

What are we hearing from participants in this virtual convening?

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Over the last 5 days together, we have been discerning what issues and research needs to be attentive to. What is God calling each of us individually and collectively to attend to at this time? I have heard 4 key issues

Interculturality and inculturation

Research presented by Sr Hellen and Sr Florence has shown us that RL for women across Africa continues to be international in its composition.

Sr Joan and Sr Bibiana have highlighted the continuing diversity of religious sisters in Zambia and Kenya. It appears that this diversity is now largely African, with decreasing numbers of sisters from the GN, more perhaps from Asia, but comprising many 'missionaries' from other African countries. The composition of this diversity calls for more attention and to ask— what new challenges does this pose to intercultural living? Does this call for sisters to respond to living their charisms as African women?

The trend in the Global North is also one of increasing interculturality –and a coming together. Sr Thu and Dr Dantis presented the emerging reality of cultural diversity and interculturality in RL in the US, and Australia. Again, what are the new demands of this and how can sisters live encounter with those who are so different. How and where are congregations coming together? How are charisms challenged to evolve in these settings?

Identity/Charism and relation to ministry

We have heard calls for more research about the nature, composition and impact of sisters' ministries so that their worth is fully recognised, or for research into emerging forms of ministry. Sr Margaret explored the implications of sisters operating as 'lone rangers' – pursuing their own personal projects. Sr Florence's research uncovered an enormous variety of ministries undertaken by sisters in Nigeria – in response to these, we have heard suggestions for research to explore the relationship between charism and apostolates – how are ministries being shaped by charisms? How is the charism being incarnated in these ministries?

Apostolates and religious life need to be considered holistically & in relation to each other. researching and funding apostolates in isolation from the life is not a short cut. We know that religious congregations are not NGOs – it is their unique way of ministering Christ to others that will attract others to want to both follow them and support them in all sorts of ways.

3. RL responding to change

We have heard presentations about RL going through great periods of change – sometimes aware of it and sometimes not - Fr Luis's research shows that the Church and Religious in Mexico have not yet woken up to or faced up to the secular reality and context.

Fr Wojcech spoke about the rapid decline in membership of RL in Poland, and increasing secularity among Polish youth. Dr Dantis's presentation explored the change faced by Religious in Australia – and how sisters are responding to the twin challenges of increasing interculturality and diminishing membership.

There have been calls to undertake research into the reality of ageing in congregations across Africa – how are the congregations planning for ageing and caring for older sisters and what are the particular challenges to individual charisms in this situation? However, we also have to ask – what is the witness of this large generation of elderly sisters? What do they have to say to us? What is the meaning of what is happening to religious life? Can we ever know?

Declining membership in many parts of the world is also leading to greater collaboration with other lay people – where is this happening? Where and why is it working well? Is it something to be feared, or is this something sisters are being called to? What about collaboration in research? What is the value of the outsider perspective and what questions can sisters ask of themselves that other lay people cannot?

Gender

This has been a conference for, with and about RL for women and gender rightly sits at its heart. Fr Wojcech explored levels of self-awareness of their sexuality among religious, and found that sisters are often more conscious of their embodied self and emotional maturity. Sr Kevin's research highlighted the gendered aspects of formation. Both presentations are attentive to the need for greater exploration of how Religious can be fully present to and engaged in the Church. Sisters need to be fully formed – theologically, spiritually and academically - both for individual flourishing as women and ministerial effectiveness. In the conference sisters have responded by identifying the need for research into empowerment of sisters, levels of fulfilment and quality of life.

Finally, we have paid attention to relationships between sisters and clergy, and indeed sisters and other lay people in their parishes and mis/understandings of religious life – which, as Fr Tom pointed out, are common everywhere, and have long been a feature of clergy/religious relationships. We also saw in the groups, identification of the need for priests and sisters to undertake research together. Personally, I would be delighted to see, as suggested by Sr Jane, someone building on our research and on what we heard from sisters on this issue. Fr Michael Niba called for research about how WR perceive and view the clergy – absolutely – but we need to be mindful that these perspectives are deeply rooted in gender and who holds power in the Church – and that isn't always the clergy!!