

**FINAL STATEMENT
ON THE
21ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF UCESM**

1. Introduction: venue and theme

The 21st General Assembly of UCESM took place between the 15th and the 19th of April 2024, in the Convent of the Minim Fathers in Vranov (Czech Republic). About 45 Presidents, Vice-Presidents or representatives of the different European Conferences of Major Superiors from 23 countries participated in this five-day event which addressed a most relevant theme, namely, "Religious Life: Identity and future. Facing the challenges of today". This is an ongoing topic, already during former assemblies. New and a specific focus at this assembly is, according to the president of UCESM, Fr. Jānis Meļņikovs in his opening speech, the focus on vulnerability, on cooperation with lay people and on Synodality. In other words, a rediscovery of our identity as religious could help us face the future with renewed hope.

2. Networking: an intrinsic value

Independent of the content of the sessions, the Assembly was an opportunity for all of us to engage in valuable networking. The structured and especially the unstructured moments of the days gave us the valuable opportunity of getting to know new faces, new people, and forge new relationships. The creation of new friendships is an intrinsic value which such UCESM gatherings inevitably offer.

3. Efficient methods used

The sessions were made up of a good mix of different methods: inputs by speakers, sharing in small groups and in plenary. Such variety of methods used helped us to personalize the themes discussed, making them more relevant to our concrete life contexts.

The creativity used during prayer moments (e.g. Taizé songs, recitation of the 'Our Father' in different languages, chant gestué, etc.) made our prayer gatherings more special and the use of different languages during the liturgy helped us experience and appreciate the beauty of unity in diversity.

The attempt to use the synodal method of sharing, made of a tripartite structure (i. sharing of what moved or touched me in my prayer; ii. sharing of what moved or touched me as the others shared; and iii. spontaneous sharing to see what actions or indications emerge), helped to create a contemplative atmosphere and rendered our journey together an experience of in-depth listening to the promptings of the Spirit.

4. Ecclesial ties

As Church documents attest, consecrated life exists within the Church and for its sanctity. It does not exist in a vacuum but finds its meaning within the ecclesial context.

As a reflection of this, the experience of the Assembly was enriched by the presence of the Archbishop of Prague, Mons. Jan Graubner, who, while reminding us that consecrated people are called to witness Christ, gave us the wonderful news that the Archdiocese of Prague is annually enriched by a 1,000 new converts, among whom are prominent people in the city. The Thursday afternoon visits on location to different religious communities in Brno (Salesians, Franciscans, Contemplative Sisters of Saint Clare, Community of the Beatitudes,

the Carmelite Sisters' restaurant near the cathedral of Brno) continued to make visible the rich presence of religious in the context of the local Church.

On the third day we were graced by the presence of the Apostolic Nuncio to the Czech Republic, H.E. Mgr. Thaddeus Okolo. The Nuncio presided at the Eucharist and during his homily, while reminding us of the essentials of our way of life as religious (prayer, community, prophecy, etc.), he made an enthusiastic remark about the authenticity of female religious in the Czech Republic.

The zoom-meeting with the Secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Sr Simona Brambilla, the input by the Under-Secretary to the General Secretary for the Synod, Sr Nathalie Becquart XMCJ, on the theme of "*how to become a synodal Church in mission with the laity*", as well as that with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, continued to highlight our ecclesial ties not only with the local but also with the universal Church. Also, the presence of the President of UISG, Sr. Mary Barron, gave a deep feeling of ecclesial ties and of appreciation for European religious.

5. Our identity as consecrated to God

One proposal which this General Assembly seems to offer as a way forward for consecrated life in the future is perhaps a return to the spiritual roots of such a call. Such a proposal seems more than relevant in our day and age, when our European secularized or agnostic society has slowly but steadily contributed to an eclipse of our identity as people consecrated (i.e. people set apart) to God. Individualistic and secularized life styles have become rampant in our communities.

Drawing on their personal experience of God in their lives, not few speakers emphasized that the principle and foundation of religious life is the personal experience of God. This is perhaps what we are primarily called to do amidst the uncertainty of our times. As Fr. František Hylmar said, although "*for the disciples it was a time of great confusion, they kept staying together in the place where they last experienced something intense with the Lord*".

In a similar vein, in his homily on the first day, Fr. Jānis Meļņikovs quoted the British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who once said, "*faith is the courage to live with uncertainty*". Fr. Luis Manuel Suárez reminded us of the Lord's words to Moses when he said, "*I place before you life and death [...] choose life*" (Deut 30:19). Similarly, Br. Philip Pinto, former Superior General of the Christian Brothers, urged us not to worry about the decrease in numbers, but on how we come across. A handful of religious who are passionate about God and seriously believe in our way of life can leave a huge impact.

6. Common life or communion of life?

Perhaps another way forward for consecrated life in the future is to creatively find ways and means to share our faith and life experiences between ourselves. In one of the plenary sessions, a lamentation was voiced in the form of a question: why do we share more with friends and outsiders, than with the members of our community? This is the risk of having a common life (eating together, praying together, etc.) but no real communion of life, i.e. no intimacy between us. We live side by side, but we barely know each other.

In light of all that we heard on the theme of vulnerability throughout these days, perhaps real communion is forged between members of a community when they reach the point of sharing their vulnerability and weakness. On that level, we are the same. As they say: "If you look inside yourself, you will find everybody else!" One's courage to appear weak and vulnerable before others is what binds him more to them. To embrace and disclose vulnerability is to risk to love. The poverty of sharing one's own vulnerability is perhaps the key to real communion of life.

Taking this principle onto an ecclesial level, perhaps only a Church that can embrace and confess its vulnerability, can really learn to love the poor, the vulnerable, the weak and those on the existential peripheries. Br. Philip Pinto reminded us that Pope Francis does not want a Church taken up by its own importance and self-referentiality, for such a Church can never embrace vulnerability and, hence, can never learn the art of the risk of loving. The sex abuse scandals within the Church are perhaps helping her to become more aware of her vulnerability. Facing the truth, not avoiding the humiliating pain and shame, embracing her vulnerability, can help the Church to continue investing in safeguarding procedures for a safer Church.

7. Journeying with the lay people

The synodal path which Pope Francis is inviting the Church to embark upon can be described as, "*Christians walking in communion with Christ towards the Kingdom together with the whole of humanity*" (Sr Nathalie Becquart). Synodality does not mean ignoring the hierarchical structure of the Church but it is a call to empower the lay people, it is a quest to encounter and give value to everyone, it is a serious tentative to engage everybody and enable all the baptized to participate and feel co-responsible in the life and the mission of the Church. Synodality is about discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit, convinced of the valuable role of the *sensus fidelium* as a megaphone in and through which the Spirit speaks. Underpinning this culture of synodality is the anthropological vision of the human being as relational by nature.

In light of this, as religious we are invited to welcome the challenge of envisioning the laity no longer as *add on's* to help us perpetuate our apostolates, but as collaborators and protagonists in our life and mission. We have to continue to make the transition from the mentality of seeing the laity as "*working for us*" to one wherein we work together with them, not walking *after us* but walking *with us*. This would help lay volunteers and collaborators not to feel *used* by us, but valued and appreciated for what they are in the Church, namely baptized Christians like us. Such a synodal mentality is conducive to the rediscovery of the centrality of baptism in the Church.

8. Conclusion: way forward.

These three proposals that emerged from this General Assembly, namely, a return to the foundational experience of God and seeking real communion with our brothers and sisters and the laity in the quest for mission, remind us of the two commandments of love given to us by Jesus Christ. May we all strive hard to put them into practice.

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Vranov (CZ) on 19 April 2024