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The Sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary at the 37th General Chapter on Sept. 20 in Rome (Sujata Jena)



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Participating in my first general chapter was a transformative experience, marked by deep learning, faith and community. As Sr. Patricia Villarroel, the re-elected mother general at the 37th General Chapter of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, succinctly reflected, "The beauty of an international congregation is that we get to listen to sisters from various countries, cultures and worldviews." This diversity enriches decision-making and strengthens our unity.

Villarroel emphasized that while it may take longer to reach decisions due to the wide array of experiences and realities, everyone must have the opportunity to express themselves. "Making decisions at the general chapter without listening to delegates from different countries would not be enriching, nor complete," she said, highlighting the value of unity in diversity.

This insight captures the essence of my own first experience at the general chapter — a space where, through dialogue and discernment, the richness of our international congregation comes to life.

As many as 42 sisters from the Republic of Congo, Mozambique, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pacific-USA, Spain, Ireland, France, Belgium, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, Ecuador and Colombia participated in the general chapter of the congregation, held Sept. 1-21 in Rome.

For those new to us, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary is a single congregation of sisters and brothers — religious priests and brothers — founded in 1800 by Pierre Joseph Coudrin and Henriette Aymer De la Chevalerie in Poitiers, France. The general chapters convene simultaneously, incorporating some shared sessions for both groups. As a unique congregation, we strive to witness unity in a fragmented world, expressed through our vowed life in community and mission.

Touching down safely at Fiumicino Airport in Rome on Aug. 28, I was warmly greeted by Srs. Aurora Laguarda and Goyi Marin, patiently waiting for my arrival. This marked the start of my incredible experience at the general chapter. The heartfelt welcome and radiant smiles of the sisters at the Generalate on Via Aurelia, Rome, instantly made me feel at home.

The 37th General Chapter, "Together we walk in faithfulness and hope," felt like a synodal journey for me and the congregation as we engaged in dialogue, listening, prayer and discernment to shape our future for the next six years. This experience of "encounter and grace" helped me see the realities of our congregation, church and world more clearly. As one of the youngest and a first-timer, I was struck by the richness of our diversity and vulnerability. Our unity remains a sign of hope, yet the challenges of diminishment urge us to creatively and boldly seek new ways to foster and sustain vocations.

Sr. Mary Barron, superior general of the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles and International Union of Superiors General president, led a dynamic retreat at the chapter's start. A seasoned missionary in Tanzania and a member of the Dicastery for Evangelization appointed by Pope Francis, she challenged us to "look beyond the horizon" and to embrace our consecration with audacity and creative fidelity and thus overcoming "spiritual anemia" affecting religious life today, particularly within our fraternal communities.



Brothers and sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary at the inauguration Mass of the 37th General Chapter on Sept. 1 in Rome (Sujata Jena)

The chapter engaged deeply with the pressing topics of "fraternity" and "synodal leadership" as vital calls for our congregation.

We emphasized the need to improve relationships based on respect and care among all sisters. The mother general observed that while there is joy in the sisters' commitment to the most vulnerable, such as the poor and migrants, the greatest concern is the fragility of community relationships. The lack of fraternity, respect and mutual care among the sisters puts the mission of the congregation at risk. Specific guidelines were outlined to enhance community life through dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation, with particular emphasis on the importance of daily conversion and spiritual growth as part of the solution.

Steps were proposed to encourage the dream of living a new mystical, prophetic and synodal leadership at all levels.

The newly appointed general government comprises Villarroel as mother general, Susana Villarreal as vicar general, Noemi Garcia as general councilor and Pushpa Rani Arphutham as general councilor. They represent Chile, Peru, Spain and India respectively.

We were delighted to have Patricia Morgante, a laywoman and communications officer at UISG, facilitate the chapter for the first time beyond the circle of sisters.

As one of the youngest members, I was blessed to draw from the rich wisdom and experiences of sisters with different experiences. Some key insights I gained about myself include the importance of being open and honest in my sharing, listening attentively and without judgment, exercising patience in various processes, and empathetically valuing the linguistic diversity within our congregation. It was also an opportunity to foster connection despite age gaps and language differences. I realized that relationships transcend language, and what truly matters is the love and peace we share, uniting us as one community.

My experience at the chapter would be incomplete without mentioning the profound moment we had with Pope Francis. It truly felt like a "sacred encounter" for me, and I believe for everyone present as well. During the audience with him, he said, "You

are called to listen to the voice of Jesus, to contemplate more deeply and to be capable of living and proclaiming the love of God incarnate in Him, particularly through service to those most in need, and through Eucharistic and reparatory prayer, you too in along this line."

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Another highlight I deeply appreciated was our trip to Assisi, the home of three remarkable saints: Francis, Clare and Carlo Acutis. The visit was filled with emotion, awe and a sense of spiritual renewal.

I truly enjoyed the enchanting sights of the eternal city of Rome, where ancient sculptures and sacred places abound. Visiting iconic landmarks like St. Peter's Basilica, the Basilica of St. Paul, the Colosseum and the catacombs rejuvenates the spirit and refreshes the faith. The abundance of fountains with clean drinking water and the irresistible gelato shops only add to the charm of this remarkable city, creating a delightful blend of history, spirituality and tourism.

I returned to the community enriched with wisdom, experience and deeper insights, along with a renewed vigor and passion to recommit myself to the mission outlined during the chapter. With a focus on serving the poor, migrants, minorities, youth, women and ecology, I trust in God's providence and the blessings of our holy founders to guide this journey.