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SOLIDARITY FOR LIFE ON THE PERIPHERY

Sister Mary Sujita, SND

Introduction

I am amazed that the UISG ever thought of inviting a simple village Sister like me to address this august assembly. I stand here as a voice from the periphery. Global Solidarity for Life with those on the margins is a theme very dear to my heart and, indeed, to the heart of every religious. I congratulate the UISG leadership for their continued focus on this most important agenda for our discipleship and mission today. I believe that the poor will continue to lead us to the heart of our mission, to where we belong and, indeed, to the very heart of God. Today, I would like to offer some simple reflections that flow mainly from my many years of lived experience among one of the most marginalized groups of people in Bihar, India, who has shaped my own spirituality and challenged my way of being a religious and a missionary.

A recurring theme for Pope Francis has been what he calls “the periphery” and the movement of the Church from the center to the peripheries of our globalized world. Days after his election (March 3, 2013), he made his approach to the periphery very clear when he said: “And how I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor.” [*E come vorrei una chiesa povera e per i poveri!*] Since then, he has repeated this same challenge over and over again: “Go to the poor, go to the peripheries.” There is a sense of urgency in his call as he invites us to reimagine religious life and mission in a radical way, and find our true identity on the peripheries. We are asked not only to look around to identify the peripheries, but to identify the most neglected and peripheralised people around us as we engage in our apostolic ministries. He continues to challenge us and the whole Church, to get out of ourselves and to go toward the periphery and to protect ourselves from becoming self-absorbed! In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” The UISG theme of this Assembly is a clear response to this clarion call of the Pope. Together, as consecrated women, we need to search for the relevance and implications of this call for our life and for our apostolic engagement with our world today. This Assembly is a privileged time to do some soul searching and ask some hard questions. As individuals, communities, institutions and congregations, where are we mostly located? Where and by whom are we seen and experienced the most? Where is the Spirit leading us to relocate ourselves as prophets of God’s Reign? Can we put our heads and hearts together to search for a response?

Jesus: Son of God of the peripheries

We see in Jesus that solidarity is not about what we do, but rather, how we live! It is about our personal and communal witness of life. It is all about relationships. Jesus could speak and act with freedom and authority because he spoke out of his profound experience of God. Jesus learned solidarity from his heart-knowledge of his Beloved *Abba*, total oneness with his *Abba* and, consequently, he related to all around him as brothers and sisters. For us as consecrated women too, this sustained divine intimacy is the fundamental requirement for engaging with one another in solidarity, and moving to the peripheries with the heart and mind of Jesus. It is only when the Spirit of God takes over our life that we can stand up, listen, and understand what God wants to say to us. We cannot be

women on fire for the mission of Jesus, women of global solidarity and peace building, unless we live a life of necessary asceticism and contemplative intimacy with God.

*The baptism of Jesus was a defining moment in his life and mission. It was then that the Spirit of God descended upon him and took command of his destiny. (Mk 1:9-12) It was then that he publicly proclaimed his oneness with the condition of all people, and was fully gripped by the reality of humanity. As Jesus entered into his mission, he took up a stance for all the marginalized, the anawim, those on the periphery, whether they are marginalized economically or socio-culturally. He was well aware of the unjust structures that have created marginalization and poverty. The God of Jesus is clearly a compassionate God who hears the cry of the poor, the widow and the orphan. (Dt 10:17-18; Ps 68:5) Jesus entered into the pains and struggles of the poor and lived in solidarity with them. His lifestyle, the kind of followers he chose, and the focus of his ministry are all expressions of his identification and solidarity with those on the peripheries. The Jesus movement was prophetic and counter cultural and, therefore, revolutionary from the beginning. **What was one of your Baptism moments as a woman consecrated for the mission of Jesus? (table sharing)***

“Jesus was profoundly contemplative, intensely human in his personal relations and authentically radical in his social options. He was a mystic given to quiet contemplation, solitary prayer and silence. “He would steal away from them into the desert and pray there” Luke 5:16. At the same time he was a person of intense action and radical commitment.” (Tissa Balasuriya: Globalization and Human Solidarity) When we are rooted in God, we will be impelled from within to move out of our comfort zones and be prophetic risk-takers and healers whose very presence and witness will challenge the oppressive and divisive powers in our society. The spirit of freedom and love are foundational to building global solidarity for fullness of life. According to George Soares-Prabhu, SJ, one of the most significant aspects of the spirituality of Jesus was “freedom and love, leading to identification with the powerless and confrontation with those in power.”

Jesus was a true “border crosser” when it came to many of the tightly-held religious, social and economic borders of his time. It was this border-crossing that took him to the cross. The transformation that he was bringing about discomfited all those who lived in the comfort of self-righteousness. Today, you and I are challenged to identify and cross over the tightly held, comfortable boundaries of our religious life and move to the peripheries. I wonder if we are reducing the “prophetic sting” in our call by mouthing the latest prophetic, theological and sociological jargon that gives us a good feeling about doing God’s mission even when we are busy doing our own mission of conserving the past, protecting our institutions, or legitimizing the present! How can we recapture the original fire of Jesus’ mission and the founding fire that we have inherited as congregations so that our creative energies are released for the building up of the Reign of God? Let each of us here ask herself: What “borders” have I crossed to move to the peripheries during the past 3-5 years in response to the urgencies of the Church and the world?

The context of our mission today-- the peripheries of our globalized world

The 21st-century reality and crises present enormous challenges to our usual way of being and doing things. Our world is in crisis. Some of the critical signs of the crises are the fractures and divisions evident in extreme poverty, ecological degradation, violent conflicts and war, and the consequent mega-migration and human trafficking which we human beings continue to tolerate and even accept as the “new normal.” We often hear about accompanying the bottom billions to fullness of life as our call of the times. What does it mean, essentially, when we say we are carrying out the mission of Jesus today where so many are hungry, persecuted, driven out and marginalized; where homelessness is ever on the increase; where human persons, created in God’s image, are trafficked, abused, sold, and discriminated against due to race, caste, gender, religion, place of origin; where the earth’s resources are plundered with greed by the powerful; where modern forms of slavery are on the rise; where politics has become a weapon of oppression and self-indulgence; where religious fundamentalism is destroying people and nations? We know that all social problems in this century are global in nature. These major issues call us to a new presence of global solidarity, a new way of living our Gospel option for the poor in our world today. We cannot any longer reduce the mission to some traditional institutional ministries and good charitable deeds (which are necessary!) and remain complacent!

Buzz session: Think of a word, phrase, feeling or image that describes for you our world today. (Sharing in your table group.)

Let us have a quick look at a few of the peripheries that call us to prophetic action today. You will hear more about these from our panelists.

We live in a world of dehumanizing poverty: According to *The Economist*: Global wealth has increased from \$117 trillion in 2000 to \$262 trillion in 2014. However, 94.5% of household wealth is owned by 20%. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening! Today, about 22% of the world's population live below \$1.25/day. It is a shocking reality that every day one in five of the world's population, that is about 800 million people, go hungry, and every 20 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness. How are we affected by these realities in real terms?

We live in a world of conflicts: Pope Francis speaks of an undeclared third world war that is going on in many forms and in many places, networked in unseen ways. These conflicts are often caused by geopolitical, territorial questions, sectarian and ethnic strife, religious fundamentalism and greed for scarce resources. Each year, at least 250,000 people die in armed conflicts and millions are pushed out of their homes and made refugees. At present there are a total of 66 countries involved in wars, more than 686 militias (guerrillas and separatists) involved in violent conflicts in different parts of the world. What is our practical contribution to peace building?

We live in a world of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers: According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the number of refugees and internally displaced people, over 60 million, is at the highest point since World War II. This means one in every 122 people worldwide is a refugee, and half of these are women and children. Yes, ours is a refugee world! These individuals have been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflicts of all kinds, violence, or human rights violations. What is our collective response to this greatest human tragedy of our time? You will hear more about this from our panelists.

We live in a world that allows human trafficking: Pope Francis tells us that human trafficking is "an open wound on the body of the contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ, It is a crime against humanity." There are an estimated 27 million trafficked persons in the world today, the highest recorded number in history! Human trafficking is the third largest international crime industry only behind illegal drugs and arms trafficking. ("The CNN Freedom Project." Accessed March 4, 2015) Trafficking women and children for sexual exploitation is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. Gender inequality and discriminatory laws trap women in poverty, and fail to protect them from violence, rendering them vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking. During the past several years, a number of women religious have moved into this challenging ministry and are making a difference among the trafficked persons. Have we really explored and utilized the tremendous potential we have as women and religious for a more pronounced and prophetic global solidarity that can challenge systems and structures that continue to create and sustain this horrific crime?

Do these "peripheries" challenge us to be women of global solidarity?

Our increasing awareness of the world situation carries with it an increased responsibility to the people who are forced by structures, groups and individuals to remain poor and marginalized. St. John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* reminds us that solidarity "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all".. Solidarity means the willingness to regard injustices committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against oneself. Genuine solidarity requires heart-level understanding of our prophetic call and a total commitment to the Jesus movement for the integral liberation of every human person. It requires common action from us, as consecrated persons, along with all people of good will, to address the fundamental causes of injustice and the sources of violence in our world.

Genuine solidarity means engagement with real people, especially the poor and marginalized of our time. Pope Francis reminds us that "A keyword that we need not fear is 'solidarity,' that is, knowing how to make available to God what we have, our humble capacity, because only in the gift of sharing our lives will we be fruitful," (May 30,

2013 homily at Rome's Basilica of Saint John Lateran.) He repeatedly urges us to live our solidarity by going to the existential peripheries of our modern world. He invites us for a shift in the center of gravity of our apostolic works as religious congregations. Time and again he challenges the whole Church, *to get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery and to protect ourselves from becoming self-absorbed!* Do we recognize the most neglected and peripheralised people around us? It touches the deepest core of my being when I am awakened to the radical implications of what Jesus said in Mathew 25. At the end of it all, Jesus, whom we call our Beloved and Lord, for whom we have left all things, has a set of *"periphery"-focused questions for us, all about our relationship with the marginalized and the needy. Did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Welcome the stranger? Clothe the naked? Visit the sick? Visit prisoners? In the context of our present day realities, who are these hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, imprisoned people in whom Christ is in agony?* (cf. Ronald Rohlheiser) What are the practical implications for us as religious who are seriously negotiating a lifestyle of global solidarity for the fullness of life that Jesus has promised for all?

Our sincere commitment to justice and active concern for the poor are absolutely non-negotiable parts of living our faith and discipleship. Today there is so much theologizing and writing about the radical option for the poor and needy. While I may feel good about that on the conceptual level, where am I in my practical, down-to-earth solidarity with the poor? Has my prayer life, my spirituality, my lifestyle, my way of living community, my way of doing my ministry been impacted by my radical, Christ-like concern for the poor? I, too, am part of the system that creates and sustains poverty and exploitation. All the goods that I enjoy, all the comforts that I take for granted, all the securities that I feel entitled to should challenge me to share even out of my need and call me to live a spirituality of sufficiency. I feel that we religious have the idea of the "hundredfold" all mixed up to suit our needs for a comfortable life! Consecrated life will always mean living on the edge and participating in the struggles, the insecurities of the peripheries. I wish we could ask the poor to give us an honest evaluation of our consecrated life as they see and experience it!

We humbly acknowledge that, in the face of all the global issues of injustice that beset us, we can do very little as individuals or even as communities and congregations. But imagine, if each woman religious would reach out even to a few persons on the margins, how the margins would be transformed into islands of hope! Let me share with you one of my many experiences while living with the poorest of the poor Musahars in Bihar. In the late 1970s, a number of us, women and men religious, felt the call to live solidarity with the poor in a radical way. Some of us decided to share the lot of one of the most deprived groups in North India by living among them in their tiny mud huts and sharing in their struggles. We had to find our own ways of living our religious community and prayer in this new reality. One day, the poor lady, Punia, whose hut I was sharing, lost her 3-year-old daughter in the morning and five-year old son later on the same day due to a cholera outbreak. I was so broken and upset that God would allow such a thing to happen to these poor helpless people. I was angry at the system that permitted such utter poverty and misery. All I could do was to weep in solidarity with all the weeping women in that village. Pope Francis, in his homily on July 8, 2013, said: "We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion, suffering with others; the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!"

My experience that day gave rise to a barrage of questions, questions about the meaning of my consecrated life, my vows and my ministries in the context of these kinds of terrible tragedies that continue to happen in the lives millions of the marginalized in our world. What is my real identity? Am I who I claim to be as a woman religious? Who is benefiting from my vowed life? Will my life make any difference in the lives of those most in need? As I, too, succumb to consumerism, am I not also contributing to a system that allows these little ones to die? Listening to the poor with compassion and allowing them to touch our lives is, indeed, a mutually transforming experience. We know from experience that the poor can teach us lessons of life that surpass all theology and science. All we need is to be present among them with the Presence of Christ and be present to the present!

Buzz session: How has my life as a religious really impacted those on the margins: the poor, the homeless, the exploited, and the broken?

What are some of the possible ways to build up our global solidarity?

Dialogue, interfaith and intercultural, will always be a powerful means to strengthen Global Solidarity for life. Pope Francis often speaks about the pre-eminence of dialogue as a means of conflict resolution and building global solidarity. During his visit to Sarajevo in June 2015, he said: "Interreligious dialogue...is an indispensable condition for peace...Dialogue is a school of humanity, a builder of unity, which helps build a society." Dialogue helps one to move closer to the truth about God and what it means to be human. Interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and solidarity with the poor in their struggles for human dignity are three important dimensions of our mission today. Nelson Mandela has said "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." I believe that, as women religious, we have tremendous potential and possibilities to be peace negotiators by opening doors to anger reduction, reconciliation, peace mediation, and healing. But are we sufficiently prepared and ready to initiate and nurture a culture of dialogue at various levels?

Dialogue is a way of life. I remember one of my experiences during my life among the poor. Two of us shared a tiny mud hut with a poor family in a Hindu village. In the adjacent hut lived a very religious old woman who did her daily *puja* (worship rituals) on the sacred stone she had enshrined in a corner of her little hut. As an educated and enthusiastic but inexperienced young sister, I was eager to revolutionize the miserable condition of the "superstitious and the illiterate poor"! One day I met my old friend as she finished her worship and I could not resist my desire to call to her attention the meaninglessness of worshiping the "stone" and so I said, "Nani [grandmother], why do you worship the stone? God is not in that stone. God lives in our hearts." Her only response to me was a loving glance and a gentle smile. The following Sunday, Holy Mass was celebrated in our village hut and my old friend came and took her place right next to me. After communion, as I was praying, she nudged me gently and whispered in my ear, "Listen, my child, yesterday you said that my God was not in the stone I worshiped. But then, how is it that your God is in the bread that you ate just now?" I was speechless. It was this timely questioning by my illiterate but wise friend that awakened me to the realization that humility, compassion and deep respect are essential ingredients of true communion and dialogue that transform relationships. Yes, the poor are our best teachers in the art of dialogue and solidarity.

Intercultural living is another powerful expression of global solidarity in our intercultural world. Within a congregation and among congregations, our intercultural living that is centered in Jesus, sharing a common vision and mission, is a powerful witness to our broken and divided world. Fr. Anthony Gittins says, "Intercultural living is an authentic discipleship lived by culturally different people together... [It] is not easy but it is desirable and urgently needed... Intercultural living is the future of international religious life. Unless international communities become intercultural, they will not survive." (2011 Congress of the Religious Formation Conference)

If we put our call to intercultural living at the disposal of the most marginalized, they will have much to tell us about the gift of our interculturality. I believe that the witness of an intercultural community can play a crucial role in the process of reconciliation and healing among the poor, the refugees, the slum dwellers, and all those who have been forced to live in a multicultural and multi-religious reality. Witness of a life of harmony amidst cultural, social and religious conflicts is indeed a visible and credible mark of the Reign of God. My experience is that living immersed in the lives and struggles of the marginalized will give a new perspective to our own intercultural challenges. Formation for intercultural living has to become a priority for all of us.

Together we globalize solidarity and hope

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that: "International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this." But why is commitment to solidarity so difficult to achieve? Global solidarity is possible only when we have a sense of solidarity among ourselves and a sense of solidarity with the suffering millions on the peripheries. If we really believe in solidarity as a fundamental value of life, we will have to find ways and means to advocate for solidarity at all levels, including the political sphere. If we religious want to embrace global solidarity as a way of life and become a transforming presence in our world today, then we will have to put new institutions and structures in place that witness to this value and promote it beyond all borders.

As more and more congregations face diminishment, if not careful, we can become self-absorbed, focusing most of our physical and spiritual energy, resources, and priorities on our diminishment, lack of vocations, challenges of

maintaining our once flourishing and secure institutions. The question is: Will those of us who are called to consecrated life at this time in the history of the world be women who will risk moving out of our securities and comforts (which we mistakenly perceive as our hundredfold for following the poor Man of Galilee!) and go out to the existential and geographical peripheries with the evangelical message of hope, joy and life to the full? Can we religious say with conviction and commitment that we do not want our charisms to be so institutionalized and centralized that we lose the “prophetic sting” inherent in our call to close discipleship and mission? When we expose ourselves to the vulnerabilities of life and mission on the peripheries, we will discover our real identity and purpose in Christ.

Today let us remember with gratitude those women religious, perhaps some in your own congregations, who are responding to ministries of global solidarity beyond the traditional and institutional ministries of the congregation. They have pitched their tent among the poorest of the poor, the migrants, refugees, trafficked persons, sex workers, persons suffering from addictions, physical and psychological disabilities. There are some women religious today who work with the government, with like-minded NGOs, and groups and organizations like the UNNGOs especially in the areas of human trafficking, empowerment of women and girls, migration, and human rights issues. They are engaged in advocacy and lobbying at various levels to ensure right policies and laws in favor of the most needy and marginalized in society. It is only a beginning, and so, the question before us today is the same one that was posed by the rich young man in the Gospel: what *more* remains for us to do, as women disciples of Jesus, in our faithfulness to Christ and to his mission? The future of religious life will be decided on the peripheries where Christ is in agony! To minister for and with the poor, we need to move away from our privileged position of power, control and security and displace ourselves existentially towards the peripheries. It’s there that we will rediscover the ‘agenda of Jesus’ and bear witness to his mission of unity, communion and global solidarity. This call has to be heard beyond our congregational and Church boundaries so as to bring together the transformational potential in the hearts all people of good will across our hurting world.

Conclusion

As consecrated and committed women in our globalized world, what is our message of hope to the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest on the new peripheries of our society? If all religious today could pause and listen, perhaps we would hear again the heart-desire of Jesus: *Father, that they may be one as we are one.*” (Jn.17:21) We also need to hear his anguished question to us: “Why are you so cowardly? Do you still have no faith?”(Mark 4:35-41). Sisters, we who have everything, and often are among the privileged women of our world; what are we afraid of? What is the root of our cowardice and our fear? Why are we afraid of the future when we know God is busy shaping our future just as God shaped our past beyond our expectations? Do we really believe in Jesus? Or is our faith just a theological concept which we easily explain and teach to others? Are we ready to cross over to the other side where a new way of being religious, a new way of engaging with all our brothers and sisters, especially with those on the periphery, engaging with Mother Earth, awaits us?

The climate we are experiencing among us as women religious and in the Church in general is something like going back to our roots. Theologically and biblically, it is a Kairos moment! How we choose to respond to this moment will decide the future of ministerial religious life. What is “the more” and “the different” that I am willing to risk in my prophetic mission today to ensure that evils like human trafficking, sex tourism, abuse of children and women, and destruction of the environment will have no place in our world? As women religious of this millennium, we are called to be the Eucharist that is *taken, blessed, broken* to be shared in this world that God loves so much, this world that is in chaos and darkness. This radical Eucharistic sharing goes far beyond praying for God’s people and God’s world and doing some charitable deeds, necessary as they are! Like Jesus, we are challenged to be filled with a “divine recklessness” that flows from a passion for God and from active compassion for God’s people, especially the weakest.

We urgently need to find new ways of relating to one another as women religious, a new way of sharing our charism and participating in our common mission and thus holding “all things in common,” beyond our congregational and national boundaries. This is the urgent need of the hour. As leaders of your congregations, you need to ask yourself: where do I want our sisters, our communities, our congregation to be in this globalized, connected and yet divided world, a world that is afflicted by violent fundamentalism, a world of mega-migration, a world of extreme disparities

between the haves and the have-nots, a world of dehumanizing hunger and scandalous affluence? How can we create and enlarge spaces of global solidarity and networking, with women and men, religious and laity, NGOs and other organizations in partnership as we move on to the peripheries of poverty, exclusion and injustice? The options before us are very limited: either we live a prophetic religious life with all its consequences of witnessing to the life and mission of Jesus in real terms, or disappear as an irrelevant reality.

Let me conclude with the words of Miriam MacGillis, OP, "We're at a moment where there are no guarantees as to the Earth's future. What are the new frontiers that beckon us, for which we would be ready to joyfully sacrifice our securities, our comfort...? It's a question of our own critical choices. And I think what we're deeply in need of is a transforming vision... a vision that opens the future up to hope."

Questions for Group discussion

1. What, according to you, are the non-negotiable aspects of our life and mission as women religious, regardless of the context in which we live?
2. What would it mean for you and your community, in actual terms, to engage the new peripheries of our globalized world in the spirit of global solidarity? What are the real peripheries that beckon you at this time?
3. What are some of the practical implications of committing ourselves to a lifestyle and ministry of global solidarity? How would such a commitment change the understanding and structures of our current way of living religious life?

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