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Audience with participants in the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 22nd Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), taking place from 2 to 6 May 2022, on the theme “Embracing vulnerability on the synodal journey”.

After handing out the discourse prepared for the occasion, the Pope gave impromptu answers to questions posed by various participants in the audience.

The following is the discourse the Pope handed to those present during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters,

I wish to greet you, in this Easter Time, with the words of the Risen Christ: “Peace be with you!”

Keeping in mind the theme you have chosen for the assembly, “Embracing vulnerability on the Synodal journey”, I would like to focus on some points and offer some keys for your discernment.

Embracing vulnerability

When I was thinking of this theme of “embracing vulnerability”, two scenes from the Gospel came to mind.

The first is when Jesus washes Peter’s feet at the Last Supper. Contemplating this leads us to recognize Peter’s vulnerability and at the same time that of Jesus, who adopts it in order to go towards him. Peter struggles to accept that he needs a change of mindset, a change of heart to have his feet washed in order to be able to do

the same for his brothers and sisters. By going towards him, the Son of God places himself in a vulnerable position, in a position of servant, showing how the life of Jesus can only be understood from service. Together with Peter, the Church learns from her Master that, in order to be able to give her life, serving others, she is invited to recognize and welcome her own fragility and, from there, to bow before the fragility of others.

I invite you, who have the specific mission of inspiring the life of your congregations and of accompanying the discernment of your communities, to enter into that scene of the washing of the feet, retracing this path of the Church, and living your authority as service.

Religious life, too, recognizes its vulnerability today, although at times it accepts it with difficulty. We were used to being significant in numbers and in our works; of being relevant and considered with regard socially. The crisis we are going through has made us feel our frailties, and invites us to assume minority. All this invites us to recover the attitude of the Son of God towards the Father and towards humanity, that of making oneself a servant. This is not servitude. To lower oneself is not to withdraw into one's own wounds and inconsistencies, but rather to open up to relations, to an exchange that makes one worthy and heals, as in the case of Peter, and from which a new journey with Jesus begins.

In this way, the place that the Son of God wishes to occupy by placing himself at the feet of humanity is a theological space, and we need to relocate ourselves there. Therefore, if our vocation is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and to do so "up close", every time that history and the Spirit reposition the Church and religious life in this place, it will be a source of joy and growth for us, an inspiring source that enables us to rejuvenate. For it is from there, from below, that each one can re-read his charism and history.

This attitude has always enlightened religious life. Like Peter, and with Peter, we are now required, having recognized ourselves as vulnerable, to ask ourselves what are the new vulnerabilities before which, as consecrated persons, we must lower ourselves today. In the light of the signs of the times, what ministries is the Spirit asking of us? What changes does it require of us in the way we live out the service of authority? How do we work for an authority so that it may be evangelical, an authority that leaves no wounds along the way without growth? Do not be afraid of this search for new ministries and new ways of exercising authority evangelically. Let it not be a theoretical and ideological search - ideologies deface the Gospel - but a search that starts from approaching the feet of wounded humanity and walking alongside wounded sisters and brothers, starting with the sisters in your communities.

The second scene that comes to mind, speaking of vulnerability, is centred around Mary Magdalene. She knows very well what it means to pass from a disordered and fragile life to a life focused on Jesus and the service of proclamation. The evangelists show her to us as a woman who experienced great liberation in her encounter with Jesus (cf. *Lk 8:2*). They conserved this fact, and certainly did not do so to hold her past history against her, but to tell us that Jesus counts on her as his apostle in witnessing the resurrection, placing her transformed fragility at the service of the proclamation.

You represent numerous charisms, many ways of reading the Gospel: each one of them is born for the mission of the Church. In the light of these two disciples of Jesus, Peter and Mary Magdalene, contemplate and let Jesus look at you and transform you, and in this way, you will be able to place yourselves in the service of humanity in the same way. Starting out from your fragilities, freed from the spirits that trouble you, you will be able to lighten your step for a proclamation of the Gospel filled with hope. I know you have many worries, that probably keep you awake at night – the lack of vocations, the constantly rising average age, the abandonment of consecrated life, among others – but I hope that your primary concern is how to proceed so as not to abandon the horizon of mission.

The synodal journey

Let us consider, secondly, the contribution that the Church expects from religious life in the synodal journey of the Church, and your service as superior in this journey. If the synod is above all an important moment of listening and discernment, the most important contribution that you can make is to participate in the reflection

and discernment, adopting the attitude of listening to the Spirit and lowering yourselves, like Jesus, in order to be able to meet our brother in need. And this through various forms of mediation provided for at this time – as consecrated women, in parishes, in dioceses – enriching the Church with your charisms. Throughout this synodal process, be builders of communion, remembering the life and mission of Jesus. You are expected to be weavers of new relationships so that the Church is not a community of anonymous people, but of witnesses of the Risen Christ, despite our fragility.

But besides actively participating in the synodal process at the local Church level, it is very important that congregations undertake their own synodal journey. Many congregations are already doing this. It is an opportunity to listen to each other, to encourage each other to speak with *parrhesia*, to ask each other questions about the essential elements of religious life today. Also, to allow uncomfortable questions to emerge. Do not be afraid of your vulnerability, do not be afraid to present it to Jesus.

To be faithful to the synodal path and spirit, it is necessary to go beyond the sphere of your own Institutes and the International Union of Superiors General itself. It is a journey that you already share and I encourage you to continue it. I also urge you to deepen your collaboration with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Ecclesial communion, the diversity of vocations and charisms, and the encounter, though sometimes tiring, always enrich us.

I count on you, dear sisters, as you accompany God's holy people in this synodal process, as experts in building communion, in facilitating listening and discernment. The ministry of accompaniment is urgent (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* 103, 169, 171).

I count on you to ensure that the synodal process we are experiencing in the Church also takes place in your institutes, where young and old exchange their wisdom and visions of consecrated life; where all cultures sit at the same table of the Kingdom; where histories are processed in the light of the risen Jesus and his forgiveness; where laypeople can participate in your spiritualities.

A good sign of this synodal renewal must be mutual care. In this context I am thinking of small congregations and those that are decreasing to the point of experiencing a difficult sustainability. I trust that these processes, in the future, will bring you even closer to each other so as to support and help each other reciprocally in your journeys of formation and discernment. I also trust that these processes will help the Church community in its dialogue with the world, without neglecting to pay attention to the common home.

I also know that in some places the lack of vocations and ageing are a concern. But the *important* thing is always to be able to respond faithfully and creatively to the Lord. Accept the time we live as a gift from God, a *kairós*, for nothing eludes him.

With Mary, with her light step, with faith, go forward! I bless you from my heart, I bless your communities, especially the most vulnerable members, and I bless all those who benefit from the work you do. And please, do not forget to pray for me.
