

Contribution UCESM

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I am grateful to be able to contribute to this European meeting for the superiors of the European orders and congregations. You start thinking about the future. And you have asked for ideas from religious women. I am a temporarily professed Dominican sister, from Nijmegen. In the past three years, this from its origin congregation for education has suddenly had three new vocations, including mine. You can take this contribution as one that sees forward to the future of the very shrunken Dutch Church within the secularized Dutch society.

I begin by reflecting what I have heard in the synod talks of the religious in our country. I will give some comments about that and outline some developments that there are in our country. Finally, I give my view on what a religious, female or male, in these times, should be.

From the synod talks among the religious, we have heard that the church is in the hearts of the religious. If the religious of the Netherlands want to give something to the Church, it is the love for & the openness to every person who are all equally worthy. This goes beyond the rules of the morality of the Church. Rich and poor, young and old, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, Dutch and people of migration background, righteous and sinners, the Church must radiate the love of God for every person and give hands and feet to that love. The first feeling of people entering a church should be that they belong there and that they are loved. There must also be equality in the church between all believers, priests and laity. In concrete terms: that the laity are involved at all levels of policy.

Where help is needed, the Church should provide it. Proximity and practical help for the vulnerable is a priority. The Church herself should be sober and think about what she spends her money on.

In the secularized West, the Church must pay more attention to young people and their search for meaning, connection and silence.

It is important for the Church to continue to engage in dialogue with other denominations, and with believers of other religions and non-believers. Where possible, there should be cooperation, especially in the areas of the major problems of climate and the gap between rich and poor.

In our area, the church is dealing with the pain of polarization that has divided groups in the catholic Church of our country. There is a need for dialogue between these groups.

At the same time, for many non-believers, the shame of the sexual abuse in the Church undermines the credibility of the Catholic faith. This causes trepidation among the believers. A renewed boldness in proclamation is called for, because faith can offer much joy and wisdom.

The Church can make itself heard in the public debate. As a Church, we serve a greater purpose, which is to make the world more as God intended it to be; In a society in which individualism and autonomy are such dominant values, communities of believers form a constructively critical voice. They live out of a connection with Christ, with others and with each other.

The cultural shift within the religious institutes in recent decades has increased the awareness of joint responsibility, that everyone has a role and can use his or her talents. They want to pass on this experience to the Church.

This is what I read in the final document of the conversations between the religious. Now what I would like to add personally is a commentary on these recommendations with my eyes on the next fifty years.

Our Dutch Church is getting small, very small. Of the thousands of religious, only a few dozen remain, many of the churches in the cities and villages of the Netherlands will close and between ten or twenty regional churches will be kept open per diocese. We have seven dioceses. We will have great difficulty in fulfilling our main tasks as liturgy and catechesis. Our country is already receiving and will have to receive even more help from missionaries from outside.

Many people who are catholic believers now come to church alone, no longer as a family. The Catholic faith is a faith of choice, no longer a popular faith. This is the prospect for the next fifty years. If God is not doing a miracle in the hearts of people, which He always can do.

At the same time, we see a number of good developments that we can respond to:

The first of these is an increase in Catholic forms and devotions at the Dutch Protestants. The religious may already be noticing that new forms of monasteries are emerging to which people from a Protestant background attach themselves. There are approximately 175 communities, half of which were created in the past ten years. There is with them more openness to the mystery of liturgical acts and vestments, to symbols and rituals. They like to make use of the guest rooms in the monasteries, and 50% of those who enter Catholic monasteries are Protestants. There is a bottom-up ecumenism, and these same development we see in the way they organize their liturgies within Protestant churches.

A second development: There is growing attention for pilgrimages, walking and cycling from church to church, or from monastery to pilgrimage site. The Netherlands is already a forerunner in the world with the number of marked pilgrim paths. They are used a lot. The pilgrimages are not performed traditionally, but they do go to the sacred and silent places of the churches. In cities, silent places or silent meditations are also offered in churches that young people use.

A third development that is interesting is that many people are registering for digital programs to prepare for church festivals such as Christmas and Easter. There is a lot of demand for guidance to come to certain choices, this is also done via the computer or hybrid, with an occasional meeting on site. For people who are searching the truth there are internet courses to orientate themselves on the Christian or Catholic faith and use is made of this. The Church can develop more in this regard as a provider of reflections and guidance. Faith-based courses for basic knowledge can also be offered. An interesting option is the possibility of creating a digital community per parish or region, whereby there are also regular opportunities to meet each other in places.

One can already see in the large cities that the Catholic community is very international. People from all over the world come to the churches. This could be a great opportunity for the secularized West, as the Catholic Church in other parts of the world is growing and has many young people. Invest in these people and give them responsibilities and tasks that lead to more people feeling welcome. It may also be good to celebrate liturgy in English or Spanish, or arrange for translation.

When the Church's sexual moral is explained lovingly and clearly, without condemnation when something has gone wrong, I think that in a society with many loose and broken relationships, it can be a message that helps people build a stable life. Bold proclamation, which is accompanied with help where that is needed, can, in my opinion, also help to make the world a better place.

The same goes for the Church's claim that there is truth to an overly relativistic culture, which encourages fake news and the rise of powerful dictators. The Church does not have to obscure her truths, but she must explain them clearly and lovingly.

I join the call of the religious to continue the synodal process of entering into dialogue and listening to each other, even after the synod. In a conversation partner who has a different opinion, there is always a truth to be heard, a truth that can often be heard in the value that resounds underneath the words.

Now that I have outlined these general developments, I want to zoom in on the role of the female active religious in Western Europe.

After two hundred years of education and care in all kinds of areas, the emancipation of the poor part of the population has been reasonably successful, and lay people can take on these tasks themselves. Apart from the fact that here and there there will always be sisters who will take up this work as individuals, it is no longer necessary for large institutions to have this task.

There are other needs in society, in my congregation we see in particular the evaporation of the faith, the lack of knowledge about it, and the lack of communion among believers as a need in our regions. That is why I see it as the first task of religious in Europe to show people that God exists. God, the Trinity, and especially Jesus must be at the center of our lives, our liturgy, our proclamation, our being. It must be visible that you are a believer and it must be clear that you invite people to get to know the faith, to be able to talk about it, to celebrate together and to form community.

Because we are few, we must be able to inspire. We are the ones who inspire and connect. We are the visionary people, that must be able to lead, direct, give space for others to develop and execute. We have to work together, preferably with people who combine a touch of creativity and professionalism, their quality is more important than quantity.

I think it is necessary to invite people to your liturgy, which you can keep simple, but beautiful. Our busy society is looking for silence and reflection, combined with calm singing, a beautiful text, and time to think. The time and the place must always be the same. It works better to provide fewer days, but predictable, for example every Friday at 5:00 PM. Open vespers are therefore ideal in that regard.

I outline a sister life to you, which on the one hand is simple and can be done with little woman power, but on the other hand must be of a high standard. The sisters should be able to build good personal relationships. They must learn to invest in the people around them, enable them to get to know the faith, and to be able to pass it on again in their own personal way. The sisters must be able to explain the faith, have answers to the difficult questions, know and be able to refer to experts in their network, and know the people in society who need them. As far as I'm concerned, they should be able to study throughout their lives and develop their own expertise. Certainly for women, because that has not been taken care of up until now at least in the Dutch church, there must be study at high level. It is also important that they understand why people in our society have difficulty with religion. What is the origin of excessive rationalism, individualism, materialism, etc. And what are the paths that lead from it, including beauty, truth, sense of symbolism, and loving relationships of friendship.

The sisters must therefore be able to create community on all kinds of levels.

For the old sister congregations, this means a major switch, from thinking in organizing large institutions with their work mentality and fixed salaries, to personal flexibility in small communities, in which investment must be made in the individual talents of the sisters, confidence in the paths that a sister feels she needs to do. Building community is a different organizational model than running a large institute. There must be time to experiment, and to let some projects fail. We need to think differently about the need of salaries for sisters. E might have to go back to begging again. The buildings of the sisters should be opened to guests, so that they can pray and celebrate, eat together, have courses and counseling conversations.

Preaching work about the existence of God, and witnessing to that is not only done in the ordinary, real world, but also through social media such as youtube, instagram, linkedin and facebook. Young sisters understand this because they grew up in this world. Give them space, because that's where their peers are too. Invest in the equipment you need, and don't be afraid to make a mistake.

Once you go this way, you will receive vocations, and then it will surely come to fruition.

Vocational work is different now than it used to be. Women will not enter in our countries in the west before their thirtieth birthday, with the exception of a few. Give the women plenty of time to discover the spirituality, guide women who come from an unbelieving background, don't be afraid to refer a woman to another monastery. Because if we all do that, they will end up in the right place, and some of them will come to you. So work together with other monasteries. In the last three years we set up a project in Holland to have open afternoons for searching women, and made a cooperation to do that together with now already 14 religious women congregations and orders, contemplative and active. The KNR is actively supporting and promoting the afternoons. The women can come to have a look and feel what is the atmosphere, learn something about the spirituality, ask some questions to a religious, pray the vespers, and eat a meal together with the sisters. Then they will go again. It is very low profile, just for these women to see and taste what this community is like.

I would really like to ask you to have a good forming of your young sisters. In my own history, the guidance has not been good. Unfortunately, I lost years and also got hurt because of it. Please have a good novice mistress, and keep the structures in your community healthy, have good conversations with those who enter, give them the opportunity to grow to your customs and to holiness. Ask yourself whether there is a safe living environment, and make use of an supervisor from outside for the candidate to talk to.

So to conclude my talk: For the future of religious life in Europe: Think big, think flexible, and ask for help where you need it.

Thank you very much for listening.