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The Pope meets with Superiors General: service not servitude, participation in decision-making and study of the female diaconate

Vatican City, 13 May 2016 – Yesterday, 12 May, in the Vatican's Paul VI Hall, Pope Francis met with the participants in the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), on the theme "Weaving global solidarity for life", which closes the celebrations for the Jubilee for fifty years of the UISG. The conversation between the Holy Father and the consecrated women took place in an informal context, with a series of questions and answers, and focused on the integration of women in the life of the Church and the role, mission and difficulties faced by consecrated women and the Union of Superiors General. The following are extensive extracts of the discussion.

For a better integration of women in the life of the Church

Question: Pope Francis, you have said that "the feminine genius is necessary in all expressions of the life of the Church and of society", and yet women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church, especially at the highest levels, and from preaching in the Eucharist. An important obstacle to Church's full embrace of the "feminine genius" is the bond that both decision-making processes and preaching have with priestly ordination. Do you see a way of separating from ordination both leadership roles and preaching in the Eucharist, so that our Church can be more open to receiving the genius of women in the very near future?

Pope Francis: It is true that women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church: excluded no, but the integration of women is very weak there, in decision-making processes. We must move forward ... because in many aspects of decision-making processes ordination is not necessary. ... For me the influence on decisions is very important: not only the execution, but also the development, and therefore that women, both consecrated and laywomen, enter into reflection on the process, and in discussion. ... I experienced a problem in Buenos Aires: viewing it with the priests' council – therefore all men – it was treated well, but then seeing it with a group of religious and lay women it was greatly enriched, and this helped the decision by offering a complementary vision. This is necessary!

[...] Then there is the problem of preaching at the Eucharistic Celebration. There is no problem for a woman – religious or lay – to preach in the Liturgy of the Word. There is no problem. But at the Eucharistic Celebration

there is a liturgical-dogmatic problem, because it is one celebration – the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy, there is unity between them – and He Who presides is Jesus Christ. The priest or bishop who presides does so in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a theological-liturgical reality. In that situation, since women are not ordained, they cannot preside.

In leadership, instead, there is no problem: in that respect we must go forward, with prudence, but seeking solutions.

There are two temptations here, against which we must be on guard. The first is feminism: the role of the woman in the Church is not feminism, it is a right! It is a right through baptism, with the charisms and the gifts that the Spirit has given. ... The other danger, a very strong temptation I have spoken about several times, is clericalism. ... Let us consider that today more than 60 per cent of parishes do not have a council for economic affairs or a pastoral council. What does this mean? It means that the parish or diocese is led with a clerical spirit, by the priest alone, and that it does not implement the synodality in the parish, in the diocese, which is not a novelty under this Pope. No! It is a matter of canon law: the parish priest is obliged to have a council of, for and with laymen, laywomen and women religious for pastoral ministry and for economic affairs. And they do not do this. This is the danger of clericalism in the Church today.

The role of consecrated women in the Church

Question: [...] In the Church there is the office of the permanent diaconate, but it is open only to men, married or not. What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons, as was the case in the primitive Church? Why not constitute an official commission to study the matter?

Pope Francis: This question goes in the direction of “doing”: consecrated women already do much work with the poor, they do many things ... “doing”. And it touches on the problem of the permanent diaconate. ... In effect this exists in antiquity: there was a beginning. ... I remember that it was a theme I was quite interested in when I came to Rome for meetings, ... there was a good Syrian theologian there and one day I asked him about this, and he explained to me that in the early times of the Church there were some “deaconesses”. But what were these deaconesses? Were they ordained or not? The Council of Chalcedon (451) speaks about this but it is somewhat obscure. What was the role of deaconesses in those times? It seems – I was told by this man, who is now dead but who was a good professor, wise and erudite – it seems that the role of the deaconesses was to help in the baptism of women, their immersion; they baptised them for the sake of decorum, and also to anoint the body of women, in baptism. And another curious thing: when there was a judgement on a marriage because a husband hit his wife and she went to the bishop to complain, deaconesses were responsible for inspecting the bruises left on the woman’s body from her husband’s blows, and for informing the bishop. ... There are various publications on the diaconate in the Church, but it is not clear how it was. I think I will ask the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to refer me to some studies on this theme, because I have answered you only on the basis of what I heard from this priest, who was an erudite and able researcher, on the permanent diaconate. In addition, I would like to constitute an official commission to study the question: I think it will be good for the Church to clarify this point, I agree, and I will speak so as to do something of this type.

The role of the International Union of Superiors General

Question: What role could the International Union of Superiors General play, in order to have a word in the thinking of the Church, a word that is listened to, from the moment that it carries with it the voice of 2,000 institutes of women religious? How is it possible that quite often we are forgotten and not included as participants, for example in the General Assembly of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, where consecrated life is discussed? Can the Church afford to continue speaking about us, instead of speaking with us?

Pope Francis: It is a point that you must review, which the Church must also review. Your work, my work and that of all of us, is that of service. Very often I find women consecrated who perform a labour of servitude and not of service. It is somewhat difficult to explain, because I would not suggest a concrete case. ... Let us

consider a parish priest, a priest who to be sure we might imagine: "No, no, my rectory is in the hands of two nuns" — "Are they the ones who run it?" — "Yes, yes!" — "What do they do as far as pastoral care, catechesis?" — "No, no, only that!". No! This is servitude! Tell me, parish priest, are there no good women in the city, who need work? Take on one or two who could perform that service. Let these two sisters go to the schools, the neighbourhoods, with the sick, with the poor. This is the criterion: a labour of service and not of servitude! When you Superiors are asked something that is more servitude than service, have the courage to say "no". This is a rather helpful point, because when a consecrated woman is asked to perform work of servitude, it demeans the life and dignity of that woman. But no servitude!

I completely agree with the third question. The Church: you are the Church, we all are. The hierarchy — as we say — of the Church must speak of you, but first and in the moment it must speak with you. This is certain. You must be present in the Congregation for Religious. Yes, yes! I shall tell this to the Prefect: you must be present in the Assembly. It is clear, because to speak about one who is absent is not even evangelical: one must be able to hear, to listen to what is thought, and then let us do so together.

The obstacles we encounter within the Church as consecrated women

Question: Many institutes are facing the challenge of revising their Constitutions in order to innovate their way of life and their structures. This is proving to be difficult due to obstacles in canon law. Do you foresee any changes to canon law in order facilitate this process? ... And another aspect: In carrying out our ministry of solidarity with the poor and marginalised, we are often mistaken for being social or political activists. Some ecclesial authorities would prefer that become more mystical and less apostolic. What value ought certain sectors Church hierarchy give to the consecrated life as apostolic and women in particular?

Pope Francis: In every change discernment is needed, and discernment cannot be accomplished without prayer. How does one undertake discernment? Prayer, dialogue, then shared discernment. ... In order to make a change we must evaluate all concrete circumstances, this is all true, but in order to advance in discernment with the Holy Spirit what is needed is prayer, dialogue and shared discernment. ... And this will give you greater freedom, greater freedom! Regarding canon law: there is no issue here. Canon law in the last century was changed – if I am not mistaken – twice: in 1917 and then under John Paul II. Small changes that can be done, are done. But these two changes were instead of the entire Code. The Code is a disciplinary help, a help for the salvation of souls, for everything: it is the juridical help of the Church for all processes, so many things, but last century twice it was totally changed, remade. And just so, parts of it can be changed.

[...] All religious women, all consecrated women should live mystically, because yours is a marriage: your is a vocation of maternity, it's a vocation of being in the role of Mother Church and of Mother Mary. But those who tell you this, they think that being a mystic is being a mummy, always praying like that... No, no. You have to pray and to work according to your own charism, and when the charism brings you to work with refugees, to work with the poor, you should do it, and they will call you "communist," that's the least they will say about you. ... And yes, it's the cross. What did they say about Jesus? That he was Beelzebub, that he had the power of Beelzebub. Calumny, be prepared for it. If you do good, with prayer, before God, taking on all the consequences of your charism and you go ahead, prepare yourselves for defamation and calumny, because the Lord has chosen this way for himself! And we bishops, ought to watch over these women who are an icon of the Church, when they do difficult things, and are slandered and persecuted. To be persecuted is the last of the Beatitudes.

The Pope also answered a part of a question that was written but not read, relating to the use of money.

Pope Francis: Requests for money in our local Churches. The problem of money is a very important problem, both in consecrated life and in the diocesan Church. We must never forget that the devil enters through our pockets: the pockets of the bishop and the pockets of the Congregation. This touches on the problem of poverty, which we will speak about later. But greed for money is the first step towards corruption in a parish, in a diocese, in a Congregation of consecrated life. ... I think that this question concerns payment for sacraments. If someone asks you for this, then report the incident. Salvation is free. God sent us freely. There is no salvation by payment, there are no sacraments by payment.

[...] When a religious institute – and this is also valid for other situations – but when a religious institute feels that it is dying, it feels that it no longer has the capacity to attract new elements, it feels that perhaps the time has passed for which the Lord had chosen that Congregation, there is the temptation of greed. Why? Because they think, “At least we have money for our old age”. This is serious. And what is the solution that the Church can give? To unite the various institutes with similar charisms, and to go ahead. But money is never, ever a solution for spiritual problems. It is a necessary aid, but just that.

Other part of the unread question

“Women religious do not receive a stipend for their services, as priests do. How can we show an attractive face of our subsistence? How can we find the financial resources necessary to fulfil our mission?”

Pope Francis: I will say two things to you. First: see how your charism is... and what the role of poverty is, because there are congregations that call for a very, very strict life of poverty, and others less so, and both types are approved by the Church. Live poverty according to the charism. Then: savings. It is prudent to have savings; it is prudent to have good administration, perhaps with some investment, that is prudent; for the houses of formation, to run works for the poor, to manage schools for the poor, for apostolic works. ... A foundation for one's own congregation: this is what should be done. And just as wealth can do harm to and corrupt a vocation, so can destitution. ... The administration of assets is a very serious responsibility, very serious, in consecrated life. If you do not have the means to live, tell the bishop. Tell God, “Give us this day our daily bread”, the true one. But speak with the bishop, with the Superior general, with the Congregation for Religious. For the necessary means, because religious life is a path of poverty, but it is not suicide!

Conclusion

A word of encouragement for us leaders, who carry the weight of the day.

Pope Francis: But take a breather! Rest, because so many sicknesses come from a lack of healthy rest, rest in the family... This is important to carry the weight of the day.

You also talk here about old and sick nuns. But these nuns are the memory of the institute, these nuns are those who have sowed, who have worked, and now are paralysed, or very sick, or left off to the side. These nuns pray for the institute. This is very important, that they feel involved in the prayer for the Institute. These nuns also have a very extensive experience: some more, some less. Listen to them! Go to them: “Tell me, sister, what do you think about this, about this?” That they feel consulted, and from their wisdom will come good advice. Be sure of it.

This is what I would like to tell you. I know that I always repeat myself and say the same things, but life is like that. ... I like hearing questions, because they make me think and I feel like a goalkeeper who stands there, waiting for the ball from wherever it comes. ... This is good, and you also do this in dialogue.

The things I have promised to do, I will do. And pray for me, I will pray for you. Let us go ahead. Our life is for the Lord, for the Church and for the people, who suffer greatly and need the caress of the Father, through you.