News
Q&As



Schares, seen here in Rome, brings a rich history of working with refugees to the global sisterhood. She is the new associate executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). (Photo provided by UISG)



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Sr. Roxanne Schares, a School Sister of Notre Dame, was recently named associate executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, or UISG, after having served as general superior of her congregation from 2018 to 2024 and as a UISG executive board member.

She continues to serve as a member of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, a post she has held since 2021.

Schares, 73, has long experience working in Rome: from 2007 to 2015, she served as her congregation's coordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

An Iowa native who grew up in a large farming family, Schares is a teacher by vocation. She studied theology at St. Louis University and taught high school in Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota for nine years before ministering in East Africa for nearly three decades, including work in refugee camps and urban settings with the Jesuit Refugee Service, or JRS.

In her new position, Schares hopes to draw on her experiences to strengthen the global sisterhood and promote collaboration among religious congregations, as well as help UISG become even more of a prophetic voice and advocate for those on the margins.

More broadly, she sees the work of the recent Synod on Synodality as an opportunity for women religious to deepen their communal discernment and collaborative decision-making, while also using their experience to help inform the broader church's implementation of synodal principles.

***Global Sisters Report*: You have had a wealth of experience in both the United States and in East Africa and more recently in Rome. Your work with refugees is notable. How did that come about?**

Schares: I served as a novice director for our community in Kenya for seven years. During that time, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda took place, and many Rwandan refugees came into Kenya, into Nairobi — into the parish where we were. In this context, I experienced a call to work with refugees, especially in peacebuilding; so, after serving as novice director, I was able to volunteer with the Jesuit Refugee Service for about 10 years.

For two years, I served in pastoral ministry among Burundian refugees in camps in northwestern Tanzania. After this, I returned to Nairobi and engaged in urban refugee work for four years. Then, I was asked to serve as the education resource person for Africa, responding to needs in several countries throughout the continent where JRS had educational projects, including peace education. I visited and evaluated projects, facilitated staff capacity building, and carried out needs assessments in Northern Uganda during the time of the Lord's Resistance Army in Chad and Darfur, Sudan.

When I look back, I think, oh my, I never dreamed of anything like that when I felt the call to be a sister.

Your experiences have taken you well beyond the American Midwest.

People say, well, how did she come out of this little place in Iowa? They're joking; at the same time, it's part of the story. I've felt a call to be with those on the margins, even though we didn't use that language back then. As a postulant, I spent a summer with migrant farmworkers in Owatonna, Minnesota, and during another summer in Appalachia.

Over the years, I have been gifted with a rich variety of experiences and ministries in various multicultural settings, in education, initial and ongoing formation, spiritual direction and retreat work, international JPIC coordination and congregational leadership, and facilitating workshops and meetings. I've learned to try to be open and discern the calls that come, and this has expanded my heart to embrace an ever-widening world reality.

These many varied and marvelous experiences going into this new position — how would they inform what you're starting to do now?

The Jesuit Refugee Service's mission statement has stayed with me: to accompany, serve and advocate. Accompaniment is foundational — to learn how to be where another is. Not that I must agree with everyone, but to understand their context, their reality. And I think that is one of the learnings I hope to bring to this ministry as I meet different superiors general, sisters with questions or concerns, or partners in mission: to know who and where they are, their realities and hopes; to learn from them and see how to respond.

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You mentioned the Advent theme of waiting as a point of reflection in your life and ministry.

While we're waiting and/or searching for God, often seeking God in this or that situation, we're being sought. God is looking and waiting for us.

This reminds me of an experience when working in a Tanzanian camp of 50,000 people. A refugee from Burundi was my interpreter; I used Swahili, and he interpreted from Swahili to Kirundi for me. He was a very humble and generous man, a refugee from the time he was 17 years old.

He shared some of the struggles he faced, and I asked, "What keeps you going; what gives you hope?" He responded, "Sister, for a Christian, there is always hope." He paused a moment, looked at me, then said, "God knows when I will be able to go home again. God knows."

A few weeks later, he came with news of the birth of their ninth child, Victorina Christina Nyibigizi — her Burundian name meaning "God knows." I realized then that we are in solidarity with one another in suffering. In painful times, we discover God's gift of hope given to us. God's gift is always there for us, but in being in solidarity with another, hope is revealed and brought to life within us. That has stayed with me all these years and, every now and then, his witness of hope comes back to me.

What you've done touches on many aspects of UISG's work, correct?

Yes. At UISG, we have a vibrant formation program for congregational leaders, a strong justice, peace and integrity of creation commission, a new migrant and refugee network, and other initiatives that touch on several of my previous ministries. I believe that my firsthand experiences can facilitate the accompaniment of our teams and projects as well as congregational leaders in communal discernment and decision-making now and into the future.

As you go into this role, what hopes do you have?

I see the importance of strengthening our global sisterhood — for us to know and support one another and together discern relevant and meaningful responses to urgent needs, especially at the peripheries. My hope is that as we move forward together, we will strengthen our collaboration. At times, that may mean moving beyond our institutions or particular services to see what we might be and do

together for an even stronger, more effective response.

Another hope is that as women religious we deepen our understanding of and commitment to the prophetic identity of consecrated life, a challenge Pope Francis reiterated during the year of consecrated life. This call continues to echo within me, and the recently concluded synod expresses the call to us and our entire church to be a prophetic voice in today's world.

Where do you see your work and the work of UISG in that continuing process of the synod?

One aspect of our work is to further the understanding of what has come from the synod and provide ongoing formation for us all to be more synodal in our lives as women religious and as a church. As Pope Francis has noted, it's one thing to have a synod or a synodal process; it's another thing to be synodal.

Within this, for us all, is the call to conversion and to initiate new pathways of missionary transformation.