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Religious Life



At its triennial general assembly, this year held May 5-9, the International Union of Superiors General united 950 superiors general and guests from around the world in celebration of the organization's 60th year. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)



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Just a couple miles from where the all-male cardinals of the Catholic Church are gathering to elect a new pope, nearly a thousand Catholic sisters in leadership can be found contemplating their own role in the church's future.

The concrete power of those 133 cardinals manifests in votes that determine the direction of the universal church — this, in stark contrast to the transformative type of power belonging to sister leaders, just as the assembly's theme suggests: "Consecrated life: A hope that transforms."

At its triennial general assembly, this year held May 5-9, the International Union of Superiors General (or UISG) united 950 superiors general and guests from around the world in celebration of the organization's 60th year, coinciding with the jubilee year.

But with the recent death of Pope Francis — as well as the suspense of the ongoing conclave — looming large over table conversations, the assembly also presented an opportunity for collective grieving and shared gratitude for Francis and his legacy. (The gathering began just as the nine-day mourning for Francis had concluded.)



The UISG general assembly is held every three years, this year bringing together 950 superiors general from around the world. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

Traditionally, the assembly closes with an audience with the pope. This year, however, their private time with Francis will look a little different: Sisters will walk through the Holy Doors of the Basilica of St. Mary Maggiore on Friday (May 9), to pay their respects to Francis' tomb.

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Opening the XXIII UISG plenary assembly, UISG president Sr. Mary Barron said that "it seems fitting at this moment to call to mind some of Pope Francis' key messages to consecrated life throughout his pontificate, and perhaps to ask ourselves, what is it that we are now called to carry forth to further the renewal that he has initiated within our church and within consecrated life?"

"He depended on consecrated life to support his vision for renewal, and at this moment, we must be vigilant in doing our part to keep that flame of church renewal

alive," said Barron, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of the Apostles.



Sr. Mary Barron, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of the Apostles and president of the International Union of Superiors General, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican on Oct. 20, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Representing about 590,000 sisters from around the world, UISG was founded in December 1965, born in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. And at this plenary, sisters are engaged in synodal conversations as an homage and continuation of both Vatican II and Francis' papacy, which was devoted to inviting all baptized Catholics to the table in dialogue and decision-making.

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"This year in our assembly, we are invited to continue to embrace the spirit of synodality, to walk not as individuals or as individual congregations, but as a

communion of hearts, minds and hands," said Barron, a member of the Vatican Dicastery for Evangelization.

"We are invited to further the synodal path being traced by us and among us. We are invited to listen deeply to one another, to discern the movements of the spirit among us and to renew our commitment to the gospel values that anchor our lives."

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>
> —Sr. Mary Barron, UISG president
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Transformative power

The keynote address was a fitting follow-up to the presentation of the 2025 UISG report, which outlined the positive impact of sister-led ministries and the organization's global initiatives (to be covered in future GSR reporting).

As the assembly's keynote speaker, Sacred Heart Sr. Mariola López Villanueva spoke of the importance of religious life "embodying hope" in a world full of suffering, using the image of cords that — like an umbilical cord — contains hope and promise for what is to be.

"I hope we help each other to be humble pilgrims in this land of love that exceeds us and accompanies us along the way, by the side of all those who today seek shelter," she concluded. "Pilgrims who choose to love without counting the cost in every circumstance."

Building on the assembly's theme, Day 2 began with Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla's speech on how consecrated life represents transformative hope. Brambilla is the prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican office working with religious orders and their members.

Evoking images in nature, biblical stories and historic icons, Brambilla said that it is the proverbial nighttime in which religious life can thrive: to turn inward and "perceive the essential," to "rediscover the authentic values of consecration."

"This is our hour," she said. "Not the hour of the blazing, solitary sun, but the hour of the humble and communal star."



Representing about 590,000 sisters from around the world, the International Union of Superiors General was born in the spirit of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. At UISG's 2025 plenary in May, sisters engaged in synodal conversations as an homage and continuation of both Vatican II and Francis' papacy. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

With transformation comes choices. And if transformation is a journey, she said, the choices that the church faces is akin to packing and unpacking a suitcase, deciding what comes along and what ought to be tossed out.

She wrapped with a memory from her time in Afghanistan, recalling the sharp contrast between her and another sister in prayer, and the armed soldiers with

whom they shared the chapel. The words of one of those soldiers have stayed with her: "These two women, extraordinary, humble and dedicated, are doing infinitely more for these people than all of us military men and women combined."

("Talk about papabile," one sister said to GSR about Brambilla, using the term for promising papal contenders.)

The assembly continues with panels from sisters sharing testimonies of their work on the margins — from Myanmar, the Amazon, and the U.S.-Mexico border — and reflections on the hopeful role of sisters in a synodal church, with speakers from the Ivory Coast, Dominican Republic and India.

At the hour of the opening of the conclave, the evening of May 7, sisters joined together in chant: "*Veni, Sancte Spiritus*" — Come, Holy Spirit.

In the coming days and weeks, Global Sisters Report will provide a more comprehensive report and reflections on the general assembly, as well as immediate thoughts from the sisters upon the election of the new pope.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.