned before the pandemic? Entirely virtual? Or both virtual and in person? Alternatives had to be weighed in case we were not able to have 100% of the delegates physically present in Rome.

Due to unexpected changes at the Generalate of the Ursulines of the Roman Union, we had to find a new General Chapter site. Fortunately, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary could accommodate us at Domus Helena, which was fully equipped with modern technology to assure the best possible communication for those present and for the whole congregation. Key events during the chapter could be livestreamed, and speakers could be brought in via Zoom.

The chapter was set for May 7-21, 2022. Sr. Ellen Doyle's exceptional facilitation had prepared the delegates well through several Zoom encounters, and they arrived in Rome with great jubilation and a feeling of familiarity with one another.

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In retrospect, the 18-month delay of the Chapter proved advantageous, by allowing all the delegates extra preparation time. When the opening ritual, we processed into the Chapter Hall with great joy. My heart was filled with serenity and relief that the time had finally come.

The chapter included a general audience with Pope Francis, who bestowed his apostolic blessing. It was a profound honor to greet the Holy Father in person, and to have group photos taken with him.

The chapter topics were all deliberated and approved through small and large group discussions.

The elections were right on schedule. The newly elected congregational leadership team includes three sisters from India, and one from the Democratic Republic of Congo — the first time that all members in leadership are from countries in the Global South! This reflects the reality of the demographics of the Congregation in 2022, with more than 850 Indian sisters and nearly 100 Congolese sisters.

We are struck by how we were guided by God from start to finish in the spirit of St Francis: The convocation letter was sent on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi; we enjoyed a visit with Pope Francis; we held our chapter in the Franciscan Guest House; and St. Angela Merici, our foundress, was a member of the Third Order of St. Francis.

The Holy Spirit was at work!