



WEAVING A NEW SPIRITUALITY

Plenary Assembly of the UISG, May 2007

Contributions from Group Work

Original in Spanish

At the end of the Plenary Assembly in May 2007, the desire was expressed that the UISG should consider how to make known the work done in subject groups on the “five threads”, as this contained good material for reflection and for ongoing journeying. The five topics were: Migrants and Displaced People, Earth and its Sacredness, Laity, Inter-religious Dialogue and Women. These topics were worked on starting from the following questions:

Following this morning’s reflection and with regard to the “thread” chosen, what can we say about:

- A new spirituality which creates hope for all humanity?
- How we are living this spirituality?
- The consequences we see for ourselves?
- What we need to mobilize as leaders in our congregations and at the international level?

In these pages we want to respond to this desire.

We have tried to gather together accurately the reports handed in, giving them a certain shape and indicating the convictions, suggestions and desires expressed so that they can all be remembered, with the desire that they may lead us to take concrete steps, even if they are small ones. They are “threads” which challenge us today, as consecrated women, “*to weave this new spirituality which creates hope and life for all humanity*”. (Theme of the Plenary Assembly).

May this text be a reminder, an impetus and a stimulus to reflection for everyone who reads it.

Women (topic worked on by 260 Superior Generals from 57 countries)

Woman is the bearer of life, and in engendering life, a source of hope for all humanity is born. However, unfortunately, throughout history and in our

present reality, she is not seen in many parts of the world with the dignity given to her by God. Woman, “the mother of the living”, the backbone of society, is the one who is of least account, the one who does not usually take part in major decisions, the one who does not always have a voice, the one whose rights are not always respected. She is often seen as an “object”, exploited, subordinated, excluded, abandoned, beaten, sold... Violence against women, children or adults, wounds life itself. To attack her dignity attacks life and this causes major and serious injustices.

The eyes of Jesus were open to the situation of women in his time: the woman bent double, the woman who was a sinner, the Samaritan woman... Meeting with Him transforms them, makes them upright, frees them and gives them the feeling of their own dignity, makes them people worthy of His love and friendship, worthy to be His messengers. And they respond to the gift received; they are with Him at the foot of the Cross, and after His death, very early in the morning, they run to the tomb with their spices. The disciples fled and hid themselves out of fear.

God and God’s Son Jesus place the great mystery of the Incarnation in the hands of a woman. *“And the Word was made flesh...”* *“Go and tell the disciples that I will go before them into Galilee...”* A woman is worthy to be His Mother, and other women are worthy to be the first to proclaim the Risen One.

Mary is with us. With her and like her we want to live a spirituality of listening and communion, attentive to the needs of others, discreet, daring and trusting. Cana is a reference point: “Do what he tells you”. Listening, bearing witness to life, and nurturing it in all that is around us, with people, with our sisters. Listening to women, to poor women, and by our simple listening, being bearers of hope.

God invites us again to be co-creators with Him. The call that we feel is not so much to weave a new spirituality as to enter more deeply into and strengthen a spirituality based on attentive listening to the Word of God and to reality, especially in all that concerns the dignity of women.

This spirituality has already come into being. It is important to be aware of it and to go forward, in order to:

- help even more in actions carried out to promote the dignity of women
- help women who are victims to find their way of liberation
- help them to begin the journey of reconciliation, where it is often the victim who takes the initiative
- help them to discover and value their being as women, to become aware of their dignity and to live their vocation as women.

We are therefore called to be women of spirit and life, and being aware of the exploitation and degradation of millions of our sisters, we must:

- combine our resources in order to be collaborators and co-creators, to be able to journey together in dignity and freedom in international action
- change our attitudes and mentalities about the dignity and freedom of women, while affirming the equality and complementarity of women and men
- know what position to take up before men and the clerical Church
- find ways of empowering our sisters so that they in turn can empower other women, journey with them and help them to move out of passivity and indifference
- understand and change our power structures where necessary

In order to dare to take our place as women, with women and for women in society it seems essential for us:

- * to direct our formation towards the development of the identity and dignity of women: a new way of being as women
- * to work in projects on behalf of women, networking with other congregations and organisations. Associate ourselves with movements in civil society which are fighting for women's rights and dignity
- * to be women of hope who bring this message where there are difficult and problematic situations and realities. Avoid being closed in on ourselves, with our own problems.
- * to keep in contact with reality, and, in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation and of communion, to make a systematic analysis.

We are aware that education is essential, in order to move out of ignorance, to allow for the development and growth of the person, to know and appreciate one's own riches, to value one's own condition and to have access to one's own rights and to freedom. However many women: children young people, adults, do not have access to education. Programmes are also needed for education for life, for respect and love of women and r men, because both were created in the image of God. There is an urgent call to set up these programmes in collaboration with others. There is also an urgent call to reflect on cultural traditions, customs and taboos in the light of the Gospel.

As Congregational Leaders

We feel the importance of helping our sisters to become aware of their value as women and their value as religious because only from that basis can they analyse the situations which many other women are living and reach out to them so that together they may rise up and be strengthened.

To accompany those who are more involved with women in difficult situations to become a committed presence, walking with women and being sisters

To allow our older and sick sisters to express their suffering, and what their life has been; to help them to continue to be aware of and to value their being as women until the end.

At Intercongregational Level

Let us take risks, let us speak out together.

Let us help one another as congregations to respond to needs without hesitating to ask those who are more competent in this area of women.

Let us reflect together about the decisions taken in our countries to see what position we should take up with regard to them.

Let us communicate what is already being done at inter-congregational level and see if there is something we could implement where we are.

Let us bring to our Conferences of Religious what we have drawn up here so that it can have a multiplier effect and so that other congregations can commit themselves in this area; let us invite them to work on and agree on civil and Church legislation in support of women.

Let us not be afraid to express ourselves in the religious, Church and political fields in our own words, and let us work to ensure that we are listened to. Let us be in solidarity in those situations of domination-submission and of injustice which some communities and congregations experience at times with some bishops and priests.

Jesus says to us today as he said once to Jairus, *“Do not be afraid, she is not dead, she is sleeping...Taking the girl by the hand he said, “Talitha kumi”...and told them to give her something to eat.”* (Lk. 8: 54)

In Relation to UISG

We appreciate the increasing reflection and action carried out by the two Unions, UISG and USG. It is an example of a collaborative and equal relationship, and we encourage them to continue to seek out joint projects and to use their common voice to speak out freely against all that degrades and dehumanises human beings, especially women.

As we finish this group work, we ask ourselves how we can network with other organisations who are working for the same end and what we can do to make international dialogue a reality.

Migrants and Displaced People (topic worked on by 131 Superiors General from 33 countries)

God speaks to us and calls us to a Gospel reading of reality. As we contemplate it, we experience in our heart the pain of so many migrants. This phenomenon calls and challenges us and throws our lifestyle into crisis. It awakens a spirituality of communion, rooted in the Trinity, a spirituality which calls us to responsibility in solidarity, to respect, to mobility and which asks us to respond by small gestures.

Through this worldwide phenomenon God invites us:

- to conversion of heart
- to develop a new awareness
- to do a new kind of theology
- to “set up tents”, beginning by setting them up in our own houses
- to create new relationships

Sometimes we feel tiredness, fear, prejudice...but we also feel the need for formation for meeting, for networking among ourselves and with other organisations and Church bodies. God continues to set up God’s tent among us! Let us have the courage to be prophetic.

Proposals for concrete actions:

- promote in our communities this new spirituality, rooted in the Word of God and in the knowledge of the social doctrine of the Church
- form ourselves and others to responsibility in solidarity
- value the quality of our presence and our resources
- begin to see the responses that we could make from where we are and what we have
- create welcoming spaces inside and outside
- use the strength of our collective voice
- network, open ourselves up to hospitality and dialogue with the world

As UISG, set up a centre of reflection and coordination about the movement of peoples. It could be a symbolic gesture of the new spirituality in support of life and of hope for all.

God is inviting us to create something new.

The Earth (topic worked on by 134 Superior Generals from 29 countries)

“...And God saw that it was good” (Gen.1:31)

God created a common dwelling place for all human beings; we call it the

earth, and God entrusted it to man and woman. God did not make us owners but rather inhabitants who live on earth in harmony. The earth does not belong to us; it is the heritage of all. Our responsibility is to protect it, to take care of it, to make it a home that can be lived in by all, to keep it worthy of present and future generations.

The earth, our dwelling place, is a sacred place, created by God and clothed in God's beauty. It is the meeting place of humanity with God. "*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*" (Jn. 1:14)

In the face of this great gift, feelings of gratitude and responsibility are awakened.

However we have spoiled the plan of God and sadly today we see:

- all kinds of violence towards the earth
- corrupt exploitation and destruction of forests
- pollution of air, water, rivers, seas
- wars and bombing
- the threat of climate change, the nuclear threat

A minority feels itself to be the owner of wide areas of the earth, thus spoiling the plan of God, and 195 millions of displaced people have "*nowhere to lay their head*".

The spirituality of the earth as "the house of all" is non-negotiable. It is a spirituality of our times, a cosmic spirituality which touches the sacredness of all life.

Earth spirituality is inclusive, all can enter it, it speaks to us today, it is relevant and universal. Earth spirituality is feminine, it fits in with right relationships, it invites us to gratitude, respect and solidarity. It gives us a basis for cooperation and collaboration. It has implications for us personally and as congregations, as Church, as citizens of the earth.

To contemplate and love the earth as God contemplates and loves it, to see it with God's eyes, to work it with God's hands. It is in some ways a mystical seeing, for which an attitude of respect and reverence is indispensable. Contemplation will ask two things of us: an ongoing conversion and a spirituality of the Covenant, symbolized by the rainbow.

The spirituality of the earth is deeply contemplative. It contemplates the world, nature, life, reality. It is a spirituality to which we are called to respond with concrete actions. Consecrated life should feel itself committed, with all humanity, to make its humble but important contribution, collaborating in creating ecological awareness, defending this common heritage and ensuring that the goods of the earth are used responsibly and fairly for the good of

people, thus giving glory to God.

This commitment asks us to:

- * think cosmically
- * pray globally
- * act locally

We suggest as concrete actions:

- giving opportunities for formation to sisters, associates and other people about creation spirituality
- rethinking our vows from an ecological point of view
- including earth spirituality in programmes of initial and ongoing formation
- acting in line with what we say and not using disposable material for convenience
- encouraging sisters to join local organisations which work to protect the earth
- advocating systemic change which respects everything connected with the earth
- supporting the “Earth Charter” (UN letter written in 1997)
- taking our statement to the UN, supporting ecological projects and denouncing abuses and actions against nature
- asking the education departments of religious in every nation to set up optional courses on ecology or the protection of nature
- proposing to governments that the means of social communication present campaigns on ecology

We ask that the National Conferences and the UISG put the topic of the earth on their agendas and that the plenary assembly of the UISG consider a campaign about water

Inter-Religious Dialogue (topic worked on by 88 Superiors General from 27 countries)

We are aware that religious life must open itself to the reality of inter-religious dialogue, and it will do so by entering into itself, starting from what provides a basis for and nurtures its own spirituality and beliefs.

Inter-religious dialogue presupposes a knowledge of reality that predisposes us to openness to the other, which becomes a dialogue of LIFE and becomes service. It is a spiritual way of being.

We consider inter-religious dialogue to be an essential aspect of the expression of spirituality of the twenty-first century.

God calls us to go and meet “the others” who have their own beliefs, with

love and friendship, encouraging dialogue and mutual sharing. It is a spirituality of knowing how to BE...SEE...HEAR..., which is passionate and dynamic, which moves from exclusion to inclusion, from superiority to equality, which sets free and heals wounds.

Together we can “heal the world” – Tikum Olam, one of the Hindu commandments.

Our heart and therefore our language need to be purified, need to be “stripped”, freed from prejudice and selfishness.

Dialogue must begin “ad intra”, valuing the multiculturalism of our institutes. This witness will become leadership, challenge and will open up to us the way of life that the spirituality of dialogue will demand of us.

We feel an urgent call to commit ourselves to inter-religious dialogue now that:

- we live in a more pluralistic world
- we feel the need to come closer to other religions as sisters and brothers
- we are seeking common ground which will unite us

We are more aware that Christians do not possess all the truth about God

- We have discovered the “face of God” in other traditions and we want to continue discovering this
- We want to live in harmony with all and to build peace with them
- In our service of humanity we must go beyond the frontiers of religion

Inter-religious dialogue nurtures a new spirituality

- A Trinitarian spirituality which is communion, relationship, reciprocity
- A spirituality centred on the person of Jesus, which is prophetic, in a deep relationship with God and attentive to reality
- A spirituality of dialogue which makes us move out of ourselves, open our eyes to the values of others, in the awareness that no one has all the values, and together, looking at those who are in need and on the margins of society; this looking can become an open space for inter-religious mission.

This implies:

- taking up again the discipline of listening and reflecting, which requires contemplation
- being healthily rooted in our own traditions, and at the same time remaining sufficiently open and able to learn from the other
- including in formation programme the experience of inter-religious dialogue and the knowledge of other religions

- having a real contact with other traditions, other religions, establishing friendly relationships

All that has been said leads us to a commitment. As leaders, we want to ensure in our congregations:

- initial and ongoing formation open to inter-religious dialogue
- human and spiritual formation which develops a strong personality, able to make a commitment, together with a serious theological formation
- formation deeply rooted in the contemplation of Christ, which allows the person to overcome suffering
- taking on a process of personal and human confrontation in order to grow in attitudes of conversion, reconciliation, humility and respect

As leaders we want dialogue to lead us to action through

- commitment to concrete actions together in solidarity
- encouraging participation and collaboration in already existing groups
- being present in existing forums
- seeking the truth together, not in order to possess it but rather to show it to humanity in its many manifestations

At the inter-congregational level we want:

- to strengthen commissions for inter-religious dialogue: the UISG/USG commission and those of countries and regions
- to continue the meetings of the continental assemblies of UISG and others outside Rome
- to promote celebrations of world days for peace, for tolerance, for martyrs etc., taking part jointly with members of other religions

Gradually by entering into this process of inter-religious, inter-congregational, inter-generational dialogue, we will be able to discover a new dimension of the vows:

- availability, acceptance of the other, respect for the other...Chastity
- freeing ourselves from our individualism and selfishness...Poverty
- listening to the Truth present in the truth of the other...Obedience

We cannot go on this journey alone. We feel the urgent need of linking up (networking) with other congregations, exchanging experiences of updating ourselves in inter-religious dialogue. We need to be able to rely on the national conferences.

The Laity (topic worked on by 181 Superiors General, of 35 countries)

God, rich in mercy, passionate about each one of God's creatures, has a plan of salvation uniting us all in God's self.

We are living in a new era which requires of us a change of mentality, a new dynamism. In this globalised world, the Spirit is drawing us to a spirituality of communion, out of which arises the need to share our charisms.

We recognise that each charism is a gift of the Spirit which urges us to carry out God's plan. The charism therefore is not the exclusive property of anyone, not even of religious life. We recognise that God also gives charisms to the laity, as God wills, always going ahead of us in distributing them.

The charism, gift of the Spirit, does not belong to us, it is given to us to be shared, even with people of other religions. The desire of lay people to live the charism of our congregations is a vocation, a call of God to both lay men and women and to our congregations. It is a responsibility to respond, or not, to this call.

The documents of Vatican II place religious men and women on the same footing as lay women and men as members of the people of God, but also different as religious. Ongoing reflection on the universal call to holiness and service as a consequence of our baptism must support our fundamental attitude of openness to lay women and men.

The Spirit urges us and drives us ... The Spirit is among us and moves us to live with others our passion for Christ and for humanity. All of us, laity and religious, have much to learn in our following of Jesus. The Spirit will show us if we listen attentively and respond.

Thanks to this call, the charism is opened up, it goes beyond our congregations, it takes on another dimension and reveals other aspects unexplored until now. It develops a new way of being Church and a new face of the Church. But we must not forget that it is not a question of doing something in this area, but rather that reflection is important.

This is the time of the laity. It is a sign of our times which urges us to develop this energy in the Church. The lay and religious states enrich one another while keeping their own identity.

For this we must:

- enter more deeply into our own spirituality, finding the right language for today
- include the dimension of sharing with the laity in initial formation
- set up journeys of formation and accompaniment – religious and lay – according to the different realities

- avoid all form of competition among us. We need each other.
- keep the creative tension while we try to define clearly our identity as religious and our relationship with the laity. For this it is important to form ourselves to a change of attitude about our own identity as religious and about the fundamental equality with lay people as baptised persons.
- foster this new life which arises from the interaction and sharing with lay people as a spiritual sign of our time. Collaborate in building the “common house” together.
- set up inter-congregational networks of relationship and communication to share experiences and bear witness to unity and solidarity
- become aware that what is important is the continuation of our charism, not of our works
- bear in mind that sharing the charism could lead to a change in ways of working and in structures

Today we feel the need to:

- welcome God’s action in history, in our religious families and among the laity
- open ourselves to lay people: an openness which will be truer insofar as there is more respect and welcome for diversity and specific identities
- weave threads of reciprocity which nurture the very passion of the Father, the awareness and the experience of the Word, wise reading of the reality of our time
- welcoming the gift of the Spirit who is present in lay people, an incarnated presence which becomes a space and place of hope and dialogue
- encouraging an ecclesial openness in communion in our community
- going beyond a “ghetto” mentality
- seeking the elements of the family charism which respond to the life of lay people, making it explicit

The lay state is a sign of our times and this sign is asking us for a conversion of mind and heart so as to move from reference to ourselves to sharing our riches for the Kingdom.

Reflection

Reading the work carried out in the groups during the Plenary Assembly

Did I feel stimulated by it?

What conclusions do I draw?

What steps can I or we take, in our particular situations?