Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



Sr. Kathryn Press, right, poses for a photo with fellow Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus sisters near Lake Albano, Italy. (Courtesy of Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)



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"Broaden your perspective ... cast a wider net," my spiritual director advised me. I was a graduate student in my 20s who felt God's invitation to religious life, but where? To find the "perfect" community, I had set about with my short list of non-negotiables. Some communities looked perfect (to me) on paper, but I hadn't found a place where it all clicked.

Thus, my spiritual director's encouragement to look beyond my list of "requirements" in a community. Interestingly, it never crossed my mind if a community was international or not. Eventually, I did meet a community where I felt truly at home. Now, 15 years into religious life, internationality is easily one of the greatest surprises for me. Belonging to a religious congregation present in 15 countries has been an unexpected delight.

Living abroad in college first opened my eyes to a new culture. I fell in love with Ireland — her people and the culture. I'm so thankful I live here again as a missionary. As a religious sister, and specifically as an Apostle of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, it is a great privilege for me to bear witness to the practice of "mutual acceptance in diversity" and "of being truly international" (*Vita Consecrata*, 80). It doesn't look glamorous. Mostly, it's reminding myself of the little differences between cultures, appreciating my own upbringing and noticing the blessings and struggles where I live now.

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Seven years ago, preparing for my perpetual profession, I spent a month in Italy. This turned up the temperature on my understanding of international! We were seven sisters from four countries (Benin, Brazil, Mozambique and the United States) looking at the origins of our congregation, traveling and praying together. This immersion (it was a kind of being thrown into the deep end!) first opened my eyes to the reality of belonging to an international community. Even when we didn't have a language in common, we spoke to each other through our charism as Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Last month, I returned to Italy. This time, we were more than 20 sisters, all youth ministers or formators. We spent a week together in a mountainside village less than an hour's drive from Rome. The sisters in attendance hailed from Argentina, Benin,

Brazil, the Congo, Italy, Nigeria and the United States. Presently, we minister in Benin, Brazil, Italy, Ireland, Mozambique, Portugal and the United States. Drawn together by the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we embarked on a week of conversation, prayer and reflection.

As the Acts of the Apostles says in the First Reading for Pentecost, we were gathered together from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). Sadly, I didn't receive the gift of tongues. Instead, I relied heavily on my 1200-plus day Duolingo streak to communicate in broken Italian. Laughter, hand gestures and Google Translate helped significantly!

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I'm still unpacking the graces from this experience. Firstly, the trip helped reconnect me with my Catholic faith. If the joy of the young people at World Youth Day is a fruit of our faith, being in Rome helped me appreciate the roots of being a Catholic. I'm blessed to have been to the Eternal City before, even to a papal audience. But walking through the colonnades in St. Peter's Square still leaves me speechless. Between the beautiful spring weather, seeing Pope Francis up close and attending Mass at the altar of the Chair of St. Peter, my heart overflows with gratitude for belonging to something bigger than myself.

Secondly, my week away gave me lots of practice at synodality (and I'm still not sure I'm any better at it!). Hardly a month goes by where I've not read something about synodality in the church. While we had professional translators for some of our sessions (and they were invaluable), I also joined in contemplative conversations in Portuguese. (There are apps to help with instantaneous translation.) My own working group spoke a mixture of Italian, Portuguese and English. Language differences aside, it was clear that we were working toward the same goal and making a meaningful contribution to the future of our lives as sisters.



Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus sisters visit the tomb of Blessed Clelia Merloni in Rome. (Courtesy of Lucas Angstmam/Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)

Lastly, there is the grace of having a deeper understanding of and appreciation for my community's charism. Yes, our faith unites us; our common humanity connects us. But our charism as Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus resonates inside each of us. Upon arrival in Italy, we rushed to hug familiar faces and smiled to meet new ones.

After our days of meeting, we enjoyed recreation: re-creating and forming friendships with one another. Sometimes, this included time together watching the sunset and learning the Italian word for bat (the kind that flies at night ... *pipistrello*). On other nights, we sang and danced together. A particularly touching moment came at the end of our week together when we prayed at the tomb of our foundress. I wonder if she ever had a thought that our community would grow to so many different countries.

When my spiritual director encouraged me to expand my discernment horizons, I did so not knowing what the future held. Now, in retrospect, I'm grateful that my 20-something self didn't know all the blessings that could come from being a part of an international community. It's been a wonderful surprise to discover again and again. How has God surprised you beyond what you could have asked or imagined?