



[Photogallery 1](#) (Assembly)

[Photogallery 2](#) (Individual greetings)

ROME - The 82nd General Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General) was held at the *Salesianum* in Rome, from 27 to 29 November. Three experiences represented the basis for the reflections and meetings held by the various language groups. Father Janson Hervé of the Little Brothers of Jesus spoke of “the lights that help me to live this service towards my brothers and of how Pope Francis comforts my hope”. The Capuchin brother, Mauro Jöhri, explained “how Pope Francis is an inspiration and challenge in my service in animating my Order”. Finally, Fr. Hainz Kulüke of the Divine Verb Missionaries dwelled upon “leadership within a missionary religious congregation in an international and inter-cultural context in light of the example of Pope Francis”.

The Assembly closed with a meeting with the Holy Father. It was not a brief encounter as the USG had requested, instead it lasted an entire morning, as desired by the Holy Father himself. There were no prepared speeches, rather a brotherly and cordial meeting consisting in questions and answers that deeply concern many of the aspects of religious life and the problems that trouble him. Through his answers the Pope often enhanced his speech with

personal anecdotes from his pastoral experience.

The first group of questions was related to the **identity and the mission of consecrated life**. What is the consecrated life we expect today? That of bearing special witness: “You must truly be witnesses of a different way of doing and of acting. These are the incarnated values of the kingdom”. Radicalism is expected of all Christians, affirmed the Holy Father, but the religious are called to follow the Lord in a special manner: “They are men and women who can awaken the world and light up the future. Consecrated life is a prophecy. God asks us to leave the nest that holds us and to go out to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation of domesticating them”. The Pope continued by saying that the prophecy is to strengthen that which is “institutional”, in other words, the charism in consecrated life and to not confuse this with apostolic work. The first remains, the latter will pass. The charism remains because it is strong. Sometimes there is confusion between charism and its practical implementation. The charism is creative, it continuously searches for new paths. The charismatic witness, continued the Pope, must be realistic and also include the fact of presenting oneself as sinful witnesses: “We all make mistakes. We must recognise our weakness. Admitting one is a sinner is good for everyone”.

“You, Pope Francis – asked one of those present – have often insistently appealed to go to the outskirts. But how?” The Pope answered that the perspective of the world is different if seen from the borders rather than from the centre, and this obliges us to continuously rethink our religious life. At this point he recalled a letter of Fr. Arrupe to the social centres of the Society of Jesus in which he stated that in order to make a true preferential choice of the poor, it is necessary to live with them. “It is necessary to view all beginning with the outskirts. It is necessary to go to the outskirts, to truly understand the experiences of the people. Otherwise there is the risk of a fundamentalism of rigid positions based on a centralistic vision. This is not beneficial. For example, those who work with young people can not use excessively structured expressions because they do not make an impression on young people. Today God asks us to leave the nest that holds us. Even those enclosed are invited with their prayers so that the Gospel may spread throughout the world. I am convinced that the most important hermeneutical key and the fulfilment of the evangelical mandate is: “Go ahead! Go ahead!”

Then the **theme of vocations and formation** was discussed. The Pope underlined how the structure of religious life has changed and that there are young churches that bear new fruits, with numerous vocations. Of course all cultures have the ability to spur vocations. Obviously however, it is necessary to avoid dramatic phenomena such as that of the so-called “exchange of novices” in that a search is made to find novices in some countries where there are no houses of a certain Congregation, to then later be invited to institutes or houses in other countries where there are few vocations. One must acknowledge that the good intention, however, may not be perfect in the beginning, but may improve over the years up until the final profession. However, it is necessary to be vigil and “keep one’s eyes open. Perhaps the novice is searching for a refuge, consolation?” This naturally gives rise to a re-evaluation of the

inculturation of the charism which is specific, but at the same time, interacts with the different cultures. The Church must ask for forgiveness and look with shame upon apostolic failures caused by misunderstandings in this field as in the case of Matteo Ricci in China who was misinterpreted. Intercultural dialogue must push for the introduction of persons of various cultures in the governance of religious institutes, thus expressing different ways of living the charism. It has nothing to do with folklore, rather it is a question of mentality, of a different way of thinking. You can not train a person for the religious life without taking into account his/her culture, or world view. Discernment is necessary as is intercultural dialogue. One can not lose his/her cultural and personal identity.



The Pope insisted upon the importance of formation for religious life which he believes is founded upon four fundamental pillars: spiritual, intellectual, community and apostolic formation. It is indispensable to avoid every form of hypocrisy and clericalism by means of a frank and open dialogue on all aspects of life: "Formation is an artisanal craft, without the use of police-like methods", confirmed Pope Francis: "Its aim is to form religious persons with a tender heart, not bitter like vinegar". Educating means allotting time to training according to one's gifts and culture. Otherwise we will create "little monsters", the Pope said. We must not forget that "young people use a different language and categories. It is not a question of geographical differences rather of a cultural change which is in answer to an epochal transformation". We must train young people so that they may be witnesses of the Resurrection, of the Gospel values, so that they may lead and train the people of God. We must think of the "faithful people of God". Therefore, if a seminary accepts a former religious person who has been sent away from another religious institute for grave reasons, it is not thinking of the people of God, and this is a serious problem. For example, just think of the courage shown by Benedict XVI in dealing with cases of sexual abuse, and this must encourage us to be serious about the formation of

our candidates, as the Pope said. He concluded by saying “we are not training administrators or managers but fathers, brothers and travelling companions”.

When asked about the **vocation to become brothers**, the Pope said that “this is not a lesser choice but a different call”. It’s necessary to reflect on the matter and to highlight the importance of such choice. “I don’t think for a moment that this type of vocation belongs to the past”, said Pope Francis, but “we must understand what God wants from us”. There is a document on the brothers which is being reviewed by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. It is necessary that it be looked at again. On the question concerning brothers as Major Superiors in Clerical Institutes, the Holy Father replied that it is an issue pertaining to Canon Law and that is the circle where it should be addressed.

Another set of questions addressed **community life**. Pope Francis remarked that it has a great force of attraction, and presupposes the acceptance of differences and conflicts. There are different forms of community life depending on the various institutes. At times living in a community may be very difficult, but it is very important – it is a way to bear witness. “Someone who is not capable of community life is not fit for the religious life”, said the Holy Father. At times one notes a certain tendency towards individualism which is often a flight from community life. Community life that is not lived well does not help to grow. Yet with one’s brothers in difficulty, how is it possible to combine mercy and compassion as well as firmness? The Pope went on to say: “Even in the best families there are some members who go through a rough time. Community conflicts are necessary: we can’t dream of a community or any human group which is free of conflicts, and we must tolerate them. Conflicts exist and must exist, and they are overcome not by eliminating, ignoring or hiding them, rather by facing them. At times, we can be very cruel to each other. We are all tempted to criticise either because we think we are better or for some personal gain”. In certain cases, accompaniment may be required, especially in the case of mental or physical illness of a brother. In any case, “we must never act like managers when faced with a brother’s conflict: instead our charity must reach out like a gentle touch”. When faced by conflict we must not react like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who simply ignored the problem: nor as those fools who enter conflict only to remain stuck in it: we need to tackle it, deal with it, overcome it and move on. Certainly, if no changes are made, other solutions will need to be found such as transferring or even leaving the order, but everything must be done in a gentle and caring way. At this point the Pope mentioned a personal experience. A young man, 22, an alcoholic who suffered from depression, was rescued by his mum’s loving and tender care. Now he’s a successful person. We must pray for the gift of loving care. “In the Office readings on the feast of St. Joseph’s there is an expression that I liked a lot which said that St. Joseph treated his family with a “Eucharistic tenderness”. That’s how we should treat our brothers” - concluded the Holy Father.

Some questions tackled the mutual relationship between the **Religious and the local Churches** in which they work.

Pope Francis stated that he knows from experience that there are problems. “We, the Bishops, ought to understand that consecrated people are not just helping hands, but they enrich the Dioceses with their charism. Dioceses need your charism”- he added. The insertion of religious communities in a Diocese is important, and the bishop must acknowledge and respect this charism. Conflict usually arises when there is no dialogue. At this point the Pope referred to his own experience, both positive and negative, of when he was bishop in his diocese. He also noted that the issue has been dealt with several times and that the Prefect for the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life is working on a shared document.

The final questions regarded the **frontiers of the mission of consecrated persons**. What are these frontiers? “They must be sought on the basis of the charism of each institute”, answered the Pope. I will not deny nor underestimate any frontiers, but we must discern them all according to the charism of each religious group. He mentioned Fr. Arrupe, former Superior General of the Society of Jesus and the choice he made in favour of the refugees. He said that situations of exclusion remain the first priority, but they also require discernment. The first criterion is to send the best and most gifted people to tackle these situations because of the risk implied which requires men of courage and prayer. It is necessary that the superiors keep in close touch with the people involved in this type of work.

Alongside these challenges, he mentioned the **cultural and educational mission** in schools and universities. These are sectors where consecrated people can give a great contribution. The Pope said: “When the fathers from (the magazine) *Civiltà Cattolica* came to see me, I told them about the frontiers of the new philosophies, like the “Weak Thought” and the “Pensée unique”. I also reminded the Superior General of the Salesians of the frontier of Patagonia which was the dream of Don Bosco”. For the Pope, the pillars of education are “transmitting knowledge, transmitting methods, transmitting values. By these means, faith is communicated. The educator must measure up to those he educates, and must give careful thought to how to proclaim Jesus Christ to a changing generation”. Then he insisted that the educational task is of paramount importance. He recalled some of his experiences in Buenos Aires and how it is fundamental to be well-equipped when receiving into an educational context children and boys/girls who come from dysfunctional families. How do you proclaim Christ to these young people? One must avoid giving them a “vaccine against faith”

Before taking leave of the 120 Superiors General present, the Pope announced that 2015 would be a year dedicated to consecrated life. He concluded by saying: “Thank you for the act of faith you made by coming to this meeting. Thank you for what you do and for your spirit of faith and your service. Thank you for your witness and also for the humiliations through which you have

had to pass: it's the path of the Cross”.

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