

MINUTES

“Religious life: identity and future” – facing the challenges of today General Assembly UCSEM, Vranov (CZ) – 15-20 April 2024

1. Tue, April 16th: Facilitator’s opening speech

Dear Participants,

My name is Grzegorz Dobroczyński, Polish Jesuit from the Warsaw Province (PMA), presently working in Poznań in the Jesuit Refugee Service and I am mostly devoted to work with Ukrainians – victims of war started in 2014.

You can ask me and speak to me in English, Italian, German, Russian, Ukrainian and Latin :) But I understand also French and Spanish. Unfortunately, I do not know Hungarian ;).

My role is to make our common efforts easier, so my function is called „facilitator:

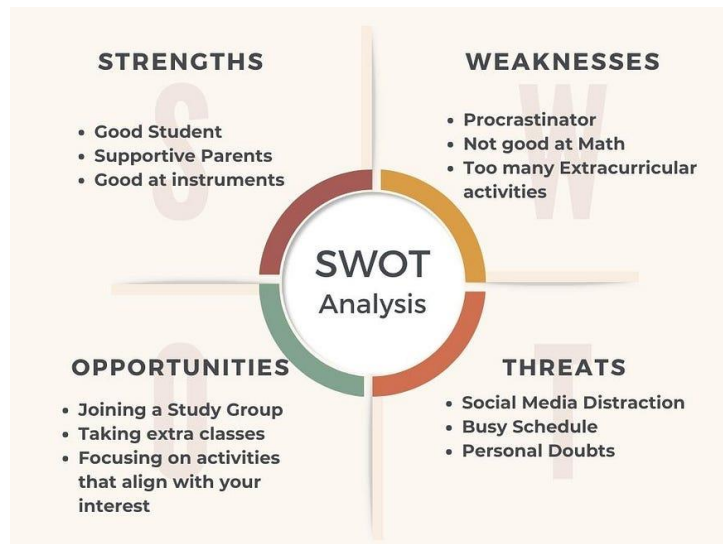


As you know it from e-mails received before, the topic chosen this year will be: **Religious life: identity and future – facing the challenges of today.**

The subject originates from the last General Assembly of 2022 in the Netherlands, where the focus was put on the **strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats** of and for religious life. Our **preparations for the Synod of Bishops on “synodality”** have also inspired us to consider this challenging and stimulating theme.

We see our charism and mission – that is, our identity – as our strength, our vulnerabilities as a weakness and a threat, and the involvement of and links with the laity as an opportunity for us.

So the guideline for reflection remains SWOT:



Depending on fruits of our work, a direct general reflection based on this scheme will be used by the end of our meeting.

Speakers

Some renowned speakers will provide participants with their inputs and points of view, and will be ready to exchange ideas with us, to provoke the thinking process:

- Fr. Lukáš Fošum op, Fr. František Hylmar sj and Sr. Denisa Červenková cstf (CZ) will give an introduction and then exchange views on identity, starting from the situation of the religious in the Czech Republic
- Friar Philip Pinto cfc (IND) will speak (via zoom) about vulnerabilities in our religious life
- Fr. Luis Manuel Suárez cmf (ES) will give an overview of the steps taken by the Vocations Apostolate Network (VAN) for which he is responsible for UCESM
- Sr Nathalie Becquart xmcj (F) will address the important aspect of synodality: the involvement of lay people in religious life and the relationship of religious with them. Conference languages are English, Italian and French with simultaneous translation. We look forward to many international encounters!

Programme of 4 days: it was shaped in a way to look, reflect, pray and share experiences and thoughts on various aspects of the principal reflection theme. *(See the papers you have received from the General Secretary).*

At this moment I would like only to put attention on some basic points, leaving the issue of elections, special guests meetings etc.

The idea of the schedule is to look at identity of religious life first. The lecture by three speakers and the zoom meeting with Sr Simona Brambilla, Secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life will be the input.

At the same time on the 1st day afternoon the problem of safeguarding shall be discussed as in the actual situation it touches critical points of faithfulness/betrayal of the identity. It will be continued on the 2nd day – Wednesday morning – with a reflection on vulnerabilities.

The third day, Thursday, is devoted to a crucial point of today's Church in general and of religious life in particular: co-working with lay people. It is to note that, again, it is suggested to treat it not in terms of the shortage of men/womenpower among religious congregations but as a challenge and the chance for the new opening within the horizon of new times and the new spring of Christianity.

Method:

After hearing presentations of invited experts and special guests we propose sharing in small groups – based on selection of common languages. Then, the fruits of group sharing shall be presented shortly in public forum.

The presentation should be short: let's say 3 minutes. The notes presenting more content of sharing may be given as documentation and further working material for the UCESM and handed to myself.

Depending on the dynamics, sometimes we will stay together, talking in two, but differently than group work this "pair sharing" should be also open to changes so that there will be an occasion to know each other better.

My role will be also to give you a short "echo" of the day at the beginning of a new one.

Elections

There will be a special time of elections and decision taking: personal, structural, budget decisions, and some others.

My role is to „facilitate” the process, guarding the time table and helping if necessary in any emerging problem.

On my behalf I assure to be of help to you all the time ☺

Let us trust that this gathering is not only a human enterprise but also a prayer and discernment community similar to the one depicted in the Acts of Apostles, 4, 32-34:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them.

2. Wed, April 17th: Minutes

Let us keep in mind what was happening yesterday. On my part, I am going to keep a general view but of course it will be partly MY viewpoint, excuse me for this.

1. The reports of the President, Fr Janis, Secretary Sr Marjolein and Treasurer Abbot Erik, brought us down to the earth on the common way within the UCESM. The next step was to hear reflections of our 3 Czech speakers: Sr Denisa and Fathers František and Lukaš: „Between today and tomorrow – who are we?”

What was very moving to me was the personal testimony of their lives. And I keep in mind specially the following words (may be not wordily repeated): „to accept reality of life” – both in the community and in the surrounding world. The basis for identity is the personal relation to Christ. Not just a generic relation to God as an idea but a personal attachment. The union of life in God and identity based on insertion of the spirituality within the culture. Spiritual identity AND human experience should go together.

A continuous conversion, this is what the identity calls for and consists of.

Then, the scripture paradigms, like this one:

John 20, 19-21

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

J 20, 24-29

The confusion which is sometimes seen in our lives seem to be like what the disciples were feeling. But still even if the door was closed, the hearts were open.

To trust in real life = to trust in Jesus. No theory but a vivid relation to Him may help us.

The tensions – might exist, they belong to real life. Trust in Jesus is the way.

Likewise, the tools of prayer:

- Gospel meditation
- quiet contemplation

- examen: in an Ignatian sense as a discernment and seeking God in all things, not just only „bookkeeping of sins and omissions”.

What is the actual call for religious life? Among others to create safe space in our surroundings, helping the injured, the poor. The poor widow from the Gospel and the Lord's reaction to her are the rule for apostolate. This brings us close to the issue of the safeguarding.

From the theology of St. Thomas, with its great tradition we are taught how to be contemplative in action. So, the dynamism guided us from personal experiences and general reflections into theological insight of the one, who at the end of his life (St. Thomas of Aquin) found the completion of his great, entire work in contemplating God.

Let us follow the example of the giants.

God guide and bless us all.

3. Thu, April 18th: Minutes

Actually, there was no time for Minutes for we decided to give more time/space to Br. Pinto.

Br. Pinto's insights: „How can it be?”

- **Vulnerability:** basic experience, critical but also opening within the paschal perspective;

- **Invitation into journey:** wanting to control everything we find ourselves out of control. This is our time and a challenge;

- **Reasons for vulnerability:** The time, the culture, excess of information. But in spite of all technologies, we are small in a huge universe. “As a religious brother I seek an answer in my tradition to find myself in this time...”

I want to see Jesus amid today's Christianity. Jesus turns upside down all what religious people think about God. He destroys our categories. God is like Jesus.”

- **How I see Jesus in the Gospel? Examples:**

a. He weeps for Jerusalem.

b. He is frustrated by the blindness of pharisees and others around Him.

c. He was abandoned on the cross.

d. He is in the love of His Father (it is manifested in the scene of His baptism).

e. He forgives all who put Him to death, and the one who betrayed Him....

That is a discipleship we are invited to follow. To testify THIS Jesus.

Question: Which God am I making visible?

- A judge, or the One whom Jesus shows me: LOVE.

- The hardest thing to believe that Jesus/God is just love (!)

God reveals himself in vulnerability. Love makes Him vulnerable. To love means to leave oneself vulnerable (!). The main task: to learn how to love. This is Jesus on the cross: naked on the tree, deserted by all, with a cry: „my God...why have you deserted me?” In this he decided to love.

„That is a sign of total humanity. If you reach it, you touch divinity.”

So this Jesus did not come to make us good but to make us whole (human being).

We cannot be human without touching vulnerability.

Quoting Virgin Mary's words: „how can it be?”

Answer: S. Levine: „the meaning of life is to let your heart be broken”...

When all masks fall down this is you! It is you whom God loves. New life can begin (!).

Congregational brokenness

Example: child abuse a sign of brokenness. Br Philip's congregation decided to face it; not to deny. To face blessing in the wound.

So, one is forced to think, what is the culture which allowed it? To have a lesson to teach us, a painful lesson of:

- personal experience

- harrowing but blessed

- discovering who we really are...under the externals

- finding the blessing in the wound.

Lessons to be learned:

- a. No avoiding the truth - face it, no denial;
- b. Feel the pain and the shame;
- c. Name what is happening;
- d. Staying with uncertainty;
- e. Staying with the Word of God .

This, according to Br Philip, is our mission. Not anything else. To show the new face of God (LOVE) - (clerical Church cannot embrace vulnerability; see Pope Francis and his option – now remind - who is the opposition? Bishops! This is wrestling with God).

Wrestling with God is continuous: Abraham, Moses, Jacob, our time and us.

When we decide to surrender, we allow forces other than you which is God and you experience new life, really.

Critical remarks

Religious life often denies vulnerability. It gives security, lodging etc... financial security, independence. So:

- we put institution above all else;
- little risk taken... we make very calculated steps;
- when we find resources lacking, it is the work with the poorest that is dropped;
- resistance to change is the temptation – holding the past;
- many are not helped in dealing with emotions;
- there is also little help in learning to love (I was taught not to fall in love not to love);
- but decision not to be vulnerable means that we need defences to protect ourselves: taking actions step by step – excuses, rationalises behaviour, blaming, joking about it.

So, what is the armour you tend to use?

Remember: „The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek”

FACILITATOR’S QUESTIONS TO SHARE: THE COLLOQUY AT THE CROSS (St. Ignatius).

A colloquy is an intimate conversation between you and God the Father, between you and Jesus, or between you and Mary or one of the saints. It often occurs at the end of a prayer period, but it can take place at any time. Let this conversation naturally develop in your prayer. In the colloquy, we speak and listen as the Spirit moves us: expressing ourselves, for example, as a friend speaks to a friend, or as a person speaks to one whom he or she has offended, or as a child speaks to a parent or mentor, or as a lover speaks to his or her beloved:

What have I done for Christ?

What am I doing for Christ?

What ought I do for Christ?

4. Fri, April 19th: Minutes

Let us remind what was happening during the Assembly yesterday.

Josian Caproens: European Laity Forum, expressed her view on following topics:

- Importance of working together, religious and lay people. It is also important to stay based on living faith communities. Religious could be open to lay people to find out more what it is to be Christian today. A lot of people seek for spirituality – religious may offer a lot. We all can be the Church together!
- To learn from each other and to enjoy faith. To be partners for Bishops’ Conferences, to change the clerical image of the church.

Then, **Sr Nathalie Becquart**, undersecretary of Synod of Bishops, put a fundamental question: How to become a synodal Church in mission with lay people? Basic remarks to be noted:

- **all religious are invited to be a part of the synodal process;**
- **short description of the process:**
 - a. communitarian discernment;

- b. Synodal dynamics lead to put clear questions to be discerned and solved, coming out of the situation of the Church and today's world;
- c. centrality of baptism: **despite** diversity of backgrounds, charisms, languages and cultures... **journeying together as baptised to serve today's world. This is the most important for the world;**
- d. community of hierarchy, clerics, laity – one round table (!) **Equal dignity of the baptized: co-responsible together for the mission of the Church...in search for the Spirit's guidance;**
- e. the need for more understanding synodality;
- f. walking together **with the whole humanity;**
- g. listening and discerning the voice of the Spirit. The Synod brings the personal integration of this call;
- h. **The change is on the way:** from the top-down teaching church to a listening/ learning Church: communion in vocation;
- i. **So the synodality is based on principle of participation** of all in the life of the Church.

Concluding points

- answering the signs of time: youth, transmit faith today, meet current missionary challenges;
- **anthropological need for a culture of synodality (EG).** Humanity created on God's image, created for relations, interactions, love and friendship. At the same time, it is to noted that people experience vulnerabilities...
- **experience of synodality as the way forward:** beginning from the family as a domestic Church;
- **relation stays at the centre (!)**
- **capability to accept and manage: tensions, TO EMBRACE DIVERSITY, vulnerabilities..., INCOMPLETENESS...HUMILITY.... fruit of synodality.**
- **eschatological dimension (!) RS 11Cd: its necessary to be aware of one's capacities and also his/her limitations.**
- reforms in Church meet resistance but **primacy of grace**

Lay people

- primacy of Christ on the orientation toward mission;
- call to be on the move;
- dynamic vision of Church – based on dynamic vision of Trinity (Syn 49);
- **common passion and vision for the mission;**
- **coresponsability and participation.**

Finally – the priorities of going together:

- **with the poor as protagonists;**
- **with women as equal partners in Church and society;**
- **calling more women to leadership;**
- **with people of different cultures;**
- **with young people as a priority;**
- **sign of times: lay associations and movements – as charismatic sign.**

WE ALL THE NEED OTHERS TO BROADEN OUR PERSPECTIVES.

Some notes from sharing within the groups:

- **Differences East-West:** in situation of conflicts and wars or persecutions, laity must be defended by clergy and the clergy is on the front more, so it is normal that a certain lack of balance will be the effect.
- **Crucial question: laity not as „coworkers” but as companions in a common mission of Christ!**
- **Baptism more than religious vows is the basis for community of religious and laity;**

- Synodal process should be correctly received. **We all through baptism are inserted into the Church as... laity :)**

Reminder - four basic vocations of the humans are: (Sr Nathalie):

- a. human (birth)
- b. baptismal;
- c. living the baptism through consecrated life;
- d. ministry and mission.

The encouragement by Pope Francis:

THE WAY IS DONE BY WALKING – IL CAMINO SI FA CAMINANDO !

Thank you 😊

by Grzegorz Dobroczyński SJ