Columns
Religious Life



Sr. Maria Nirmalini, the superior general of the Apostolic Carmel congregation, and sisters of the Apostolic Carmel congregation meet with Pope Francis in Bahrain in November 2022. (Vatican Media/Francesco Sforza)



by Maria Nirmalini

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Editor's note: *On March 13, 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis. This week, leaders of four organizations of women religious reflect on what his papacy has meant, particularly for women religious, in columns for Global Sisters Report. Read more about Pope Francis' 10th anniversary from the National Catholic Reporter.*

It is indeed a joyous occasion to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' papacy and a genuine privilege for me to share a few thoughts on the impact the Holy Father has had on the world in general and on Indian women religious in particular over this decade.



The first visuals at St. Peter's Square on March 13, 2013, of Pope Francis' election actually set the tone for what was to follow. As he stepped onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis looked radiant, sporting a winsome smile. Wearing a white cassock, discarding the traditional red mozzetta, was the first sign of the things to come. Asking the large cheering crowd in all humility to bless him and to bow their heads in silent prayer caught everyone's attention.

Pope Francis was certainly signaling a new kind of leadership, a new way of being church. The name he chose signified that it was truly going to be a groundbreaking

leadership and that there would be many firsts: the first Jesuit to be a pope; the first pope from the Americas; the first to take the name Francis (of Assisi); the first to travel on the bus with other cardinals after the election; the first to live in the Vatican guesthouse, Santa Marta. And that was just the beginning. Many other firsts have been witnessed ever since, not least the desperately needed reforms in the church.

But reforms anywhere must first begin by acknowledging that something is wrong and needs a course correction. The expression of that humble acceptance came in the first interview he gave to the Jesuit magazine America.

"Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" Fr. Antonio Spadaro asked.

The answer came snappily: "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."



Pope Francis bows his head in prayer during his election night appearance on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica March 13, 2013, at the Vatican. The crowd joined the pope in silent prayer after he asked them to pray that God would bless him. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In his acceptance speech at his election a few months earlier, he had stated the same: "I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ." No wonder, then, that two years into his papacy, he announced the Jubilee Year of Mercy from 2015 to 2016.

In that first interview, Pope Francis outlined his vision for the church, saying, "The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up."

The many wonderful ideas and words he has uttered during his daily homilies at Casa Santa Marta, said during his meetings with heads of states or consecrated persons, or written through his encyclicals have engaged me deeply, and I consider them the hallmark of Francis' papacy.

India has one of the largest numbers of religious women and men: around 130,000, among whom 110,000 and counting are women. I believe this to be such a powerful force to carry forward the mission of the church as Pope Francis envisions. The religious, especially the women religious by their sheer numbers, are spreading God's love through the length and breadth of India (and in many other countries, too) by accompanying the oppressed, sheltering children who live on the streets, providing health facilities, preventing human trafficking, teaching in universities, and participating in international conferences on religious life and environmental protection, to mention just a few.

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Does that mean that everything is hunky-dory in India with the way religious men and women conduct their lives? Undoubtedly, the religious are working with deep commitment, presenting the church as the "field hospital" in a multireligious and multicultural Indian setting. But we also face many challenges, much like the pope himself, who, despite the problems, is moving forward with his reform agenda. We are part of that church and need reform in our lives, too. We need to begin by first humbly accepting that we are all sinners in need of God's mercy. The good thing is that we have a leader in the church, himself a religious, goading us to move forward.

One of the many firsts of Pope Francis is the long stride he has made in interreligious dialogue, particularly with Muslims. It was during one of his trips to promote such dialogue that I happened to meet him in November 2022 in Bahrain. It was such a deep, transforming experience for me — not to mention the exchange of a hearty laughter between us, another of his trademarks when he meets people. Though a good number of religious in India are engaged in this ministry, in a large country with variety of religions coexisting, we religious need to do a lot more.



Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and university, listen as a boy recites verses from the Quran during the popes meeting with members of the Muslim Council of Elders in the courtyard of the mosque at Sakhir Palace Nov. 4, 2022, in Awali, Bahrain. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The other great challenge we face in India, as outlined in *Laudato Si*', is the care of our common home. India is a fast-growing economy, and in its race to catch up with others, it is tempted to sacrifice environmental concerns. More religious in India need to expend their energies on this area.

The Indian church also suffers from what Pope Francis often refers to as an issue affecting the larger church: clericalism. On numerous occasions, Pope Francis has spoken of the importance of women's roles in the church and has acknowledged the contributions made by them. In his video message Feb. 1, 2022, in which he dedicated the month to consecrated women, he said, "What would the church be

without religious sisters and consecrated laywomen? The church cannot be understood without them."

Without being critical of anyone, as president of the Conference of Religious India, I would like to respectfully present his words in the video here for our reflection: "I invite [religious women] to fight when, in some cases, they are treated unfairly, even within the church; when they serve so much that they are reduced to servitude — at times, by men of the church."

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Most significantly for us women religious, in his remarks aboard the papal plane after his visit to Bahrain, he said, "A society that is unable to give the woman her [rightful] place does not move forward." He further added, "I have seen that every time a woman comes in to do a job at the Vatican, things improve." He also encouraged men and women to work together for the common good of humanity.

I must confess that I am even more inspired and resolved to live and lead with courage and compassion, to strive together with my team to empower women to come to grips with their inner strength and to believe in God's ever-loving presence in us.

On behalf of all the Catholic religious in India, I would like to wish our beloved Holy Father, Pope Francis, a happy 10th anniversary and pray for God's abundant blessings on him and his mission. Long may he continue to lead us in accordance with God's will and be blessed particularly with good health.

We love you, Papa Francis!

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.