Navigating Religious Life in the 21 st Century

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My task is to set the scene of religious life looking at the wider context and trends today. We are in new territory. When navigating a new route, a map of some sort is essential. Some years ago Sr. Jane Herb IHM, during her LCWR Presidential address (Leadership Conference of Women Religious -in the United States), referred to a novel by James Cowan called A Mapmakers Dream. The story is about Fra. Mauro, who is a cartographer at the Court of Venice. He remains in his monastic cell; attentive to those whom he invites in to give him information, as he follows his dream to create a perfect map of the world. He perceives the world through the eyes of others. However the author remarks that "True philosophers are those who embark on a voyage into the unknown, unsure of their of their destination or whether they might ever return."[1] Fra Mauro eventually realises that the experiences of those who come to visit are changing him and that the map he is creating has contrasting and conflicting views. He feels that he must look at the task from a different perspective in order to attain a deeper sensitivity. The map of religious life that I will try to create today probably responds best to the observation by Elizabeth Kapu'uwailani Lindsey - a cultural anthropologist from Hawaii - who wrote: *The planet is our canoe and we are the voyagers. True navigation begin in the human heart. It is the most important map of all. Together may we journey well.*

What I present today comes from my heart and love of consecrated life. Firstly, let us look at the facts and figures. I believe that these are not the most important aspect of religious life but they indicates patterns. Sr. Tere Maya ccvi said some years ago: "God provides the vocations needed, where they are needed and when they are needed," and I believe this to be true. From the Vatican statistics we can see the difference between 2019 and 2024. There has been a decrease in the number of religious women (50,000); religious brothers (1,500) and religious priests (4,000). While there is little difference between the numbers of brothers and priests worldwide, someone recently remarked "they are now just in new places." The big decrease in the number of women religious, is due to a wide variety of factors: including – deaths, new educational opportunities and work opportunities for women; smaller families; opportunities to serve the church as lay persons; secularization, a weakening of long-term commitment, the church's loss of credibility, the lack of visibility of religious and a host of other reasons.

In the next 10 to 15 years, the number of religious will decline significantly in the Global North. Many congregations are coming to completion or engaging in extensive restructuring. Lay people are taking over many of the congregations' institutional ministries – schools, hospitals, universities, etc.) –which have become Public Juridic Persons (PJPs), - a formal legal entity established under ecclesiastical law (canon law) "to conduct specific ministries, own property, and manage resources on behalf of the Catholic Church."[2]

Even in the Global South numbers are beginning to decline. In India where there are over 100,000 sisters, in the last 10 years, 31% of the population have transitioned into the middle classes who make up 81% of the population. This has

[1] James Cowan, A Mapmakers Dream, Boston, MA: Warner Books, 1996, 48.

[2] Every PJP operates under a specific set of rules detailing its purpose, governance and membership.

affected vocations. In the State of Kerala, a traditional source of many vocations, the numbers are falling quickly. Families now having one or two children (1.3 – 1.5 in the official average), while in the past they had six, seven or eight children and several would go on to become priests and sisters.

Many congregations in the Global South now have an increased and growing number of elderly sisters and brothers even though the median age is between 40-60. It must be noted however that many female congregations have never really grown very large – many are under 50 in number - and are largely restricted to a particular diocese, under the local Bishop. The sisters have often been in ministries with no salary or stipend or pension. In addition, health provision in their countries is often poor or non-existent. As one Superior General said to me – if a sister becomes ill – naming a particular country which has few resources - she will likely die. While some congregations are growing in number, that places a great stress on the congregation's finances as they try to cover the cost of religious formation and professional preparation. Some congregations have had to focus on projects to earn enough income to survive.

We are at a significant crossroads in terms of retention in religious congregations. Annually about 11,000 leave, across all ages including religious in their 70s. The reasons given are multiple: difficulty with living community life, problems with styles of leadership – especially when leadership is authoritative - difficulties with obedience especially when there is a lack of consultation and participation.

The recent synodal on synodality proposes a whole new approach to participation and leadership at every level within the Church. This requires a massive cultural change for some congregations. Pope Francis said that synodality is key to understanding the Church's hierarchical nature. While there is a hierarchical structure, leaders need to engage all the baptized at every level in the Church's life and mission. Pope Benedict spoke of the importance of the inclusion of everyone in the search for truth. When elected he said: *My real program of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas but to listen together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that he himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history.*[3] This also applies to leadership in religious congregations.

Alongside this change of demographics, it is noted that where this is happening the younger generations of religious view this change not as an ending, but as an opportunity to deepen global bonds and to re-seed religious life. For them to "reseed" religious life means planting new, sustainable foundations for faith, community, and spiritual practices, rather than trying to recreate the past. Some of this reseeding happens when religious life responds to modern challenges like social isolation, global crises, environmental destruction, climate change, shifting cultures, new technologies and AI.

The 2005 conference on consecrated life, Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity stressed the importance of developing a new model of consecrated life "born out of compassion for the wounded and downtrodden of the earth……defined around new priorities, new models of organization and open and flexible collaboration with men and women of good will."[4] The document spoke about "inter-congregational

[3] Benedict XVI, Homily during the Mass for the beginning of his Petrine Ministry (24 April, 2005), AAS XCVII (2005), 709.

[4] Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity: International Congress on Consecrated Life (Pauline Books and Media: Boston, 2005, 43.

dialogue and bridges of collaboration and integration" as "clear initiatives to which the spirit is leading us."[5] There was a clear call to support each other inter-congregationally, making room for the laity and having a better understanding of reciprocity and collaboration."[6] Religious Life is now responding by finding new ways of collaborating – think of Talitha Kum the worldwide network against human trafficking, or the network of digital missionaries who are increasing in number and were present at the Synod. In South Sudan religious sisters, brothers, priests , and lay people have lived together since 2009 educating teachers, nurses, mid-wives, farmers, pastoral workers and seminarians. While the students are very grateful for the education that they are receiving, they regularly ask even today "how do you from different tribes live together." Here the witness of the life in community is seen to be as important as the ministry itself. There are other inter-cultural, inter-congregational communities present at border lands serving as a new example of collaboration in mission to migrants. Other collaborative initiatives focus on formation or care of the elderly.

There is also greater emphasis on being a contemplative presence in the world and on sharing spirituality widely. In the global north those considering religious life are attracted to prayer and contemplation, spirituality, community life and visible witness rather than on particular ministries, which they feel they can undertake as lay persons.

From my experience, during these past years the words that I associate with contemporary religious life are vulnerability, global, restructuring, collaboration, presence, mutuality, solidarity, contemplative listening, synodal and mission. Let me say something about each but in no particular order.

The reseeding of religious life often happens in places of **vulnerability**. During my years at the UISG I saw new relationships growing between congregational at a global level, as they shared their fragility and vulnerability. Some struggle with ageing and falling numbers, the maintenance of large institutions, the selling of property, dealing with cases of abuse. Others experience growth while also lacking resources to deepen and sustain growth because of corruption and oppression even within the Church. Yet, this vulnerability is seen as a place of grace sending congregations back to the essentials of the life**.**

In some place larger congregations are offering a welcoming space to smaller ones coming to completing and religious are serving as commissaries when there is a lack of personnel to take up leadership in congregations. Some congregational leaders in the Global North with its increased focus on well-being and self-sufficiency, ask "have we transitioned from a theology that glorified suffering to an avoidance of any kind of discomfort?" Those in the Global South often face scarcity and want and see other parts of the world as rich in resources to which they need access. Leaders pose questions like – "Do we put our own security over the needs of others? Do we believe that it is in giving that we receive?" Are we willing to risk insecurity for the common good?

Have we explored what has been called "the Theology of Enough" or are we still operating out of a mentality of scarcity? The "theology of enough" connects to Catholic social teaching, with an emphasis on environmental ethics, the critique of consumerism, advocating for moderation, limits on accumulation, and solidarity with the poor. If we religious are to live in a balanced way where the needs of all are met

[5] Ibid., 56.
[6] Ibid., 114.

within the congregation, we need to share our needs and our resources so that everyone and every unit can live the 'fullness of life" promised by Jesus.[7]

The principle of the common good guides this discernment. This is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily."[8] Working together for the common good across the congregation, means having a shared vision which acknowledges interdependence and mutuality and opens up an honest dialogue about how best to use resources – which are not just financial - and to share them across the congregation. This invites members to a deeper level of sharing, so that the discernment is richer and more grounded as a result. The synod emphasized the need for mutual exchange and sharing of gifts and congregations are trying to respond so that some parts of the congregation don't feel like beggars.

Today religious speak about the important of *being* rather than focusing simply on *doing* - of being a leaven in society, mustard seeds scattered on the landscapes, advocates for the voiceless and forgotten. The hierarchical church often doesn't understand this emphasis on the *being* or the *prophetic witness* of religious congregations. The quality of *being* draws on the congregation's charism (the gift of the Holy Spirit), the life and witness of the Founder, the history and tradition of the congregation and how mission is discerned in response to the needs of today. The focus on presence centers on the intentional commitment of "just showing up."

Rather than focusing solely on traditional institutional ministries, religious feel increasingly called to be a presence in local communities listening, bearing witness to suffering, and demonstrating the dignity of individuals. The ministry of presence is rooted in the belief that simply being with someone in their solitude, grief, or joy is a profoundly holy act. Sometimes this presence takes place formally through spiritual direction, counselling, mentoring and supervision. At other times because of the context and the need, it is less structured. Pope Francis called it the apostolate of the ear.

Today many religious are present in the midst of war and conflicts – think of the small Catholic presence in Gaza or in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the current ebola epidemic. Recently a religious in the ebola area said that "people are afraid and don't know where to go. Borders closed between neighbouring countries, no money, banks remain closed. This is what we are going through at home today."[9] "We are no longer sure how to position ourselves……Despite everything, God continues to watch over us."[10] Personal and community prayer and community life provides religious with the spiritual strength to face the demanding emotional demands of these new realities. These are the geographical and existential margins that Pope Francis often spoke about.

Another important aspect of contemporary religious life is the multicultural nature of communities. The Vatican document New Wine in New Wineskins, notes the enormous change that has occurred, especially in female congregations who "have passed from almost entirely monocultural contexts to the challenge of

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[7] Years ago, in a book called The Ethics of Development by Denis Goulet (published in 1965/66), it was pointed out that each individual, each group or society has a point on the development scale, above which they are oppressed by having too much and below which they are oppressed by having too little.
[8] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution, Gaudium et Spes, #26.
[9] Global Sisters Report.
[10] Ibid.

multiculturalism."[11] The face of religious life now reflects a "labyrinth of cultures."[12] Religious live increasingly in multi-cultural communities or participate in networks of communion and mutual support that are "culturally, ethnically, theologically and ecclesiologically diverse."[13] This recent evolution within and across many congregations "has made the challenge of integrating different cultures even more acute."[14]

The document notes the de-westernization of consecrated life keeping pace with the process of globalization.[15] The document says that what is essential "is not the preservation of forms" but the willingness "in creative continuity to rethink the consecrated life as the evangelical memory of a permanent state of conversion."[16] Religious are now having to ask new questions and face new challenges: "How to understand the vows from different cultural perspectives?" "Can we have honest conversations about racism and prejudice?" Newer members have experienced overt or covert prejudice, generalizations, stereotypical judgments and reciprocal misunderstandings. Congregations are now educating their members about cultural dynamics, how to acquire cultural competence and to learns the values, behaviors and skills needed to become truly intercultural. It is important also to understand the trinitarian underpinning of interculturality where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "a communion of three different beings' and where "mutual acceptance of differences is the vehicle for the plural unity of the three divine Persons.[17]"

As time and space shrink, as many international congregations restructure into fewer units, as religious meet in charismatic families – Franciscans, Vincentians, Dominican, Sisters of St. Joseph, Ignatian etc. and as conferences of religious meet at continental level - religious have begun to speak about being a global sisterhood, a global brotherhood both within congregations and across congregations. **The** word GLOCAL blends the words Global and Local to indicate that if we are to solve worldwide problem, we must do so through creative action at local action. In a globalized world we depend on one another increasingly. The various papal encyclicals invite us to have an open universal heart to overcome global indifference and to meet the needs of today. The presence of religious at the United Nations is an important sign and symbol of being global.

Becoming a congregation where everyone and every ministry can flourish calls for shared responsibility and courage. There are challenges and everyone has a part to play. It requires inter-generational collaboration across different units, different brothers and sisters and different cultures. Today we deal with differences and "we should not be intimidated by tensions or differences because they can become creative forces when guided by shared responsibility."[18] People often fear difference

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[11] *New Wine in New Wineskins, The Consecrated Life and Its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), #7.

[12] Marie Chin RSM, "*Towards a New Understanding of Cultural Encounter in Our Communities,*" Horizon, Winter 2003, 16.

[13] Mary Pellegrino CSJ, "Opening Space for an Emerging Narrative of Communion," Presidential Address, LCWR, August 10, 2017.

[14] *New Wine in New Wineskins,* #13.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Quoting Renato Gnatta, SVD, and Emmie Vas, SSpS, at the Nemi workshop, January 2015.

[18] Ibid, #13.

because they see it only as messiness and chaos."[19] The theologian Thomas O'Loughlin says that we must recognize that diversity is richness and the Spirit is the creator of diversity. He says "Diversity is everywhere. Diversity is richness and the source of beauty. Diversity is what makes life worth living."[20] the Spirit is the One "unifying in our diversity and diversifying in unity."[21] This is a reality that we seek to make present and witness in our daily living. This is the prophetic witness that religious life can offer to a broken and fractured world.

Ministries continue to flourish in parishes, schools, hospitals and clinics, in community and social development, in economic empowerment, in awareness raising and in advocacy, at the borderlands and at the margins of life - wherever human dignity is threatened. Through partnerships, networks and collaborative initiatives across congregations, with lay associates and lay staffs, with people of other faiths and of no faith.

Finally, to respond to their own and global realities, many congregations are engaged in mergers and fusions and in establishing federations. These organizational changes can bring life and energy and in a globalized world they can unite religious across different geographic spaces, building networks of inter-connectivity. This can lead to a wide exchange of ideas, experiences and best practice. The need to restructure can come from a place of vulnerability and fragility but this is often where grace flourishes and where the new emerges. It can take courage to let go of what is familiar and walk into the unknown.

But amid change and turmoil, something new is being born. As the Church undertakes the synodal journey, calling on all the baptized to participate and to share in God's mission, religious have an important role to play in leading this dramatic cultural change. At a recent meeting of the Conferences of Religious of Latin America it was affirmed that "This is not a time for fear, nor for indifference. It is not a time to retreat or escape. It is a time to assume our historical responsibility, to set out on the road, to go out to encounter others, to embrace just causes, to build bridges of peace, and to sow hope where the future seems uncertain."[22] This is who we must be as religious men and women worldwide.

Thank you for your attention.

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[19] Thomas O'Loughlin "Pentecost and a synodal Church: The diversifying Spirit, La Croix International, May 20, 2021.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Clar, Inspiring Horizon 2025-2028. Be Born Again! Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus: A call to transformation, 9.