



REFLECTIONS ON THE UISG MEETING, ROME

From Maree Marsh

Theme: "I know the fountain well which flows and runs...though it is night."

Dear Sisters,

Greetings from Ireland!

During May I had the privilege of attending the leaders' assembly of women's religious orders, held in Rome every three years. The UISG (International Union of Superiors General) represents some 600,000 women religious. The assembly drew together 465 leaders from Europe; 67 from Asia; 102 from Africa; 157 from the Americas and 10 from Oceania.

Reflecting the hardships and sufferings of many, the theme for this year's assembly was taken from the writings of St John of the Cross: "**drinking from the fountain that springs forth and flows...although it is night.**" We pondered the twin themes of mysticism and prophecy. We were challenged to renew our commitment to the mystical aspect of our lives in order to renew the prophetic dimension of our lives.

Tables were assigned according to language groups. My table included English-speaking leaders from India, Africa, Philippines, Slovenia, USA, Switzerland and Australia. This diversity provided rich sharing.



Simultaneous translation was given in eight languages: French, German, Spanish, English, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese and Korean. Apart from inspirational and moving reflections the informal sharing at mealtimes was also very rich. On one occasion I was sitting with a Canadian sister who related her experience of being in Haiti on the day of the earthquake. The buildings belonging to her community partially collapsed and her sisters suffered a range of injuries but no loss of life. Cathy told the story of a local congregation of Haitian sisters who had gathered together on that very day to celebrate

receiving their approbation from Rome. Of the thirty-nine women only eleven survived. What must those eleven women be saying to God at this time?

Feelings of disappointment, regret and anger were quietly and respectfully expressed about the cancellation of the audience with Pope Benedict, which had been arranged well in advance. The Pope travelled to Portugal on the day of the pre-arranged visit. Cardinal Rodé, the Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, was also "out of town."

Fr. Eusebio Hernandez Sola, representing Cardinal Rodé, barely alluded to the pain felt in the church as a result of the sexual abuse, abuse of power and the investigations into the orders of women religious. It was a Jewish Rabbi from Boston who expressed heartfelt empathy and compassion to the gathering. In response to questions he also spoke of the personal pain felt by many on both sides of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

At the Assembly updates were given on the world-wide activities to combat human trafficking, as well as reports on an inter-congregational project in South Sudan. Partnership with Caritas International at a number of levels was appreciated. Caritas was also acknowledged for its excellence in responding to many needs around the world.

The energy, commitment and passion of the women at the UISG Assembly were palpable. What follows are some excerpts from the talks and the *Statement of Direction* for the next three years. The complete texts are available on the UISG website: <http://www.uisg.org>

One commentator in the National Catholic Reporter summed up the week: "*The editorial this week highlights the remarkable vitality and perseverance that has provided the Catholic church with examples of compassion and sacrifice for the sake of the "least among us." In the midst of one of Catholicism's darkest hours, the sisters continue to produce light, reminding church people that there is a dimension of Christianity that is sadly lacking in press accounts of scandal. The nuns illustrate Pope John's sage remark at the outset of Vatican II that the Gospels call for the 'medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.'*"

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Since 2001, the UISG, working through the general assembly, releases what has since been viewed as a foundational declaration, pledging religious congregations around the world to work in solidarity with one another in order to seek justice and hope in the wider world. The 2010 statement aims to express the spirit, intent and direction for the next three years and reflects an international view of religious life. The statement reads:

“I know the fountain well that flows and runs... though it is night” (St John of the Cross)

THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IS IN ITS MYSTICAL AND PROPHETIC FORCE

“My soul is thirsting for God, the living God” Ps 42, 3

During this Assembly:

We, 800 superiors general coming from 87 countries, have quenched our thirst together at the Fountain of life, the God of Jesus Christ, source of our joy, our hope and our strength.



We commit ourselves to:

- Rediscover anew and listen to the Fountain which speaks in our hearts, through others and through creation.
- Draw water from the Source of our charism and rediscover the dynamism of our first call.
- Taste and share together the Word and the Bread.
- Promote a constant dialogue between the Word of God and the events which happen in our world.
- Invite others to come and drink at the Fountain.

“If you consider me a believer... come and dwell in my house” Acts 16, 15

Like Lydia, a listening and faith filled woman, we are invited to open our hearts and our homes and to remember the living waters of our baptism.

We commit ourselves to:

- Create a new style of mystical and prophetic life, open and hospitable, inclusive, respectful of differences and acknowledging the richness of other cultures and religions.
- Recreate the art of living in common, marked by deep human relationships, a listening heart, empathy and non-violence in order to be witnesses of Gospel values.
- Live in harmony with the whole Cosmos and to dwell respectfully on this Earth.

“Put out into the deep... and cast your nets...” Luke 5,4

We have become aware that we should not fear the night of the deep waters.

We commit ourselves to:

- Courageously identify the “nights” of the Church, of society and of our congregations.
- Discover the sparks of light hidden in the heart of violence, poverty and the lack of meaning
- Open our eyes to discover new paths of light in the darkness of our world: in the precarious situation of women, the existential restlessness of the youth, the consequences of war and natural catastrophes and the extreme poverty which leads to violence.
- Offer as consecrated women a ministry of compassion and healing.
- Build inter-congregational networks at local and international levels, involving the laity in order to initiate different projects and to work for the transformation of unjust structures.
- Go beyond the frontiers of our respective charisms and to unite ourselves in order to offer a mystical and prophetic word to our world.
- Engage in truthful dialogue with the hierarchical Church at all levels in order to achieve a greater recognition of the role of women.

As Mary, let us remain awake and vigilant, constantly searching for the Fountain that flows, certain that It will be found, although it is night.

“I know the fountain well which flows and runs... though it is night.”



Prophetic action can grow out of confusion

Judette Gallares, Cenacle Sisters, The Philippines

Using imagery from the Acts of the Apostles and a story of Lydia, a woman who broke boundaries after she became a follower of Jesus, Judette Gallares called upon all to open our hearts to conversion. She laid out the steps of conversion, a movement, she said, that takes one through confusion and darkness into quiet contemplation, to awakening and finally to prophetic action.

“The first phase of conversion is an experience of darkness or confusion, an awareness of emptiness that needs to be filled, of thirst that needs to be quenched, of questions that beg for answers; yet there does not seem to be anything or anyone who could satisfy these needs. For some, this phase manifests itself in an experience of incongruities - in oneself or in life itself.

The second phase is the phase of awakening. This is when one’s spirit is awakened by the touch of God, priming it to listen intently to the Word of life. What follows after the awakening is the phase of prophetic action, an experience of an initial impetus of faith, a sudden surge of inspiration which brings about enthusiasm and desire to put one’s new-found conviction or belief into action. This frequently effusive change in one’s attitude and values is what we commonly call a conversion or a transformation. We usually have this phenomenon in mind when we think of conversions.

What follows then is a phase of silence. This is called the quiet phase where time is needed for contemplation. A frequent and faithful entering into the heart to listen and discern God’s word in the world is necessary for prophetic action. For change brought about by conversion to have its deep and lasting effect on the person, a quiet phase is necessary after the ebullient stage. This is a time of reflection, of withdrawal and moments of aloneness, a time for making sense of what has happened, a time of testing the authenticity of one’s mystical experience and the depth of one’s conviction to engage in prophetic action. This is the time of internalizing the values put forth by the newly accepted and deepening faith.

The quiet phase eventually leads to the fifth and final phase, or movement, which is the integration phase. Here, the person makes the substance of the conversion an integral part of one’s being. The period of silence and withdrawal has provided the time to make sense of what has happened, to integrate the change of attitude, perspective and belief into one’s history and life, and to form a synthesis of all the parts of the mystical and prophetic experience of conversion.

Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one’s capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for the authentic self. An ongoing life of prayer is important to discern continually the action of the Spirit in one’s life. Prophetic speaking and acting do not have the advantage of hindsight precisely because it is addressed to “what is happening” right now.

Thus the more contemplative the person is, the more one can make appropriate prophetic action even without the privilege of long periods of prayer. This phase will enable the person to enter again into the community of faith and to put that faith into action based on one’s conviction. The prophetic task is to focus the Word, the proclamation of the Reign of God, directly on and in a particular situation.

Religious women are being called to be more attentive to the presence of the sacred in our inner journey, in the lives of others, and throughout the whole of creation.

Just as the first Christian community in Acts - who gathered together in deep prayer as they awaited the birth of a new beginning - experienced an impelling force of the mighty wind that emboldened them to engage in prophetic action of proclaiming and witnessing to the Word to the ends of the earth, we too are called to live our religious commitment in the same pattern as we continue Christ’s mission in our world today.”

The Theology of Empathy

Rabbi Arthur Green USA

“How wide is our circle of empathy, of compassion? Can we open the doors of our hearts widely enough to include the whole human family, even the larger family of natural beings, within it, without losing our distinctive sense of history and ethnic identity? Can the special love I have for members of my own community be a love that encourages me to open further, to embrace ever wider circles in love? Or does it necessarily close me off from others, creating a circle of exclusiveness, to which most of humanity remains outside?”

Both Christians and Jews need to struggle with a legacy of exclusivism. You may blame ancient Israel and its prophets for having started it, but the church inherited it and raised the stakes, until we Jews too were seen as outsiders.

We need to work side by side in facing the great challenges before us. These include the degradation of the human spirit in our profane modern culture, the endless lure of selfish materialism and the great injustices it engenders, and the very preservation of our planet itself as a home for higher forms of life. All these are the real work of religious people and communities, and we must be united to facing them...



Your church has made great strides in openness of spirit... The spirit of Vatican II, and especially the words of *Nostra Aetate*, gave us all much hope that the truest catholicity or universality of your faith was being given full expression. Many of us, including myself, learned from and were inspired by your church's ability to repent, to grow, and to change, while remaining faithful to your own identity. I urge you with my whole heart to continue in the path of that growth, not to compromise it in your hearts or in your teaching. I promise you that I, along with a host of my colleagues and students, present and future rabbis, struggle alongside you to read our own tradition as one of universal human embrace.

The mystical spirit that seeks to overcome all distance and separation cannot become an excuse for ignoring boundaries... I realise it might be more polite for a visitor to remain silent about painful and embarrassing matters taking place within your own family. But I have decided it would be even more insensitive to remain silent. As a friend of your great church I mourn with you the pain of all the victims, including the priests, whose lives have been so ruined by energies that got so deeply out of balance. If I am here to speak of empathy, I must first express empathy for the pain and loss felt by Catholics around the world in these recent months and years. That includes empathy for all those who have been harmed by abuse and inappropriate behaviour, empathy for all those misled into thinking they could hide from themselves or from God behind the veil of attempted celibacy, and empathy for all the many hurt by confusion, doubt and loss of faith. I pray that God be with you in the work of healing, healing the lives of individuals and healing the deeply wounded church itself. How ironic that you women, who had so little to do with the causing of this crisis, so much of it having to do with men and male psychology, will have so great a hand in the process of its healing. Indeed, I also pray that the church learn from this something about how greatly the wisdom and leadership of women is needed to right these balances that seem so hard for many men, both in the church and throughout the world..."

Called to Illuminate with Prophetic Light the World of Darkness

Liliane Sweko, Sister of Notre Dame de Namur



"As an African and a woman religious who worked for many years in Africa before being elected to the general leadership team of my congregation, I can only approach our theme from the starting point of the particular experiences through which religious life is growing and taking root in African soil. Well known for its poverty, under-development, endemic sicknesses and its wars and HIV/AIDS, is the African continent not in the process of making its mark within the noble Christian tradition of prophecy and mysticism? Yes, for the past fifty years or so, many African women religious have been assassinated (235 in 2003) along with their brothers and sisters, men religious, priests and laity. By the end of last year, the number of assassinated women religious greatly increased.

If we examine the circumstances surrounding the death of these consecrated persons, we discover that they were not involved in activities that were particularly confrontational: their time and energy were devoted to teaching, medical assistance, development, evangelization. Unarmed, they were a threat to no one, were capable of extraordinary courage, and stood out from others solely by the gratuitousness of their love, sign of God's solidarity with people.

If we are to be mystics and prophets in the world today, we are called to involve ourselves in a world where men and women, bruised by violence, famine, poverty, wars and so many other attacks on their dignity, cry out and appeal for help. By nature, prophets have three tasks: denunciation, annunciation and renunciation. Reflection on our vows and on our manner of living them may help us to find new ways of being prophetic today. How do we understand the vows or continue to understand them? We certainly do maintain that they are a source of freedom, pathways to freedom, maturity and fulfillment, but concretely what do we make of these evangelical counsels..?"

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