

# Religious Life for Women in East and Central Africa: a sustainable future

Report of a research project on sisters' understandings of the essence of religious life for women in East and Central Africa 2017 - 2020

*by Dr. Catherine Sexton and Dr. María Calderón Muñoz, February 2020*



A collaborative research project jointly undertaken by Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies and the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, generously funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
What this report is	11
What this report is not	11
<b>Chapter 1 Methodological considerations</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Methods of data collection and analysis</b>	<b>14</b>
Feasibility Study period (Year 1)	14
Key outputs of the feasibility study	14
Research design	14
Identifying the sample set	16
Data collection and analysis	16
Limitations of this study	18
Ethical considerations	19
<b>Chapter 3 Relationship with God, prayer and the following of Christ</b>	<b>20</b>
Introduction	20
God: the centre and meaning of religious life	21
Christ the pray-er	22
Prayer	22
The Holy Spirit	23
Forms of prayer	24
Functions and fruits of Prayer	25
Being other-oriented as the fruit of prayer	26
A central dynamic	30



<b>Chapter 4 Community life</b>	<b>31</b>
Introduction	31
Overview	31
Sources of models for community life	32
Community as communion, mutuality and reconciliation	34
Challenges of community life	36
The common timetable	38
Community life as a form of witnessing to God's loving action and the value of Christian life	39
God and prayer at the heart of community life	40
Community as a source from which to draw	41
A second dynamic?	43
Community as protection	44
Awareness of connection with wider community	45
<b>Chapter 5 Mission, evangelisation and apostolates</b>	<b>47</b>
Mission	47
Evangelisation	49
Apostolates	50
<b>Chapter 6 Bearing witness and hope through consecrated being</b>	<b>56</b>
Introduction	56
The vows and consecration: speaking into the world or set apart from it?	57
Witness	61
Being signs of eschatological hope	63
Ministry of Presence	64
<b>Chapter 7 Charism</b>	<b>67</b>
Introduction	67
Charismatic maturity through expressed complexity	68
Relating the charism to other aspects of Religious Life	69
Charism as a source of renewal	71
Charism understood as both gift and ecclesial in nature	72

<b>Chapter 8 Sisters and the local Church</b>	<b>73</b>
Introduction: Sisters as part of the life and energy of the Church	73
Sisters in and as the mission of the Church	74
Are we Church?	76
Sisters and clergy: differentiated roles and power dynamics	77
Power dynamics between clergy and sisters	79
Conflict over land and institutions	82
A role for prophetic voices in the Church: speaking out?	86
 <b>Chapter 9 Sisters' sense of identity</b>	 <b>88</b>
Under the gaze of society	88
How sisters see themselves	92
Identities as multi-layered	93
 <b>Chapter 10 Sustainability, poverty, empowerment</b>	 <b>94</b>
Introduction	94
Sustainability of congregations	94
Living vowed poverty	99
Engaging with poverty in their external environment	101
Poverty and the impact on sisters' apostolates	103
 <b>Chapter 11 Recruitment and initial formation of new members</b>	 <b>104</b>
Introduction	104
Reasons to continue to attract new members	104
New members: what is expected of them and what they expect from religious life	106
Initial formation	108
Formators	110
Summary	111



<b>Chapter 12 Sustainability of the spiritual life and integrity of the congregations</b>	<b>112</b>
Introduction	112
Distractions to religious life	112
Main distractions	112
Advice on how to deal with distractions	117
Family bonds and expectations	118
Accepting the limitations of being human	120
Sustainability of the congregations through renewal and ongoing formation	120
The extent and nature of the self-critique and introspection	120
Conclusion	124
 <b>Chapter 13 Summary and conclusions</b>	 <b>125</b>
Sustainability of the wineskins: financial sustainability and new membership	126
Sustainability of the congregations in terms of spiritual, charismatic and apostolic integrity	128
The right place of apostolic activity	128
Shared understanding of charism	130
Sisters and the local Church	131
Conclusion	132
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	
Research participant consent form'	135
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>136</b>
Participant information sheet	136
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<b>138</b>
Invitation letter to and guidance notes for Stage 2 group discussions	139



# Acknowledgements

We would first of all like to express our gratitude to the Catholic Sisters' Initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; none of our work would have been possible without their belief in our research and our approach and their commitment to women religious throughout the world.

This report has been written by the 'inner' core research team of Dr. Catherine Sexton and Dr. María Calderón Muñoz. However, we acknowledge the invaluable and significant role and contribution of the members of our wider 'core' team of Project Support Assistants, without whom this work truly would not have been possible:

**Sr. Margaret Akoth Sewe IBVM (Kenya)**

**Sr. Scholastica Mwale SCO (Malawi)**

**Sr. Deusdedita Lutego CST (Tanzania)**

**Sr. Christine Keneema DM (Uganda)**

**Sr. Helen Kasaka LSMI (Zambia)**

We thank them for the time they have given to this work, for the loving care and attention with which they coordinated the data collection in each country, and for the conversations and ideas which led to this final analysis and report. We would also like to offer our warmest gratitude and appreciation to the Provincial and General Superiors of these five congregations who so kindly loaned the sisters to the project over this period. We also acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Susan O'Brien, who assisted us in the data analysis stage; her insights as a historian of women's religious life have also been invaluable.

We would also like to acknowledge the input and wisdom of the members of our theological commentators' group, which met in Nairobi in April 2019, and whose helpful insights have been drawn upon many times throughout this report:

**Sr. Chama Mwila OP (Zambia)**

**Sr. Margaret Kubanze LSOSF (Uganda)**

**Sr. Rael Otieno SMK (Kenya)**

**Fr. Tim Redmond SPS (UK - Kenya)**

**Sr. Dr. Teresia Tarimo OSS (Tanzania)**

**Sr. Dr. Redemista Ngonyani OSB (Tanzania)**

**Fr. Joe McCullough SPS (Ireland)**

**Sr. Dr. Marren Rose Awiti IBVM (Kenya)**

**Sr. Mercy Shumbamhini CJ (Zimbabwe)**

**Sr. Revocate Kabahuma MSOLA (Uganda/Malawi)**

**Sr. Rita Namayanja IHMR (Uganda)**

**Sr. Joyce Meyer PBVM (USA - Zambia)**

We express our gratitude for the cooperation and support of the leadership conferences of the five countries in which the project was run, and their past and present leadership: the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK); the Association of Women in Religious Institutes of Malawi (AWRIM); the Tanzania Catholic Association of Sisters (TCAS); the Association of Religious of Uganda (ARU) and the Zambian Association of Sisterhoods (ZAS). We would also like to thank the following individuals who helped us in our original and ongoing thinking: Sr. Eneless Chimballi SBVM, former Secretary General of ACWECA, Sr. Pat Murray IBVM, Executive secretary of the 'International Union of Superiors General' (UISG), Sr. Jane Wakahiu LSOSF, then Executive Director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), as well as all those sisters who attended the original 'Kasisi consultation' meeting in Zambia, September 2019.

We would also like to thank all the members of the wider team and support staff of our institutions who helped us in so many ways over the last three years, in particular Professor Paul Murray, Principal Investigator of the Project and Yvonne Williams, Project Co-ordinator of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, and, at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Sr. Dr. Gemma Simmonds CJ, Director of our sister project 'Religious Life in the UK: discerning the future', and Dr. Amy Daughton, now at the University of Birmingham. We include in this the members of the Academic Advisory Group who supported and challenged us throughout, particularly the guidance of the Chair, Dr. Carmen Mangion of Birkbeck College, University of London.

It only remains to thank each one of the over six hundred individual sisters and nearly eighty congregations of sisters who participated in the project, giving of their time, their thoughts and their commitment. We hope this work is of some benefit to them.

# Executive Summary

In 2015, towards the end of the initial piece of research carried out by this team on vitality in apostolic religious life for women in the UK and Ireland, funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters' Initiative (CSI), we were approached by the CSI staff to explore whether we would be interested in applying our existing experience and extending our approach of working with Catholic to include sisters in a number of countries across East and Central Africa. This research, carried out between 2016 and 2019, was the result of an invitation from the Catholic Sisters' Initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to undertake a further piece of work.

The aim of this project was to combine the shared expertise of sister researchers from the region and the global perspective of the UK-based Religious Life Vitality team to enrich local reflection on women's religious life and to contribute to the growing global discourse on the same.

Our methodology was two- fold, consisting of an aim to hear, amplify and privilege the theological voices of Catholic sisters, and second, a belief that their theological voices are to be heard in conversation with each other. We therefore wanted to encourage a participatory approach and to this end, the research questions were drawn up through a consultation exercise. This comprised listening to individual sisters in key positions and to a range of network and umbrella organisations, such as ACWECA, UISG and the leadership conferences of each of the five country project locations. Most specifically the research questions resulted from a consultation meeting held in Kasisi, Zambia in 2016, bringing together sisters from the five identified project locations: Kenya; Malawi; Tanzania; Uganda and Zambia.

The project aimed to answer the key following questions:

- What do sisters say is the essence of Religious Life for women in Africa today and into the future?
- What are the key challenges that hinder the living of this essence?
- What are the best ways of ensuring the understanding & living of it, and how this is communicated to sisters in formation?

The study used qualitative research methods to address the questions as our concern was to draw on the lived experience of Catholic sisters and to hear their reflections on the emerging theology of religious life across the region. Data collection was carried out in two stages. In Stage 1, we asked sisters to tell us the five key points in their understanding of the essence of religious life for women as lived in their own context. In Stage 2, these responses were explored in guided discussion groups.

In Stage 1, we received responses from 621 sisters from 79 congregations in five countries across East and Central Africa, a 76% response rate. 50 of these congregations went forward into Stage 2 and held 56 discussions groups. We analysed the data using thematic content analysis. In Stage 3, we brought together a group of sisters from the five project countries who acted as theological commentators and helped us identify the theology of religious life emerging from the data. We then shared these initial insights with participants in workshops in each of the five countries, giving them the opportunity to respond and thus enabling the project to be dialogical in method.

Based on our analysis and discussions with sisters, we decided that it would not be appropriate for us to make recommendations, but instead we would make a series of observations and offer some questions for further reflection.

Although the project attempted to answer the three parts of the research question agreed with sisters in the consultation meeting in Zambia in 2016, we have also explored the sustainability of this form of life. Sustainability was one of the key concerns expressed in that meeting, alongside the role of sisters in the Church, and how best to form women for roles in church and wider society. Those discussions focussed on sustainability from the perspectives of financial self-reliance and new membership. However, in order to reflect the nature of many questions asked and concerns raised by sisters in the data collected, we have widened our understanding of sustainability to include the spiritual and charismatic integrity of these apostolic congregations.

In relation to financial sustainability, depending on their context and indeed on the type of congregation, the participants have a wide range of experiences. Despite different contexts, all the congregations in some measure acknowledged that financial security or self- reliance is a struggle, and some say not even feasible. From the discussions, it is difficult to know for certain if the

financial situation of the sisters is deteriorating but some do refer to changing circumstances that affect their financial situation. Some congregations that are reliant on financial support from abroad, such as from donors, no longer receive as much financial support from these sources as before.

All recognise that financial sustainability is a real struggle, and for many, meeting the needs of the sisters and the congregations as well as addressing their own desire to address the needs of those living in poverty around them, as well as their ministries, is largely unrealistic. It is difficult to draw conclusions on the prospects for financial sustainability as individual congregations face different challenges. However, all seem to be trying to strengthen their financial security.

In relation to new membership, the report found that the primary reasons to recruit are in order to ensure the future and the continuity of the congregation; to continue Christ's mission and that of the Church and to staff existing institutions and apostolates. However, other sisters express concern at some of these reasons so that continuity for continuity's sake is not seen as a valid reason to continue to attract new members, putting the onus firmly back on the congregation to establish clarity as to their sisters' role and purpose in church and society.

We heard three main challenges to the recruitment of new members. The first of these was the perception of a decrease in the number of young women coming to enter congregations. This perception was not widespread, but no congregation spoke of an increase in women entering. The second is a perception of a change in what sisters call the 'quality' of vocations, influenced by young women not receiving the kind of formation in the faith, nor realistic understanding of what religious life entails, needed as a good basis on which to build. The third challenge is concern at the motives for women entering, as many sisters believe women come to get a good education or for what are perceived as other self-centred and individualistic reasons.

In relation to strategies for formation of new members, the report notes the negative perceptions of the role of formator and asks what ways can be found to change these perceptions, as many sisters see that all professed sisters are called to model how to live religious life, and thus all are formators to an extent. The report also asks how can traditional formation methods be best adapted to meet the needs of recruits today? We have heard of positive experiences of collaboration between congregations in Uganda, facilitated by the Association of Religious of Uganda (ARU) and we ask whether there is scope for further

collaboration between congregations in other countries in this field?

Turning to the sustainability of the congregations through spiritual and charismatic integrity, the report found that the most commonly occurring and prominent theme identified in the research was the ideal or actual form of community life distinguished by physical presence and togetherness. It is a very strong and defining element of religious life for the participants and is central to sisters' self-understanding and identity as religious, and prominent in their theology of religious vocation.

Although all the participant congregations are active or apostolic in character, the report found that many are attempting to live a semi-monastic way of life, which would have been prevalent at the time of founding of the diocesan and indigenous congregations but may no longer be appropriate today. We feel that this may point to a need for a deep examination of this form of life and ask to what extent is a model of community life, which is conventual, lived under-one-roof and emphasises physical togetherness, still sustainable, or suitable to the demands of contemporary apostolic religious life for women in East and Central Africa?

We ask this question for several reasons. Firstly, the primacy given to community suggests that, for some sisters, community is certainly the first apostolate, and possibly considered their main apostolate. This must give cause for reflection on whether community life in apostolic communities can ever be an end in itself, or is it only the means through which the wider apostolate and mission of the church is achieved?

The second reason is that the attempt to reconcile a semi-monastic form of living with an active apostolate can create huge pressures on individual sisters and their ministries. This does not mean that time for prayer becomes less important, in fact it is of the utmost importance. One of the **key questions** to come out of the project asks how an ongoing theology of the apostolic life can explore new forms and ways of prayer which may aid this integration. Can congregations and communities make more time and resources available to sisters to study and explore forms of prayer which may help them move towards this synthesis?

The third reason is the comments from sisters themselves. In the data we collected, we hear the voices of many sisters seeking to discern if their way of life is the most appropriate expression of the charism for this time and these circumstances. The extent of their questioning extends to and includes whether both current and the ideal forms of community life are shaped by the charism of

each congregation and whether community life is evangelised by the apostolic charisms of each congregation? Again, we ask, what is properly given primacy in the active life – community or apostolate, and which is serving which?

On the other hand, the stress upon and the importance given to community life may mean that we are witnessing the interplay of the reading of the signs of the times and each congregation's 'deep story'. This may be leading to an evolving a form of religious life for women which has adapted to the socio-cultural context where extended families, community and even tribe are still the predominant forms of living and values influencing the way religious life is lived.

The report found that the opening up of the way of living religious life, including community life, can be supported not only by revisiting the congregation's charism, but by helping sisters develop an understanding of charism as multi-faceted and complex, as story, rather than a motto or strapline, which shapes each and every aspect of religious life. Charism can be confusing, and many sisters in the project confuse it with apostolates and even spirituality.

Most sisters participating in the project look to community as a central source of nourishment and the place to which they return for refreshment and recharging. While sisters are explicit about living in a state of mutual encounter and communion with their sisters in community, they less often articulate this sense of communion either with those whom they serve, or with the local church and society more widely. The apostolates themselves are not described or referred to as sources of replenishment or prayer for sisters. This suggests that further investigation of mutuality in mission may be helpful in developing a theology of mission. Mutuality goes further than communion; it expresses the idea that, while sisters gain nourishment from the community to enable their apostolate, this very apostolic work can also bring something sustaining back to the community. This idea is important for developing a theology of the apostolate.

An emerging apostolic theology suggests that nourishment may also be found elsewhere: particularly in their mission and apostolic work. Thus, sisters can complete the circle: bringing replenishment back to the community from the apostolic work as well as drawing from it. The majority of the congregations work with the poorest and most vulnerable people and support them with immediate physical and practical help. However, the report found that the way the sisters speak about their service to the poor and their apostolates suggests a one- way

relationship between sisters as givers, and the poor as receivers. The report asks whether the communication is always one way in the sisters' relationship with the poor? Are they only givers or do they, in fact, also receive from those they serve?

Drawing on the teaching of the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the report also highlights the sisters' role as partners and collaborators in their mission and asks: How far can their apostolate be developed in partnership with the poorest of the poor, by working within and alongside them? Can their service be extended to provide a preferential option for the poor through empowering and bringing about permanent change? A future theology of apostolate may wish to consider ways of taking empowerment further by questioning unfair aspects of the status quo or by advocating for greater self-sufficiency, choice and agency in society.

Turning to the role and experience of sisters in the institutional church, the report found conflicting experiences of relationships between religious and other lay people and religious sisters and the clergy. The sisters offer a resounding affirmation of the ecclesial nature and location of their vocation and offer some examples of positive collaboration for the sake of the mission. At the same time, they speak of the depth of misunderstanding and misperceptions of religious life and of conflict with clergy, characterised by being undermined, excluded and mistreated. We note above that sisters seem to identify only community as a source of communion and mutuality. In relation to ecclesiology, we rarely heard expressions which would chime with a contemporary ecclesiology of communion, but we wonder whether, given the sisters' experiences, this is indeed a realistic expectation on our part. A question raised by the research for future consideration is whether the apparent reciprocity between sisters and other lay people in the Church can be taken further: do sisters always need to be the 'other' in the parish context? Can they be receivers as well as givers, or do power dynamics and conflict within church communities inhibit this understanding?

The report has identified great potential for the sustainability of religious life for women in terms of the strongly incarnational and implicitly sacramental theology we have heard of mission, ministry, consecration and living of the charism. Sisters express and live great love for God; they go to extraordinary lengths to share and communicate that love to and for others, in very demanding and challenging contexts. Their lives are characterised by simplicity and a love for the gift of their vocation and commitment to the church and its mission.



The central issue which has emerged in the course of this research is the need for continuing renewal of the way the life is lived in accordance with the spirit and patrimony of each congregation: its expression in charism, authentic apostolic spirituality and vocation, and community life. The research leads us to ask whether what we have heard from the 620 sisters from 80 congregations, across five countries, constitutes a call for further, deep renewal, or are we witnessing the emergence of a form of apostolic religious life which is appropriate to the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which it is being lived? Or indeed, are both these factors shaping and influencing the other so that the renewal must become context-specific? In addressing these central questions, sisters themselves will clarify, or find it immeasurably easier to clarify the ways of understanding, living and communicating of the essence of the apostolic impulse, as lived in their congregations, in their own context, to new members. We hope we have given them some tools with which to continue this work.

## Introduction

In 2015, towards the end of the initial piece of research carried out by this team on vitality in apostolic religious life for women in the UK and Ireland<sup>1</sup>, funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters' Initiative (CSI), we were approached by the CSI staff to explore whether we would be interested in extending our work to include sisters in various countries across East and Central Africa. The CSI staff had responded to our approach to research very positively, describing it as one whereby 'process is product'. This begins with hearing and listening to sisters' concerns, involving them as much as possible, from the point of formulating the research question onwards. Our view of research is not extractive or experimental. We don't view the sisters as objects, or subjects of research but more as conversation partners. The approach produces 'research' which is not solely theoretical or academic in nature but is rooted in sisters' experience and reality and reflects that back to them.

This term 'process as product' has been meaningful for us and the sisters with whom we have worked over the last three years. It has meant that the actual taking part in the research has a value in and of itself, so that sisters who participated

benefitted both from the taking part and from hearing and responding to the final analysis of the research. Sisters have been able to send us their thoughts on their religious lives in writing, then to discuss those thoughts, together with their fellow sisters, in discussion groups, and finally, to take part in the feedback workshops we conducted in each of the five countries project locations. In other words, they have had the opportunity to reflect individually on their religious lives, and to take part in conversations about religious life as lived in their own immediate context - its purpose and meaning for them. We believe that this in itself has been of benefit to sisters. We have had numerous conversations with individual sisters who have taken part, telling us of how this project has given them the opportunity to reflect deeply and prayerfully on how they are living their religious life - something that they rarely, if ever, take the time to do. We have also heard from numerous provincial and general superiors who have seen the advantage to sisters of the simple conversations held - again taking the time and making the effort to talk to and listen to what each other is saying about her own and their collective religious lives, as lived in their communities and congregations.

For us also as a team, viewing the research in the light of 'process as product' has meant that the carrying out of the research and the process of engaging with sisters has been very meaningful in and of itself. At the heart of this was hearing and being attentive to the theology of religious life articulated by the sisters' voices. Had we simply wanted to learn about the theology of apostolic religious life for women, we could have consulted the numerous documents and volumes that have already been written about this topic or consulted with a group of African sister theologians. However, we wanted to hear the theology of apostolic religious life for women in the context of the five countries of East and Central Africa, as expressed by sisters themselves, through reflecting on and excavating their lived experience. We wanted it to be empirical, rather than theoretical; we wanted to hear the 'ordinary theology'<sup>2</sup> of those sisters reflecting on their lives, and how this was operant within their religious lives. This has been an approach of hearing, of listening attentively, with an ear of discernment, and of amplifying the voices and the theology we have heard.

1. The Religious Life Vitality Project 2013 - 2015: a project exploring lived experiences of vitality in congregations of apostolic women in the UK and Ireland. Also funded by the Catholic Sisters' Initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.
2. Astley, J. 2013. *Ordinary Theology*, Routledge: London. Astley uses the term to refer to the theology articulated by ordinary Christians with little formal academic or systematic theological education.

## What this report is

Whilst arguing that the process itself has been of importance and value both to us as researchers and to the participants, we also acknowledge that the final analysis and findings of the research have to be shared more widely in the format of a report and our research approach has had implications for the way in which we have written the report.

As we gathered and reflected on the voices of the 620 Catholic sisters who participated, we recognised what a unique and valuable resource this collection of voices represents, and we would like the voices to be shared as widely as possible. For ethical reasons, the original responses, recordings and transcripts cannot be kept and must be destroyed,<sup>3</sup> but we can still offer a selection of the voices heard in this report in order to preserve and share their contribution.

A further concern of the process was to amplify these voices. This provides a further justification for including a large number of excerpts from the original data in the report, to enrich and illustrate our analysis. We could have simply produced our own analysis, but we believe that as a research resource the report is more valuable with this original data included. This in turn has made the full research report quite lengthy, but we offer an Executive Summary, and have produced an abridged version of the report, in colour brochure format, for participants. Furthermore, the report is structured in chapters so that the Executive Summary can be read in conjunction with specific areas of interest, such as charism or community life.

Within this, we decided to try to include a representative selection of excerpts from across the five countries. We have endeavoured to recognise that these are five individual countries, within which there are numerous ethnic groups, languages, districts and cultures. We have sought not to treat the project locations as one site, nor to use the term 'Africa' or 'African' to describe the location or the participants. We would regard that as essentialist and a simplification. We have only used the language of Africa/n when sisters themselves have done so.

Having said this, although we do not present the results of Stage 1 in this report, we found a remarkable level of homogeneity in the responses across all five countries. In general, we can say that the themes which emerged as most prominent in Stage 1: apostolates; community life and centrality of relationship with God were the most prominent across the five countries, only the degree of prominence varied. For example, apostolates rated significantly

above other themes in Zambia, and community life was very prominent in the Uganda responses. On the other hand, charism and call appeared very infrequently in Stage 1 responses in Malawi and Zambia. Sisters appeared to respond very positively to the high degree of homogeneity and felt it represented a sense of sisterhood and solidarity in sharing challenges and facing issues.

## What this report is not

This project has been empirical and qualitative in its methodology and methods of data collection and analysis. It is not a work of formal theology, but it is reflective and theological in nature as we seek to express the theology of religious life articulated by the participants. It is not a sociological study, nor a quantitative study based on statistics or a survey. Although we have tried to provide some representation of the quantitative value of responses, we have also discerned and chosen to represent points which appeared to us to be of qualitative importance. Where possible we have triangulated this in conversations among our core team, taking into account the opinions of the Project Support Assistants and reflecting together with our wider team of theological commentators. This analysis, therefore, is not objectively verifiable but an attempt, true to practical theology, to hear, listen attentively and amplify voices of women rarely heard.

Furthermore, we offer no recommendations. On numerous occasions we have been asked by sisters whether the report will provide recommendations and what they are likely to say. We apologise to those we disappoint, but we do not feel it is appropriate for a team such as ours to offer recommendations to sisters on how to live their religious life more faithfully or with more commitment. We only ask questions and point to issues which seem to us, as a core team of outsiders, to warrant attention. We have listened, been attentive and amplified. One of the things we have heard is sisters themselves asking how they can live their religious lives in greater faithfulness to their charism, and to their lifelong commitment to the following of Christ and we feel it is for sisters themselves to identify what actions can now be taken to ensure that they and others benefit from the fruits of their lifelong commitment to transformation in, with and for Christ.

3. This position is in line with the statement on the consent form signed by participants and in line with the General Data Protection Regulation, agreed by the European Parliament, which came into force in 2018 and now governs the use of personal data within the European Union

# Chapter 1 Methodological considerations

The design of the research project was informed by several methodological principles. First, a commitment to drawing on learning from an earlier piece of research, the Religious Life Vitality Project (RLVP). In this project, we became aware of a distinct lack of contribution to the public discourse on women's religious life by British women religious. For that reason, we were keen to privilege the sisters' own voices.<sup>4</sup> We felt this to be even more the case for sisters in many parts of Africa<sup>5</sup> and, therefore, we chose to foreground or privilege those voices in the process of the research, in the contents of and findings from the research and in the personnel working to implement the project.

Second, in the RLVP we were influenced by the principles of Theological Action Research<sup>6</sup> (TAR). Whilst this second project does not specifically set out to explore a gap between practice and theory (a key purpose of TAR), TAR does offer some elements of a theoretical framework which are relevant. The first is that participants formulate their own research question. Our experience of the positive value of the articulation of the sisters' voices in the RLVP led us to take this one step further, to enable a representative group of sister participants to formulate the research question themselves, in the Kasisi consultation meeting of September 2016. This research question was further tested in a series of pilots, and again discussed with the group of Provincial and General Superiors in Uganda. This approach is particularly relevant in a context where sisters may not have had many opportunities to shape or contribute to the discourse on religious life. Therefore, cultivating a degree of ownership was a significant concern.

Action research methodology, which underpins TAR, claims the value of the 'outsider'<sup>7</sup> element of the research team. Whilst our overarching concern has been to listen and attend to the lived experience rooted in the reality of religious life in a concrete context, we assert the usefulness of our role in reflecting back to sisters our re-interpretation of what we hear them say. The result, we believe is a methodology which is both participatory and practical, which promotes deep and collaborative reflection that leads to a flourishing for those involved, with a focus on process and qualitative impact rather than on quantifiable outcomes. The staff of the Catholic Sisters' Initiative (CSI) at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (CHF) understood our approach as one where 'process is product' whereby the way we work with sisters is as important as any final output we may produce in terms of 'results' or reports. They stated at the end of RLVP that they were particularly keen to see an approach which encourages collaboration within, between and across congregations, and which helps sisters articulate elements of a global charism of religious life – what is increasingly being referred to as 'the global sisterhood'. This is the point where, hopefully, process does indeed become product. As the project both gathers and produces material which lends itself to theological reflection, we see process and product become entangled in a way which we hope is enriching for all involved.

Third, we drew on elements of a transnational approach. Historically, sisters have long travelled from their country of origin to other countries, either for training or their apostolate. As such, they can be considered religious migrants with

4. See Sexton, C. 2013. *Still Life in Us Yet: In search of a narrative of diminishment*. Paper 2 in partial fulfilment of the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology. Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University and Simmonds, G.A Future full of hope? 2012, p.17, on the lack of British contribution to the discourse on religious life.
5. For example, the publication *Voices of Courage* (2015 ed. Wakahiu et al.) has been hailed as unique and as one of the first opportunities for sisters from various countries in Africa to voice their thinking on religious life. <http://www.ghrfoundation.org/news/voices-of-courage-new-publication-on-catholic-sisters-in-africa>
6. Cameron, H., Bhatti, D., Duce, C., Sweeney, J. and Watkins, C. 2010. *Talking about God in practice: theological action research and practical theology*. London: SCM Press.
7. Greenwood, D.J. and Levin, M. 2007, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. Thousand Oaks CA, p.51; Humphrey, C. 2007. Insider-outsider: Activating the hyphen. *Action Research*, 5(1) pp. 11-26; Dwyer, S.C and J. Buckle, 2009. The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8 (1) pp. 54-63; Kerstetter, K. 2012. Insider, outsider, or somewhere in between: the impact of researchers' identities on the community-based research process. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 27(2) pp. 99-117.



significant ties not only to their countries of origin but also to their congregation. Taking a transnational approach means considering different issues such as how the movement of sisters influences ideas of identities and belonging - especially relevant to the research question. It also points to issues of the direction and the exchange of ideas across different communities, congregations and countries and how the Catholic Church mediates (or doesn't) these exchanges. In summary, taking a transnational approach to our research means that we see these congregations not as islands but as part of a wider transnational institution, the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup>

Taking this transnational approach enabled us to recognise the transnational and international character of Religious Life, specifically in the five proposed Project locations. In Kenya, for example, the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) has a membership of around 134 congregations,<sup>9</sup> only 14 of which are indigenous<sup>10</sup> to Kenya. The Association serves sisters from around the globe, as many international congregations have chosen Nairobi as the location for their regional base or Mother house. Similarly, the Association of Religious in Uganda (ARU) has a membership of 63 women's congregations, 19 of which are termed 'indigenous' i.e. locally founded (Ngundo, 2015).<sup>11</sup>

We wish to recognise the value of the involvement and the increasing importance of the 'indigenous' congregations owing to the fact of their potential to explore an 'enculturated'<sup>12</sup> approach to women's religious life, and to the growth in their numbers. As many 'international' congregations founded in the global north decline in number, these

'indigenous' congregations become increasingly international.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it may be that they point the way to this future and will have a vital contribution to make to discourse on the 'essence' of religious life for women in Africa, along with useful and interesting stories about the embracing and development of more recent charisms.

However, we recognise that religious life for women has long been truly international, and cross-border and boundary in nature. The complexity of these cross-border and transnational relationships of congregations spread around the globe has been reflected in recent scholarship and conferences.<sup>14</sup> These have considered not only the experiences of European and North American missionaries but also more contemporary experiences of African sisters on 'reverse mission' to the global north. We wish to recognise and value the contribution made by the role of 'northern' missionary sisters and congregations to the development of religious life in Africa. To this end, we consider the focus of the study to be Religious Life for women in Africa, rather than uniquely for African women.



8. Della Cava, R. 2001. 'Transnational Religions: The Roman Catholic Church in Brazil and the Orthodox Church in Russia'. *Sociology of Religion*, 62 (4) pp. 535-550; Wuthnow, R. and S. Offutt, 2008. 'Transnational Religious Connections'. *Sociology of Religion*, 69 (2) pp. 209-232 and Ebaugh, H. 2010. 'Transnationality and Religion in Immigrant Congregations: The Global Impact'. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 23 (2) pp. 105-119.
9. AOSK website 2015.
10. From conversations with AOSK and ARU General Secretaries April 2017.
11. Ngundo, B. 2015. Indigenous African Women's Religious Congregations. In: Wakahiu, J., Gichure, P. and Njageh, A.K. eds., 2015. *Voices of Courage*. Pauline Publications Africa, pp.66 - 99.
12. Ngundo, B. 2015, ibid p. 94 re the potential of these congregations to provide models of/for African women religious in indigenous congregations and perhaps explore what an enculturated model might look like.
13. An example of one such congregation would be the Little Sisters of St Francis, founded in Uganda in 1923, but now with multiple communities in Kenya and the United States.
14. <http://cushwa.nd.edu/events/2015/05/07/28276-the-nun-in-the-world-a-transnational-study-of-catholic-sisters-and-the-second-vatican-council/>; <http://cushwa.nd.edu/events/2017/04/06/too-small-a-world-catholic-sisters-as-global-missionaries/>; Johnson, M., Gautier, M., Wittberg, P. and Thu T.Do. 2017. *International Sisters in the US*. Trinity Washington University/CARA Study: [Washington?].

## Chapter 2 Methods of data collection and analysis

### Feasibility Study period (Year 1)

It was agreed with the staff of the CSI/CHF that in Year 1 of the grant period, we would carry out a consultation or feasibility exercise to assess the implications and practicalities of extending the Religious Life Vitality Project into East and Central Africa. Within this main objective, we wanted to identify whether there were adequate levels of interest in the research among women religious to both participate in and conduct the research themselves. We thus needed to ascertain whether there was sufficient support at regional, national and congregational levels of leadership to ensure the Project received the backing it required. The feasibility study also helped to assess what levels of induction into the project team's approach were needed and what resources might be necessary to support and equip staff supporting the research in East Africa.

### Key outputs of the feasibility study

The first output of this period was a consultation meeting held in the region attended by those with expertise in and experience of the particular needs of R.C. women religious in East and Central Africa. The purpose of this meeting was to bring together and draw on the experience of the primary researchers involved in the RLVP in the UK and Ireland and potential researchers and commentators from the research context. Consultations were held with sisters such as Sr Pat Murray (Executive Secretary to the UISG<sup>15</sup>); Sr Jane Wakahiu LSOSF (then Director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative<sup>16</sup> or ASEC); Sr Lina Wanjiku SE, ASEC Africa Director; the leadership of the Association of Consecrated Women of East and Central Africa (ACWECA) and the various National Associations of Sisterhoods through a 3-day meeting held in Kasisi, Zambia in 2016. The team also consulted

representatives from congregations participating in RLVP with members in the region.

The second output was a proposal for research with women religious in East and Central Africa with a methodology and methods appropriate to the region including timings, costs and identifying participant researchers. This was included in the Year 1 narrative reporting submitted to the CSI/CHF.

### Research design

Key findings from the consultation period informed the research design of the project. We were also confident of having established sufficient levels of relevance and potential for in-country ownership of the work.

### Research Question for the Project

**During the Kasisi consultation, three key topics surfaced from sisters' discussions. These were:**

- **Formation:** Why are we recruiting? For what vision of religious life?
- **Sustainability:** How to balance the need for financial sustainability with our commitment to serve the poorest through our mission?
- **The role of women religious in the institutional Church in Africa:** where do we fit in the local Church? The sisters saw the answer to this question as being relevant to the issue of formation and the role and place of sisters within the mission of the Church locally and more widely.

15. Union of International Superiors General.

16. One of the key partners working with sisters across Africa supported by the Catholic Sisters' Initiative.

17. Tuohy, D., Sexton, C. and Mwale, C. May 2016. *Sowing Bountifully*. The GHR Foundation/UISG: Porticus. November 2015. Formation of Religious Women in Uganda and Wakahiu, J., Gichure, P. and Njageh, A.R. 2015. *Voices of Courage*, Pauline Publications: Africa.

The pertinence and relevance of these issues is reflected in other recent writing and research on religious life for women<sup>17</sup> and was endorsed in conversations with other sisters and with funders and supporters of religious life for women in Africa. The process to identify a ‘working’ research question which is rooted in the lived experience of the sisters themselves coalesced into the following Research Question for the Project:

*What are sisters saying is the essence of women’s Religious Life in Africa today and into the future? What are the key challenges that hinder this essence? What are the best ways to ensure the understanding and living of it, and the communication of it to sisters in formation?*

In line with our methodology, this reflects the actual wording of the sisters who participated in the Kasisi workshop. It also points to, and opens, the door for a full exploration of the three key concerns they articulated. As the research team, we had some concerns about the use of the word ‘essence’ and encouraged the participants to be more explicit and to explore use of more concrete and specific wording. However, they were insistent on using the word ‘essence’ and so we committed ourselves to exploring its use.

After discussion on this issue with the Academic Advisory Group,<sup>18</sup> we decided to carry out a pilot of the two versions of the (Stage 1) question in order to test their clarity and ease of understanding. Therefore, we conducted pilots in mid-2017 in three locations: sisters of mixed nationalities at the Kalundu Study Centre in Zambia; ten sisters in a formation team meeting of a southern Africa-based congregation and nine sisters of mixed nationality at Chemchemi Formation Centre in Nairobi, Kenya. The main decision made following the pilot was to use the following wording of the Stage 1 question: ***“in your opinion what is the essence of religious life for women where you live? We want***

***to know what makes your way of life unique and different. Please give us five phrases or sentences as examples of what you mean.”***

## Research locations

Initially the CSI staff invited us to work with sisters and congregations through the network of countries of their key partner ASEC.<sup>19</sup> We immediately realised that including both West and East Africa in one project would present serious logistical and contextual challenges. The member countries of the Association of Consecrated Women of East and Central Africa (ACWECA)<sup>20</sup> seemed to offer a greater sense of cohesion and practicality. After consulting with their leadership, it was agreed that operating in Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan would be difficult for practical and security reasons. We, therefore, agreed to focus on the following five countries: Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.



18. A group of UK-based academics with an interest in, or in expertise in, fields related to the study of religious life, convened several times over the course of the project.

19. ASEC operates in Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Zambia and Malawi.

20. ACWECA member countries: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and (since 2017) Zimbabwe.

## Identifying the sample set

We adopted three strategies for inviting congregations to participate. First, we contacted all the congregations who participated in the RLVP and asked them to recommend participation to their sisters in the five proposed countries. Second, we identified and contacted relevant members of the Conference of Religious of England and Wales (CoREW). At least 13 expressed interest in their sisters in Africa taking part in the Africa project. Finally, we decided to work in collaboration with the National Association of Sisterhoods<sup>21</sup> in each of the proposed research locations. We were advised that they are the best entry point to their membership and also this would contribute to a sense of ownership of the project and possible embedding of outcomes in the local context. They initially took on the task of inviting their membership to participate but once Project Support Assistants (PSAs) were appointed in each country, they were able to relieve the National Associations of this workload.

## Data collection and analysis

We decided to adopt the same two-stage approach to data collection as used in RLVP; it seemed appropriate for the context of these five countries, although we recognised that there would be implications of applying this in a range of new and distinct operating contexts.

### Stage 1

The first stage of data collection asked sisters the question which is set out above. Enrolled participants were sent a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, which had to be read, signed and returned before proceeding. They were then sent the question by email and could respond either by email or by WhatsApp, which is widely used by sisters on a daily basis in all five proposed locations. The data gathered at this stage was analysed using thematic content analysis and used to create a thematic coding structure to inform the analysis of Stage 2. We also used this opportunity to collect some basic contextual information from each respondent: age, number of years in religious life and stage of formation, highest level of educational attainment.

Once we had received the responses from all of the sisters participating in each individual congregation, we analysed and grouped the responses thematically. We also produced a word cloud showing the frequency of occurrence of individual words in the grouped responses. The word clouds and a short thematic report were sent to congregations with more than three sisters participating; this amounted to a total of 63 reports.

Overall, 813 sisters from 79 congregations enrolled in Stage 1. Responses were received from 621 of these sisters, giving a response rate of 76%. This is broken down by country, as shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: Numbers of sisters participating and response rates in Stage 1**

Country	No. of congregations	Total sisters enrolled	Total responses	Response rate
Kenya	20	180	145	80%
Malawi	13	161	145	90%
Tanzania	18	234	140	59%
Uganda	19	132	106	80%
Zambia	9	106	85	80%
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>813</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>76%</b>

### Stage 2: reflection/discussion groups

A second stage of data collection allowed us to address the more complex questions in the second half of the Research Question. We initially intended to invite five congregations from each country to proceed to Stage 2. This was for two reasons. We were limited by our own capacity as part-time researchers, and we believed that only a small number of congregations would want to go forward as the Stage 2 discussions demanded a commitment to time and logistical elements. However, we were persuaded by the staff of the national associations to allow as many congregations as possible through to Stage 2, as they believed the demand would be high. In the end, they were proved right, as 50 congregations chose to move to Stage 2.

21. Standing leadership conferences of sisters in each country.

22. See Appendix 3.

23. An informal name for members of St. Patrick's Missionary Society.



**Figure 2: Participation in Stage 2**

Country	Congregations participating in Stage 2	Number of discussion groups and transcripts
Kenya	11	14
Malawi	4	4
Tanzania	13	24
Uganda	15	16
Zambia	7	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>56 discussions groups held, and transcripts produced</b>

The purpose of the Stage 2 discussions was to explore the sisters' responses to Stage 1 in more depth. This took the form of a discussion to further explore the responses. In this way, any difficulties with unclear or nebulous responses to the word 'essence' could be addressed by obtaining more descriptive and more practice-based type discussions. Groups were provided with questions to guide their discussion.<sup>22</sup> Although we had hoped to gather more detailed and contextual information about each congregation, we were advised to keep information gathering simple at this stage and we were limited by capacity to collect and use the data.

The PSAs travelled to meet with each congregation to explain the process, giving them a small digital recorder and explaining its use. Following the discussion, the PSA collected the recorder and uploaded the recording to be sent to in-country transcribers. The transcripts were then analysed, again using thematic content analysis. This was undertaken by the research team.

Feedback both from RLVP and this project has shown that this stage gave congregations the opportunity for conversations they might not otherwise have held. Most congregations reported that they found this not only relevant but motivating as it provided them with resources and material which could be carried forward in their own internal development and generative processes such as ongoing formation, congregation assemblies and chapters. Our method encouraged the deepening of initial, individual responses and constituted a more participatory process which might foster both ownership and further reflection internally within each congregation.

### Stage 3 – theological reflection and commentary

As a means of hearing the theological aspects of the voices of the sisters participating, we invited a number of religious to reflect on the transcripts. We identified a group of eight sisters representing the five project countries, each with formal educational backgrounds in either theology or canon law, who were willing and able to participate. We also invited two Kiltegan<sup>23</sup> fathers who had served in Kenya and South Africa to join us. We held a two-day symposium in Nairobi in April 2019. Together with the PSAs, we met to listen to each other's reflections on, and theological analysis of, the transcripts reviewed. The aim was to draw out common theological points, themes and movements and to identify the theology of religious life which seemed to be emerging from the common presentations and sisters' voices.

Each participant was allocated several anonymised transcripts of recordings of the Stage 2 discussions (from congregations outside of her own country to further protect anonymity and confidentiality) and was asked to reflect on the theological themes emerging in these transcripts, using a method of qualitative data analysis as spiritual discernment. Each participant presented a paper, which was shared with all participants and discussed in a symposium. We have sought to integrate key insights and comments from the commentators into our report.

### Feedback workshops to participants

We were committed to sharing the initial analysis of the data with participant congregations and sisters at an early stage and before the report was drafted. Therefore, between January and May 2019, we carried out a series of two-day workshops in each of the five countries with this aim in mind. All five workshops were arranged in conjunction with, and attended by, staff from the leadership conferences – AOSK; ARU; TCAS; ZAS and AWRIM. At least two sisters from each of the participant congregations attended the workshops as well as representatives of many congregations who had not participated but had nonetheless expressed an interest in hearing about the research. Our main aim during these workshops was to share the research at an early stage rather than presenting final analysis. We wanted the workshops to represent a further stage of the participatory and dialogical nature of the research, whereby sisters could respond to, and comment on, the work so far and thus continue to shape the outcomes.

## Limitations of this study

We acknowledge that this study has a number of limitations. They are as follows.

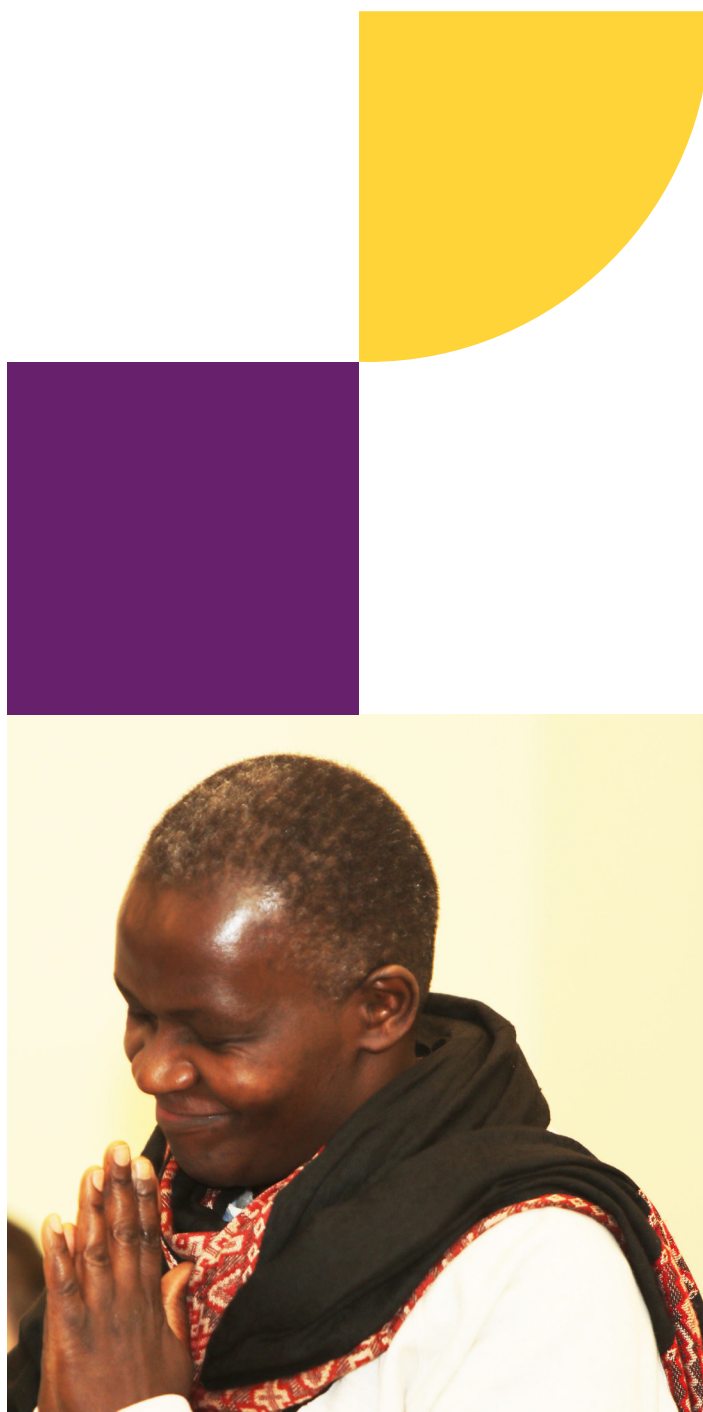
- The project's methods of data collection meant that participation was limited to sisters with a good enough level of English and education to be able to work with the concept of 'essence', to reflect in this way on her religious life and communicate that in English. This may have limited the participation of many younger, and some older sisters. In Tanzania, levels of English among sisters meant that participation could have been severely curtailed. Therefore, we made an exception and agreed to allow sisters to hold Stage 2 discussion groups in Kiswahili. The transcripts were then translated into English, and content analysis undertaken on the translated transcripts. This may also have affected the team's understanding and ability to analyse these transcripts.
- Many communities of sisters did not have access to the internet or computers in their own communities and may have to travel some distance to a town for this, so that even communication by WhatsApp was difficult. We were able to work with hard copies, but these had to be delivered and collected – often over great distances. This generally slowed down response time, but we strove to be as flexible as possible so as to allow these sisters to be included.
- Participation may have been affected by the cost of transport and food to enable sisters to travel from communities to one centre to hold the discussion
- Due to the large number of congregations taking part, it has not been possible to collect detailed information about the congregations or the sisters participating within each congregation. This may have limited our analysis, especially regarding the impact and nature of transnationalism, responses in relation to stage in religious life, level of education, and also by type of congregation, whether pontifical, diocesan and/or indigenous.
- We had originally hoped to recruit in-country based sisters with a background in theology and/or qualitative research to join the research team. The sisters would, ideally, be available up to 2 full working days a week to work with the project. This was so that they could be involved in the process of data analysis and not only data collection. We were reliant on the knowledge and recommendations of staff from the National Associations to recommend individual sisters and on the good will of congregations to release sisters to take up the role of PSA. In most cases we were able to review CVs and interview sisters by skype or WhatsApp and select the most suitable sister. In the end, however, we were not able to recruit sisters with either a background in qualitative research or in theology. Furthermore, not all the PSAs could be released for up to 2 days a week, as we had originally requested. We endeavoured to provide structured initial briefings, with ongoing regular contact by skype, WhatsApp, and face-to-face visits. We also devised an informal development programme of meetings in Nairobi and the UK, but we acknowledge that the primary role of the PSAs was in data collection and less so in data analysis.
- In the RLVP we were able to provide written feedback in both Stage 1 and Stage 2 to each participating congregations and feedback in person through presentations, workshops and attendance at Provincial Assemblies. This was possible because travel in the UK and Ireland was relatively easy. In this project, in addition to Stage 1 reports and word clouds, we had hoped to provide some form of individual, verbal feedback to congregations, in order to help the research process to become a tool for the sisters. However, this approach had considerable time and cost implications and proved not to be possible as a norm. Nevertheless, feedback was provided through the workshops run in conjunction with each National Association, as a minimum. In addition, some congregations requested that the in-country PSA visit and meet with them to go through the project findings and what had emerged from their own conversations.

## Ethical considerations

We accepted that General or Provincial Superiors would act as gatekeepers and that they would, in practice, determine who could participate. To an extent this ran contrary to the Project team's approach that sisters be invited, rather than selected to participate. However, we recognised the necessity and practicality of this in the context. Superiors were encouraged to invite participation, rather than to select sisters who they considered to be suitable and favourable. This approach was taken in some congregations, but in others it was clear that the superior invited those she considered most able. It may have affected anonymity and confidentiality as the provincial and general superiors were well aware of which sisters participated in the Stage 1 discussions and in the discussion groups.

In some congregations, it appears that sisters were simply selected, and their names sent to us without their knowledge or without them understanding the nature of the project or what participation would entail. As each sister was provided with a participant information form and consent form and asked to sign the consent form and return it, we assumed, therefore, informed and free consent. However, the impact of the understanding of obedience in these congregations meant that in practice sisters were often simply told to participate and, even when asked, many may have felt they had no choice. This was made clear during visits to several congregations. Armed with a list of sisters enrolled on the project, we asked to meet with them to discuss the project progress. Often sisters would not meet without prior consent of the superior, or at other times, they appeared not to know anything at all about the project, despite having sent in a consent form. This affected sisters' motivation to participate and we saw high numbers of withdrawals where this was the case, as the sisters' consent was not truly informed.

Issues of anonymity were compounded by the practical approach of allowing sisters to answer the Stage 1 question by hand on a printed sheet. In at least one congregation, the forms were taken round communities by one sister designated by the superior, and all filled in together. Often the responses from each community were identical or were completed in the same handwriting and so were clearly either directed or filled in by one person with the authority to do so.



## Chapter 3 Relationship with God, prayer and the following of Christ

### Introduction

The number of comments grouped under the three themes of: centrality of relationship with God, prayer and the following of Christ, totalled some 376. This made this thematic grouping the second most prominent theme identified in Stage 2 of the research, after that of community life. This points unsurprisingly, to relationship with God being the clear principle and foundation of sisters' lives.

The same three themes also featured prominently in the Stage 1 results, often being among the top three most frequently occurring themes taken into Stage 2<sup>24</sup>. However, we noticed that in just under 20 per cent of the 56 discussion groups at Stage 2, where one of these themes - especially centrality of relationship with God - was not first among the three, the sisters re-arranged the themes to put it first, as in this example from Tanzania.

*We now begin with the first question given... They indicated that we can decide among the three themes which we had presented, the questions answered previously. Do we wish to continue with the same or make some alterations? On our side, we have made slight changes regarding which theme should be given priority. Instead of the first themes about apostolate, vows and evangelization, we have found it more important to first focus on our relationship with God and secondly, we discuss the vows, and finally about our individual and congregational apostolate. This is what we agreed on (TP 27 - 33).*

In the guidance notes for Stage 2, sisters had been invited to re-arrange the ranking of the Stage 1 themes but were also asked to explain why they were doing this. However, many did not take up the opportunity to discuss why, for example, prayer and relationship with God had not been as prominent in the Stage 1 responses as they would have liked. As a counterbalance to this, we have noted quite a

high level of questioning and self-examination among sisters about how they are really living their religious lives. The research found over 60 examples of sisters engaging in this kind of introspection, with some of these asking what might lie behind the themes of community life or apostolates occurring more frequently than prayer and relationship with God in the Stage 1 ranking.

*Sometimes our prayer is like routine. We take it; this is prescribed; we are supposed to do it, we do it. But it's not really life giving like my sister said. So probably that is why it didn't come out strongly [in Stage 1]. We take it; it's important but somehow, we are concentrating more on apostolate, on community life because most of the time we talk about it mostly and we have problems. But we don't take prayer as...as maybe something that is supposed to change us, that relationship with Christ (ZG 269 - 274).*

In this Chapter we will present the material on these themes in several sub-themes: God the centre and meaning of religious life, prayer, the Holy Spirit and the fruits of prayer.

24. The top three most frequently occurring themes in Stage 1 were: apostolates; community life and centrality of God and prayer.



## God: the centre and meaning of religious life

Within the overarching theme of centrality of relationship with God, a group of 55 comments stated that relationship with God is what gives meaning to religious life. Religious life is understood as a gift from God, so that God, the one who offers this gift, and who called them to this life, therefore, must be at the centre of their lives. Where the sisters see God and prayer as prominent in their word cloud<sup>25</sup> or as the most frequently occurring theme for their congregation, they are gratified and happy. They acknowledge that to be effective in apostolates and as a religious family, they need God to be central. In a closely related set of 18 comments, sisters express their total dependency on God and a desire to continually deepen that relationship.

*If our lives were only going with the feeling that God has called us, and it is all, without strengthening our roots, then we could not be able eh! We could find ourselves acquiring kwashiorkor<sup>26</sup> and begin fading away. We would be attacked by different spiritual diseases. However, prayer helps us, strengthens us, it consolidates us to continue to love God who has called us and be happy in what we are longing for, which is personal holiness and the sanctification of the world (TO 134 - 138).*

Sisters rely on God's guidance, knowing that nothing can be achieved without receiving God's grace, which enables them to live this life. One sister expresses the concepts of centrality, source and dependency through the image of a tree.

*Centrality in God is a key factor, for us as [Congregation KC] and with this I thought of a tree, a tree that is deep, it has deep roots. This tree with deep roots is able blossom and give first fruits - best leaves, best firewood and shade, and so as we centre ourselves in God we are able to be truly witness and we are able also to serve God better in our apostolate (KC 422 - 426).*

### Coming to know and love God through loving and following Christ

Intimately connected with the desire to know and love God more fully is the desire to follow and imitate Christ, who mediates and makes real the sisters' love of God. The key document of the Second Vatican Council containing teachings on religious life *Perfectae Caritatis*, states that "the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels" (1968, n.2a) and "let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule". In their quest to become Christ-like, the sisters understand that they need first to be in an intimate relationship with Christ, as God made incarnate. In the words of one sister from Uganda:

*The call to religious life is, is rooted in one's desire to follow Christ more closely and so its one's relationship with God that makes one, that pulls one to follow Christ more closely and be religious (UA 29 - 31).*

The large number of comments on this theme (80 in total) indicate that sisters embrace this central teaching that religious life is, at its heart, about developing the relationship with Christ: growing in intimacy through and towards imitating Christ. They use language indicating a desire to be with Christ and to grow in love of Christ. Several describe their call to religious life as falling in love with Christ. Sisters state that without Christ there would be no religious life and yet another strong image illustrates beautifully the idea of Christ as the lynchpin of the life.

*The idea what came to my mind is the image of the door, the door this is about centrality of Christ. Christ is like the hinge of the door from which you swing the door and also you open. Like this, this hinge is Christ himself, our relationship with Christ, you know, aah, you swing to the community, you swing to the apostolate - this Christ that holds, holds, it together and to other dimensions - Christ is the hinge to hold on because without the hinge the door cannot swing but, aah, with that, the door can swing wherever... those who can open the door (KE 659 - 665).*

This image illustrates this central place that the following of Christ holds for these sisters and their religious lives and their source of strength (12 comments). Many express their belief that if they are close to Christ, all will be well, particularly as they move out into their apostolates.

25. Refers to the word clouds prepared by the research team and sent to each congregation as part of the Stage 1 reporting.

26. Kwashiorkor is a disease caused by the lack of protein in a child's diet and is widespread throughout the developing world.

## Christ the pray-er

Relationship with Christ is lived and experienced through prayer; this is how the sisters learn and understand Christ's call to them to become women of God. As Christ prayed to His Father, so He becomes the model for the sisters' prayer life. They understand that, in the midst of the business of His mission, Christ was instinctively aware of the need to set time aside to be with His Father.

*Before He [Christ] healed the sick, before He raised the dead, He prayed. Before doing anything, He prayed. Even before His death, He prayed; He always prayed to His Father (TI 164 - 165).*

In these comments, sisters reveal a Christology of Christ as the pray-er, for whom the Father was the source of all love and all strength and who prayed to His Father for guidance and help, and particularly before carrying out his Father's mission. Christ thus becomes their model for prayer.

## Prayer

The sisters' relationship with God and growing intimacy with Christ is conducted and enabled through prayer. In their 39 comments on prayer as relationship with God, they refer to prayer as being in union with God, bringing them closer to God and enabling them to know him more fully. They speak of encounter, relationship and mystical union.

*In relation to what sister is saying about deep encounter with Christ, you see ah, the life of prayer is considered essential in living our life consecration to God. Having called to religious life it becomes necessary for us to develop and nurture this close relationship with God in prayer (KE 310 - 313).*

They invest in their relationship with God through prayer and in turn, they receive guidance, illustrated by one sister through the image of keeping a fire burning, so that communication and the relationship is continuous. Within this though there is a very real and ever-present sense of sisters questioning themselves: whether they spend enough time with God and whether that time is spent well. They ask if they truly seek to enter into that relationship and give themselves up to all the risks it holds.

*Sometimes we may be intimate, that intimacy may not be that much, maybe we are just doing it for the sake of maybe it's there in the timetable and yet we are just like fulfilling it. It is there six o'clock, I have to be in the Chapel. What I have to... Because maybe it's in a timetable what we had arranged and yet it is not deep down of your heart. It is not there (MA 365 - 367).*

Prayer is not easy. Sisters describe it as a challenge, with some admitting that they can spend the whole time in the chapel maybe sleeping or finding it difficult to concentrate. Others admit that difficulties faced in their apostolates can cause dryness or doubt in prayer. In this comment from a sister from Kenya, her hesitation shows the depth of her struggle with her prayer life. Her willingness to share these struggles in front of her sisters is moving.

*I am challenged sometimes, that centrality, that relationship with God, I feel that it hasn't, it didn't, I don't, it is not there, and sometimes I also feel that I am doing things for myself, by, for myself and I forgot the main thing that it is God's service (KR 373 - 375).*



## The Holy Spirit

In a group of 98 comments, sisters refer to, or invoke, the Holy Spirit in their lives, referring to the workings and power of the Spirit in several different ways. Many of the Stage 2 discussions begin with a prayer to the Spirit, asking for guidance in the discussions and for the Spirit to enable them to share and speak freely. This suggests that beginning meetings in this way is the norm for sisters. In several instances, the sisters see the creative action of the Spirit at work in their word clouds, in the specific ordering and pattern of words and the frequency with which they have been used and this shapes their discernment and their response.

In relation to prayer, sisters most frequently pray to the Spirit, rather than in or through the Spirit. There are no references to specifically charismatic experiences, conversions or practices. However, they do frequently ask for the Spirit's help in both wanting to, and being able to, pray and to make them women of prayer.

*But sometimes we feel that the call to prayer is the call to religious life and that is why we see that like God Himself is life and love; and we are called also each day of our life to be women of prayer; to invite the Holy Spirit, to invoke in Him each day of our life to instil in us the spirit of prayer, so that all the time we are journeying with the Holy Spirit, coming closer to God and always to see what God is really calling us to do in this life (TC 220 – 224).*

Sisters ask to be open to the work of the Spirit, so as not to block the actions and working of the Spirit, particularly in relation to vocations promotion, and in discernment of vocations among their newer members, where they see the Spirit especially present and creative. They are aware of the need to discern where and how the Spirit is moving, but even this awareness is most frequently expressed as a source of hope for the future of their congregations and their charism.

References to the Spirit are more frequent among a small number of congregations, spread across the five countries, which appear to have a Spiritan aspect in their charisms. Frequently in these congregations, the sisters acknowledge the power of the Spirit in guiding them in their apostolates. The Spirit supports them, guides them to speak the truth in their evangelisation and inspires and shapes their

mission through their charism.

*...[W]e look at the disciples, what they did before they received the Holy Spirit, they were afraid but after receiving the Holy Spirit they were empowered and they were able to be witnesses and also they responded to the different situations that came their way because they were guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit in everything that they did and they were.... So the challenge would be as a sister of [CONGREGATION ZH] how do I allow the spirit to guide me in my day to day life in order for me to continue being a true witness and to respond to God's call in my day to day life? (ZH 159 – 168).*



## Forms of prayer

In this section we explore what the material tells us about the ways in which sisters pray and how they are supported in developing their prayer life by their congregations and communities. There are many comments which show that their prayer lives are supported by their congregations through quite formal daily timetables and structures. Sisters from just over half of the Stage 2 congregations mention the daily structure of prayer times and exercises in their communities, featuring communal morning and evening prayer. Several congregations refer to praying the Divine Office and sisters attend the monastic offices of *Vigils*, *Lauds* and even *Terce*. Sisters commonly refer to daily exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, often half or a full hour before mass. Sometimes this is combined with personal prayer, but sisters frequently also refer to a daily practice of *Lectio Divina*, or simply scripture reading combined with personal prayer and meditation. Other spiritual exercises mentioned include reciting the Rosary, and chain prayer. A small number of Ignatian congregations refer to the practice of the daily examen.

These prayer exercises are supplemented with other, congregation specific forms of devotion, and with preached retreats and monthly days of recollection. Therefore, there appears to be a high degree of uniformity within congregations in prayer, and conformity to a common timetable.

*We have the daily exposition in our communities; we have daily Eucharistic celebration. We have the daily meditation of the word of God which is centred preferably before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. We reflect on this word of God in a spiritual reading all these are bringing us to a deep union with God. Even the meetings that we have, our monthly meetings help us to unite in God and to get more close to each other which makes us one in our response to our charism (KQ 192 – 196).*

Only one congregation mentions a more informal form of community prayer – faith sharing. Sisters refer to preached retreats but mentions of guided or personal retreats are very rare, although one congregation in Uganda speculates that it would be helpful for them to be able to move from having preached retreats to guided retreats. There are also only a few mentions of individual sisters receiving spiritual direction or accompaniment.

There is a great emphasis on prayer as activity and communal forms of prayer, or on individual prayer undertaken together, at set times. There is little evidence pointing to sisters being encouraged to, or having the resources to, explore different forms of prayer or spirituality. This contrasts with the first research conducted by this team, exploring vitality in women religious in the UK and Ireland,<sup>27</sup> where we concluded that sisters had experienced, in their lifetimes, a movement from ‘saying prayers’ to prayer. There is no evidence of such a movement in the material collected by this project.

However, there is evidence that they have a life of prayer which goes beyond ‘saying prayers’ or set, traditional prayer exercises, and which includes personal meditation and living prayer beyond these exercises and the common timetable. There is clearly some thirst and desire for an intimacy with Christ which carries over from formal prayer time, into the whole of their lives so that they remain connected with God throughout each day and, in the words of one sister from Zambia, ‘you become just prayer’ (ZA 239 – 241). Another sister from Malawi explains it thus:

*The prayer life is intimacy with God; is not only sitting in the Chapel or reciting the Rosary or praying the book. It is not only that. That also is important but in our day to day life and each and every moment of our life had to be felt and God He is loving us and in that feeling we have to see our sisters and, uh, my work that I’m doing (MA 611 – 614).*

27. The Religious Life Vitality Project, 2012 – 2015 – RLVP. See p.1.





There are surprisingly few references to contemplative prayer, with only five uses of the term contemplation or contemplative prayer in all 56 conversations. This suggests that sisters connect 'contemplative' prayer with a contemplative or monastic way of life and do not, therefore, see themselves as contemplatives. Rather they use the term 'mediation' or refer to personal prayer. Again, this would be in strong contrast with the UK and Ireland material<sup>28</sup> from the RLVP. It is also striking how infrequently silence is mentioned in connection with prayer. There are just eight comments where sisters speak of the need for, and benefit of, and in one case difficulty of reaching, interior silence in relation to prayer.

## Functions and fruits of Prayer

### Prayer as personal transformation

A significant function and also fruit of prayer is personal transformation and conversion and is explored in some 56 comments. Prayer changes and transforms she who prays, leading to personal renewal. Sisters receive God's grace through prayer and grow spiritually. Time thus spent with God increases love in and creates communion among sisters. It reveals and confirms their ongoing vocation and the form of their response to God; God is thus incarnated in their lives. The aim of this conversion is to become ever more Christ-like, in a search for holiness. Sisters know that they need to be in constant relationship with Christ for this conversion to take place.

*Without prayer, we won't be able to search for such sanctity that is stated in the Vatican Council II that, everyone is called to holiness. If we are called to holiness, then we should look for such holiness through prayer and our union with our God (TO 139 - 141).*

Prayer leads to self-knowledge and humility and an awareness that weaknesses can only be changed and addressed through prayer.

*In prayer also a person can get conversion. For example, if I find it difficult to touch on some unbecoming, unbecoming habits if I, in prayer I am, I am true to myself, I don't mask, I accept Jesus to come and take possession of, of my situations. One is able to, to convert from this kind of, of bad habits. That's why I say prayer is very, very, very important (UD 64 - 67).*

28. Ibid. See p.1.

## Being other-oriented as the fruit of prayer

The previous section presented sisters' experience of personal transformation and ongoing conversion as a primary fruit of prayer. Connected with this and referred to by many more sisters as the fruit of their life of prayer is the urge or impulse to turn outwards to others; to consider their needs and offer them their service and love. The 115 comments on this theme, linking prayer to apostolates, are explored below.

Interestingly, while sisters do recognise Christ as the model for their prayer life, the pray-er, as God made incarnate, and seek to become Christ-like, most of the comments about God relate to God as the source of their call, and to prayer and a relationship of intimacy and even union. Meanwhile, most comments about Christ relate to apostolates. The following of Christ is expressed in this outward turning to others and made real, through their charism, in their apostolate, pointing to a deeply incarnational theology of God's action in their lives and ministries. Fr Joe McCullough SPS viewed this incarnationality thus:

*[The sisters] are a community of disciples who pour themselves out in service to those in need, just as Jesus did. This is the all-consuming and defining characteristic of their religious lives, this mystical union with God in Christ.*

### The impulse to turn towards others and their needs

Sisters know they are loved by God and respond with an impulse to turn outwards to others – to serve and love them and in doing so, they heed the second commandment: love one another as I have loved you. Religious life is a call to follow Christ, and each sister is invited to turn outwards, to community, and to mission. This impulse to love others represents a form of reciprocity; the sisters cannot give directly to God, so they love others in return for God's love, as commanded.

Sr. Marren Rose Awiti IBVM, one of our theological commentators was also struck by this clear articulation of the dynamic relationship between God, self, and those the sisters serve.

*It is the force that propels them in their ministry. From prayer they get the energy for ministry; it forms a dimension of the mission of Christ. They dialogue with Jesus who sends them in mission. Prayer is the air they breathe; it is the foundation of their service and the source of fruitfulness of ministry.*

This impulse is expressed as both a general orientation towards others, and more specifically to those in need; this is how the sisters express their love for, and serve, God and imitate Christ. The discussions featured a greater focus, however, on the specificities of how this outward turn is manifested: in the apostolates.

In a significantly large group of 62 comments, sisters make an explicit connection between prayer as the force that propels them into ministry, and which brings about its fruitfulness. This apostolic impulse is born in prayer, which is seen as an anchor in their lives. They make this outflowing of love from prayer real in their service.

*We show the love of God uh, by first of all, communicating with him... talking to him through prayer. And then as we have already said, out of the love of God, then you are going to love neighbour by actually doing service. So, we serve the poor, the needy and so on. Because of the love of God, we are going to give service (ZG 376 - 380).*

Prayer nourishes everything, but particularly their apostolates. Without prayer, their ministries are not fruitful and will be more challenging. With prayer, they can be more dedicated, and more sincere. Some sisters explicitly identify success of apostolates with the genuineness of their prayer; there can be no effective apostolates without depth of prayer.

*...[W]e can work with the people but if we do not have God in our life we get fed-up very fast you know things can be difficult you know, sometimes you do things you find difficulty but once the love of God is there, and God is there to guide us we shall be able to fill the charism we are supposed to do (UE 187 - 200).*

29. Further aspects of this concern with balancing different elements of religious life are explored in the sections on Community Life in Chapter 4 and Distractions in Chapter 12.

We found a very small number of sisters who were able to express an understanding of service as a form of prayer in itself. When these sisters go out to their apostolates, Jesus is with them everywhere, particularly in that ministering.

*The same time as we are working with our apostolate, we have to put in mind that we are with Jesus and what am doing is for Jesus and therefore I think that we can also intimacy with God because the way I am serving the people, the way I am doing things can be connected with my prayer. And, this prayer is not only, I think is not only to be present in the presence of Jesus in the chapel but when wherever we are also show our intimacy with Jesus (MA 379 - 383).*

This demonstrates the integration of prayer and ministry which is the dynamic at the heart of apostolic religious life.

*So, prayer and work, go together; they are not in the different departments; my prayer life takes me to my work, my work, I offer it to God; for example morning, when I pray the morning prayer of the Church, I take one or two sentences from some of the psalms, that's my guiding light, guiding light for the day (TB 402 - 404).*

A very small number of congregations, which have adopted Ignatian spirituality, refer to themselves as contemplatives in action. Among other congregations, however, there is a great deal of preoccupation with being able to 'balance' prayer and apostolates, as distinct elements of their religious lives. Sisters experience a tension between being present at prayer and being engaged in demanding apostolates and noted the challenge of this. Part of this<sup>29</sup> seems to be where prayer and apostolates are viewed as two distinct and separate elements of religious life. There are many examples of sisters saying that working night shifts in a clinic, or long hours in school means that they cannot be in their community for set prayer times. This is often expressed as a source of stress, as in this excerpt from a sister in Uganda.

*If we want to make really community life which is applicable to our religious life, we need to balance these two activities. And how do we balance them? We are not contemplatives. Make a timetable; you follow the community timetable. Sister for example, let me give you the example of nurses some who are like not working... even if you are working in your own dispensary you want to balance, you know that according to your timetable prayers are at six but for you the patients are there, the women are in the labour ward, how will you now leave that one? Sister I cannot encourage that. I cannot really support it because you must really have time table the nurses it is not only you who is working alone [exactly] in the health centre (UF 321 - 332).*

Here the sister is concerned that her commitment to community prayer is suffering because of her commitment to her apostolate. Comments such as this seem to indicate a difficulty in integrating prayer into the apostolate or to view the apostolate as prayer. It is particularly important for apostolic or active religious to be able to be united with God in prayer throughout the day and in the midst of their ministries, rather than seeing themselves as having to choose one or the other.

*In our congregation as, eh, as, we are active religious; so, we are, need to have that experience of God. We see even now in our apostolate when we are running here and there, but we should be, able to unite ourselves with Him at every moment, whether we are busy always with Him! Personally, this is difficult; that presence, we should be able to, to think His presence and to long for it (TB 373 - 376).*

Although we found a very small number of comments where sisters were able to express this integration, (see the previous page) the high levels of concern expressed about this issue may indicate the need for support to think differently about prayer and the apostolate, rather than thinking they need to pray more and spend less time in ministry. We find ourselves asking if the tension and struggle in these comments points to a need for congregations and communities to make more time and resources available to sisters to study and explore forms of prayer which may help them move towards this integration.

## Prayer as source - Refuelling through prayer

Of the four functions of prayer identified, the second number of comments (67) refer to prayer not only as central in the sisters' daily lives, as the source of their relationship with God but also the source of their strength. God first loved us, and through prayer, sisters return that love and in turn, become ever more aware of God's love for them. Sisters are inspired, motivated and energised through prayer. They feel 're-charged' and gain the strength to live life in community and go out to carry out their apostolates. Again, and again sisters emphasise that without returning to this source, religious life is not fruitful.

*Without water, we cannot live. Therefore, without prayer, we cannot exist. Prayers enable us to fetch some energy, prayers help us to feed our souls... even at moments of trials, let's say when we face different challenges in our pastoral work, in our lives, in our daily activities. Therefore, we are strong because we have invested in God (TO 128 - 132).*

Sisters often convey a sense that without prayer, sisters feel empty or exhausted and lack the energy to act on the apostolic impulse.

*When we draw strength from prayer, we are full, we are equipped with Jesus and we are able to meet the people of God wherever we are serving. We are able to give Jesus to the people of God. But when our prayer is weakened, our apostolate is weakened. We take ourselves instead of taking Jesus. So, this, through this then we get burn outs, we get tired, we lose the taste, the sweetness of our service (KQ2 201 - 204).*

These comments give a strong sense of prayer almost as a finite resource. Sisters need to draw on this resource to have something to take out to others, almost as if they are refuelling. The expression 'I cannot give what I don't have' is used frequently and creates an impression of sisters feeling themselves to be empty before prayer and having nothing to give poor and vulnerable people. They are only able to give what they themselves have received.

*First of all, I am myself I need to go deep within myself first because I can't give what I don't have. If I have Christ, I will be able to give Christ to 258 others (UE 256 - 257).*

Sisters speak of being called to 'be' first, before doing. This 'being' comes from being connected with God, 'the first priority', who will fill them. They receive from God and take out as in a form of channelling. The image of a water wheel comes to mind – drawing water from the source and passing it on to others. A different form of imagery is used by a sister who speaks of completing the cycle and drawing others back into God, rather than it being a one-way process.

*So, God first, we go to witness, you and meet those people to see God in our apostolate, and so we draw people back to God, who is the centre (KC 406 - 408).*

This is, however, an exception and there is little in this material to point to the kind of mutuality we might expect to see being engendered by such awareness of being in receipt of God's love. Rather these comments give the impression that sisters view God and prayer as a well, to which they themselves must return frequently, in order to replenish and re-energise themselves – almost a 'downloading' of some sort. God is the primary source: sisters need to be connected with God first, before they can go out to serve and bear witness to others. Not only do they need this strength, but they seem to experience this being readily and instantly available through prayer.

They go out to their apostolates full of love and energy; this is consumed during their apostolates, and they must return to community and prayer in order to be recharged. These comments suggest a more distanced, objective understanding of God as source, which does not sit easily alongside the desire for personal intimacy, union and encounter we see in other parts of the material.



## Intercessory prayer

In a smaller group of 23 comments, sisters refer to the intercessory role of prayer, a recognised, traditional practice within the Catholic Church. Here, a sister tasked with the formation of new novices asks for God's help to enable her to be more effective in her formation ministry.

*So, I am going to go in prayer, and it is in prayer that God will inspire me, will fill me with the gift of wisdom to understand this novice and to help the novice (UD 55 – 56).*

Intercessory prayers also play an important role in community. It is seen as a powerhouse of prayer, and sisters receive many requests from others to pray for their needs. At times though, the attitude to prayer seems somewhat utilitarian. There may be a fine line between interceding on behalf of others, or oneself, and an expectation that prayer will remedy an immediate difficulty. Some comments from sisters indicate their having high expectations of obtaining a 'quick fix' to address a difficult situation and mending their own or others' bad habits – a sudden or miraculous response from God.

Another of our theological commentators, Sr Marren Rose Awiti IBVM, felt that the emphasis on prayer in the Stage 2 discussions was encouraging and welcome but went on to question some of the rationale behind prayer.

*I feel there is a bit of overly spiritualising the aspect of prayer. Its significance is well brought out, but my impression is that prayer is understood to be offering instant solutions (more functional) as opposed to being part of other aspects of life which contribute to the life and works of the sisters.*

In one congregation in Uganda, saying the rosary is equated with one way of not only coming closer to God, but of combatting witchcraft.

*So, prayer is very important even if you know this world we are, we are always hearing of people experiencing this challenge of witchcraft or people going under the what, this and that but with prayer through the rosary is*

*very powerful. So it has helped many people also to come closer to God and even I could say with the charismatic or even other people, when there is a problem of devil or what when the people come and pray in homely or even what in any places you get people getting healed (UE 681 – 688).*

References to prayer specifically as a tool to combat witchcraft and evil spirits appeared infrequently in the material. However, concerns about witchcraft were more often expressed anecdotally in conversations around the project and raised in feedback workshops. Concerns seem largely to relate to novices using witchcraft against each other, or even the novice mistress, or accusing each other of being possessed, and sometimes such accusations occurring in communities. However, as the topic does not feature in any depth in material collected for this research, we cannot offer any comment here. Nonetheless, the expectation of prayer as a 'quick fix' for a range of other difficulties is something that could be addressed by sisters through moving to a deeper theology of prayer as a relationship with God. The lifelong commitment to this relationship being the fundamental means of conversion.



## Prayer as witness

Articulated in a small group of 12 comments, prayer is understood as witness not only to the sisters' relationship with God but to their living of their vows and the Gospel message of love. Their prayer, as with the profession of vows, is a public witness. Others see the sisters praying and praising and this attracts them, both to their message of God's love for the world, and to their way of life.

*We witness to gospel values of love and care for other people. I think the prayer and witness they are connected, when we pray, it is the prayer that is lived out and this is what people see and ask from us as religious women (ZF 42 – 43).*

Sisters express concern that if neighbours and others in the parish or community don't see them praying, they will question the authenticity of their life. They seem concerned that this lack of visibility in prayer will undermine their ability to bear authentic witness.



## A central dynamic

In this chapter we have sought to amplify an understanding expressed by sisters of prayer as a form of relationship, and desire for and expression of mystical union. We have also seen a more objective, distanced understanding of God as source or a being from whom energy can be drawn. The material offers, therefore, at least two quite different theologies of relationship with God and prayer and how this is experienced and articulated.

In the diagram below we try to represent how sisters speak of the outflowing of love, energy and communication from God – whether source or relationship – to the other aspects of their lives.

**Figure 3: A central dynamic**



The diagram is intended as a representation of the way in which sisters speak of this relationship with God as the primary source in their lives – of love, energy, strength, which, once received, they are able to take out to the community and into their apostolates. This relationship and life of prayer as source enables them to bear witness to what they themselves have received and to be oriented to others. In the following chapter on community life, we shall consider a second dynamic encountered in the sisters' discussions, whereby community itself is the source for sisters.

# Chapter 4 Community life

## Introduction

The theme of community life featured as one of the top three most commonly occurring themes<sup>30</sup> identified in Stage 1 responses in 40 of the 50 congregations who participated in Stage 2 and was, therefore, discussed by all of these congregations. In a small number of other congregations, the theme had not featured among those top three themes but in the Stage 2 discussions, the sisters re-arranged their themes according to their own priorities, bringing community life into the three themes to be discussed: an indication of its importance for them. In the Stage 2 results, the total number of excerpts from the transcripts which have been grouped under the theme of community life is 752, including challenges, making it the single largest theme discussed by sisters.

## Overview

Community life is a very strong and defining element of religious life for the participants, central to sisters' self-understanding and identity as religious, and prominent in their theology of religious life. Community life in this context is understood as a common life lived together in one house of the congregation, where worship and meals, and most tasks and activities, if not all, are done together. Sisters are missioned in the name of the community and congregation and all income and resources are pooled. Community life also seems to represent the way in which the sisters are and experience Church, and indeed their contribution to the Church. It thereby constitutes perhaps the key structure and characteristic of religious life in these five countries.

Sisters appear to have great enthusiasm for, and find great joy in, this particular form of structured community living and togetherness. It is very precious as an ideal and sisters show concern at issues which may be damaging to it. Fr Joe McCullough SPS noted:

*The sisters place great value and much emphasis on their community life; their experience of common prayer and being with their confrères for other community activities is very central to their charism and how they interpret what religious life constitutes for them. To live with each other in fraternal communion is essential, and a sign of their intimate communion with God.*

However, it should be noted that it is an ideal, and we found that the majority of comments about community living, particularly those modelled on the idea of family, expressed a very idealised way of living. Sisters do not speak of the reality and difficulty of community living as often as they speak of the positive aspects. Furthermore, this model of semi-conventual, common life, structured around a common timetable was only questioned once in all 56 discussion groups. The discussions contain no reference to single living as a positive choice or option in any of the five countries. Indeed, it is only ever mentioned in the light of being a danger and a threat to religious life, as commented on by Sr Margaret Kubanze LSOSF, another of the project's theological commentators.

*It is becoming rather a common experience these days to find some of the Religious preferring to live outside their communities for various reasons. When I interact with some of those who have chosen to live on their own rather than live in community, the reasons they give include inhibition of total availability to ministry, limitation of space in convents and inconveniences caused by a common timetable. Much as this might be true, there is need to remember that ministry is at the service of the Institute's mission, which is best lived in community. Living in community helps the Religious to deepen their experience of God through their interactions with one another.*

What follows below is a presentation of the various sub-themes which were identified as forming part of how sisters discussed their life together in community.

30. These were: apostolates; community life and centrality of God and prayer.

## Sources of models for community life

Although implicit in the majority of the comments about community life, 47 comments express explicitly the relationship between living this particular semi-conventual form of community life and religious life. They conclude that religious life is not properly constituted unless lived in this quasi conventual form.

*If there was no community in religious life, I don't think I'll be a religious because community is the essence of my religious life, without community am nobody; I can't live without community. So, community becomes an important entity as a religious for and it's a sign for me for joy and celebration where I share my life, ideas and visions... I can't do that on my own (ZC 78 – 82).*

Community life is inspired by, and modelled on, one or part of several sources: the first Christian communities of disciples as seen in the Acts of the Apostles; the theology of the Trinitarian life, and on family life.

The first basis for understanding community is the model of the Christian community formed of the disciples following Christ as outlined in Acts 4: 32 – 35. Sisters make this explicit connection in nine excerpts.

In the second of these 'models', there are six explicit mentions of the Trinity in relation to, or as a model for, communal living and all but one of these originated from sisters in Uganda. The comments point to not only an understanding of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the model, but to a sense of *perichoresis*, the interpenetration of relationship between the three elements of the Trinity, as sisters live in community, share gifts and talents. God is in communion together with the Son and the Holy Spirit and the sisters seek to emulate this.

*I think the community life for me reflects... the Trinitarian relationship - the way we share our giftedness, our gifts and talents in complementarity. This way we, we, we build unity. Unity in diversity (UC 162 – 163).*

Although the transcripts contain very few explicit references to this teaching, it underpins much of the sisters' understanding of community life, expressed more implicitly in their comments. It also reflects the central role in theology of consecrated or religious life given to community life, as shown for example in this extract from the 1994 CICALSAL document *Fraternal Life in Community*<sup>31</sup>.

*It is therefore impossible to understand religious community unless we start from its being a gift from on high, from its being a mystery, from its being rooted in the very heart of the blessed and sanctifying Trinity, who wills it as part of the mystery of the Church, for the life of the world (1994, n.8).*

More recently, sisters will have engaged with Pope Francis' Letter to all consecrated people (2014, n.2) which refers to 'the loving relationship of the three divine Persons (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), the model for all interpersonal relationships' and strengthening further this association.

The third and most common model and ideal is that of the family presented in over 50 comments from sisters. The sisters are called by God to leave one family to join another, bound together by a shared faith. In turn, they are provided with all that they need: a home, clothing, food and relationships. This is a new family, in Christ, with people they have not chosen but whom they accept in joy. In this new family sisters learn to pray and are called to conversion; deriving their energy and love from prayer and from each other, and this, in turn becomes another expression of their following of Christ. They offer witness to his resurrection and presence among them.

Community life is also seen as a witness to the value of family life when sisters see so many broken families in society around them. Community means family and home. A sense of belonging is important, and it is vitally important to them to experience this family spirit in their community and congregation and, if possible, the Church at large.

31. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican dicastery or department which deals with religious institutes and other forms of consecrated life.



*The other aspect of a family is... about the Church as a family. And even for us [name of congregation] missionaries, eh, the emphasis on our communities as a family and or even our congregation as a family, the family spirit is very strong (KE 73 – 75).*

Sisters speak of ‘our second family’ and say that as Africans, family and community is already strong in them. They seek to behave with each other as they would with their own family and extended family members. Images of family life are almost universally positive, and family is only problematised in the discussions about expectations of family on sisters, and pressure on sisters to meet the financial needs of their family. This idealistic view of family seems an unrealistic representation of family life, which we know is very complicated and can be very difficult and cause people damage, in many ways. Those entering religious life carry with them their experience of, and expectations from, their own family life. Whether these have been nuclear or extended families, the experiences can be nurturing and loving, instilling confidence and trust, but can also cause much pain and damage, but no reference is made to any potential and real difficulties.

### **‘African’<sup>32</sup> family as model**

Sr Rael Otieno SMK, one of the project’s theological commentators reminded us that community life is rooted in African family life, and in the family life of each of the five countries and their various cultures, often articulated theologically by the concept of *ubuntu*. This bears many similarities with Christian theology of communion and indeed perichoresis, as it explores and articulates the relationship between one person and those around them, and the material and spiritual world. It also helps link the traditional and cultural elements of the extended family where all is produced and shared in common.

*Community life for me it is a place of joy. A place of celebration. In our culture as Ugandans here, we can say that it is from our culture, from our background at home. We gather as a family. That is already a community, it is born in us, it is not that we come to a convent and that is the beginning of community life (UJ 69 – 71).*

Another sister said that entering religious life is like a continuation of the extended family and group living at her home (TK 136 – 140) and others speak of the African values that they also see shared among the sisters in community.

*[I]t also reminds me of values at home when a mother is coming back from the field; you cannot just say no, am tired; the mother will sacrifice to prepare meals for the children and for the whole family, the husband and so on.... There are a number of things that we may want to keep to ourselves as a congregation just like in a home certain issues are only for my family, so I see a huge link between African values back home in an African family as well as values in our community (ZA 492 – 497).*

It is, therefore, perhaps surprising that the mentions of this aspect of traditional forms of life, rooted in local cultures, and described by sisters as ‘African’ should appear so infrequently. Only one sister makes the connection, calling for these values to be at the heart of community living, in order to strengthen and deepen their life together. The discussion in the congregation from Zambia (above) is one of the few discussions of ‘African’ values and these are seen to comprise respect; generosity; tolerance, love and forgiveness.

*[B]eing Africans, we know what elements that comprise an African home. It’s a community where...a home where one will experience respect. A place where one will learn generosity just of the generous. A place where I will learn to tolerate others, to love, to forgive so when we talk in our African context, I think in our communities we are called, you know, to bring home our African values ...I think those are things that as Africans which we are supposed to bring to our communities so that those things combined with what we learn maybe in this modern world, things which we know can build, should be brought to these our communities so that they are places where one feel a sense of belonging, where one when am out there (ZA 334 – 344).*

32. See section in Chapter 9 on identity on p.90 for further discussion of the concept of ‘Africa/n’ and both our and sisters’ use of the term.

## Community as communion, mutuality and reconciliation

Community life as described and discussed by sisters is characterised by a strong sense of communion. Within this, there are explicit experiences of mutuality and reconciliation. Community as communion is the largest of the sub-themes within community life, with 162 comments. This is implicitly underpinned by a theology of trinity and the mutual giving and receiving of self and gifts, as will be shown in the following sections.

### Sense of communion

Communion is perhaps the result of mutuality and reconciliation and flows through most of the 162 comments referred to above. However, it is explored explicitly in 106 of these comments, where sisters speak of being in encounter with each other, bound by faith and their calling; in union and communion with each other. They share their gifts and talents with each other, as well as their sorrows and challenges. They hope to express their own and meet each other's needs. Relationships are formed in community and sisters get to know each other, living as one in spite of the diversity in origin, sharing what each receives from the other, and recognising each other as gifts to the community, the congregation and the Church.

*We live community as a state of encounter; it is where we embrace each other in our brokenness. It is where we accept each other as we are because we are called to complement each other. So, living these moments of community, we are able to express this communion with others, as we know that God is love, God is a communion of persons. So we are also able living this, this having received Jesus, also to live moments of encounter as a community, to encounter each other in our challenges, in our strengths and then we are able to accept each other in Christ and then we are able also to spread this love of God to others (KJ 41 - 47).*

Sisters share the same faith, the same charism and mission. Belonging and feeling at home is important and they offer an idealised picture of both family and community.

*Our community life is an extraordinary life. Everyone inside the community feels at home. Inside the community we experience love,*

*inside the community we are respected, we take care of one another, when we are sick, we take responsibility and help each other, even at the moments of our departure, when we die, we pray together for the departed soul and bury our fellow in unity (TI 260 - 263).*

### Mutuality

This is understood as sharing between and among each other, sharing happiness and consoling in unhappiness, and as an explicit sharing and exchange of what is brought back by each from her apostolates. This mutuality constitutes more than a reciprocity, but a being with and being for - for the sake of the Kingdom. It is difficult to separate from, and arguably an inherent component of, communion. Nevertheless, separating out these elements has made it possible to highlight where this is an exchange of mutuality which goes beyond a transactional relationship. Furthermore, distinguishing between communion and mutuality also highlighted the contrast between the frequency of these kinds of comments in relation to community, with the paucity of these comments in relation to ministry, and life outside the immediate community, and in the Church.

The mutuality expressed and identified between sisters comprises an exchange and a complementing of one another which leads to a completing of one another and brings all together in the love and imitation of Christ.

*...[t]he completion, it is very true that we complete each other and this when I read it brought me back to couples who marry we are told they are half of the other they come together they make complete. And often times I ask myself do, I still take myself to be a half, not complete, because am not with a husband? But I realised that all that happens in the life of couples is exactly what we are living cause the completing each other is beyond, is beyond just procreation. It is beyond the, the, the superficial encounters with each other; it is a very deep love lived... the relationship between or among us, is for me I feel even deeper because it is a relationship that is eeh, that is God given (KC 620 - 632).*

Sisters speak of drawing what they need from the community - strength and love - into

their apostolates and bringing back into the community what they in turn have received in their apostolates. They share their experiences of ministry and seek to face any problems and challenges together. A smaller set of comments (15 in total) offer a powerful image of what is a more implicitly mutual experience of community.

*I am missioned each day to go out to reach out in the name of my community and I come back to the community bringing, you know, like the needs of the people have met or the joys of the people have met...and then I think we get that mutual nourishing (ZC 119 – 123).*



## Reconciliation: a communal journey towards holiness

Reconciliation in community seems to comprise helping each other in communal reconciliation before God rather than reconciliation with each other following disagreement or conflict. Each sister recognises her own call to conversion, as well as the need to help each other come before and be reconciled with God. This form of community reconciliation functions as and represents a source of spiritual growth. Within this there are two main elements, the first being 'sisterly correction'. Sisters comment on one another's behaviour in community and offer guidance in order to support a sister in the living of her vows and the fullness of her response to God's love. Instances most cited relate to not being present for communal prayers or liturgy. Sisters report asking and reminding each other about prayer and other aspects of community life, saying that this is done out of love and with love.

*...[r]eligiosity, yes it is already there and also it is a challenge for us because we are very faithful in our prayer we don't miss our Lauds and vespers and our adoration our practices of prayer we are so faithful to them and if am not faithful my sister will ask me, will remind me it's like a call to remind me that thing that I am praying, how is it reflecting my life, is my life showing what, are the two things matching, so I find that what I am living, what I am saying what am praying try to, try to be part of my life (KE 796 – 801).*

Several comments claim that sisterly correction leads to greater self- acceptance, and to a common obedience and discernment of the will of God in the community. The individual being helped towards holiness forms part of the group's witness, so that holiness is indeed communal. The group desires to keep moving at the same pace.

*We warn each other when one of us is going astray so that she reconciles and converts herself from the weaknesses. We do that out of love and with love. So, in such situations of the religious life, we live by loving one another to proclaim the Word of the Lord, as Christ himself told us to love one another in the same way He loved us (TL 303 – 306).*

There are a small number of comments where 'sisterly correction' is clearly another name for what is seen as gossip or negative criticism and sisters reporting not feeling brave enough to offer 'sisterly correction' in case it is met with hostility. There are also only a small number of comments relating to interpersonal conflict or disagreements and the one-to-one reconciliation needed between sisters to move forward. One comment from a diocesan congregation in Tanzania offers an insight into the formal mechanism of reconciliation within the community, drawing on the long-established 'chapter of faults' to confess sins and ask forgiveness from the community. This practice would have been common across apostolic congregations in Europe and North America before the Second Vatican Council but nowadays would be more associated with a particular form of monastic community.

The second element of reconciliation as bringing each other closer to God comprises an understanding of holiness as a common calling. Some 30 references to holiness explore what constitutes holiness and the sisters' desire for, and call to, holiness. They all have in common the belief that community living is the means to holiness as this is where Christ can be followed more closely.

*Our guideline is Christ himself; our aim in the world, as especially us sisters is to observe holiness, and we will obtain this holiness in the communities, in communion and togetherness (TF 188 – 189).*

The apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018 n.6) reminds us that not only is the call to holiness universal, applying to all (n.10) but that the journey to holiness is a communal exercise: God's salvation is offered to all God's people, and the longing for and seeking of holiness is also communal.

*It is in the community that we gain our holiness because in it we meet people of different types, so we get chance to keep growing, we gain spiritual growth and even purify ourselves through our communities. (TI2 – 349 – 351).*

## Challenges of community life

Living in community under one roof with people not of one's choosing is a difficult way of life to live. Yet, in this project, community has emerged as both an ideal and an idealised form of living and data collected on community life is largely positive. Only 93 of the 752 comments refer to conflict or challenges in community living. Much of the evidence presented to us about the difficulties in community life has been anecdotal. At each of the feedback meetings, individual sisters have remarked that what we have presented is overly positive and unrealistic, and that the reality is very different. However, sisters do not say this in the discussion groups and the reasons for this are probably many and perhaps chief among them a fear of confronting the difficulties at all, let alone in front of their sisters. Therefore, we feel that any real exploration of the quality and nature of community living in these cultural contexts may need to be done in one-to-one interviews or in mixed congregational discussion groups outside of sisters' own locations.

Turning to the data we do have on this topic; we can say that the more challenging aspects of community life were mentioned in 29 of the 56 group discussions but only nine of these discussions were substantive and substantial. Five of the most in-depth conversations took place in indigenous congregations in Uganda, and the others in international congregations in Zambia and one each in Malawi and Kenya. Where clear references to conflict and challenges occur, they are by and large attributed to external factors and causes, such as use of mobile phones, social media, television, and the impact these are having on community life.<sup>33</sup> Less frequently addressed is the issue of how sisters respond to these distractions and how managing the use of social media can itself be addressed.

There are only ten comments acknowledging the difficulty of living in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-national communities, yet one sister from Uganda says of the issue:

33. See the section on Distractions in Chapter 12 for further discussion of this issue.



*I don't know what we should say about tribal or cultural differences. Yes, tribalism is bringing conflicts. There is somewhere I read that tribalism is a silent cancer in most religious congregations. Is a silent cancer. And then when we start dividing ourselves according to that, we also include the people who are supposed to see the kingdom. We go to priests; we go even to the common people - the lay people and so we kill their faith. (laughter) (UL 291 - 296).*

A small but related group of seven comments referred to a lack of trust in community, including unpleasant gossip about each other and instances of sisters projecting beliefs about tribal groups as well as casting suspicions of witchcraft onto sisters from those areas. Interestingly these examples all occur in congregations in Uganda, as do other, more challenging aspects of human behaviour. This is where we find the references to sisters as victims of gossip, hate, and attitudes of submission. Sisters also raise witchcraft, suspicion, evil, tribalism and segregation which are often the hard-to-mention issues. This leaves us asking whether this is a sign of greater honesty and a willingness to be open, and to confront these issues, or a greater prevalence of the issues, or perhaps both.

There are comments from 11 sisters calling for a renewed commitment to each other in community. These are often in response to the identified problem of individualism and self-interest often leading to sisters trying to live individual lives within the community, which, they note has a negative in that sisters are less available to each other and, therefore, do not offer the support and sisterhood so clearly sought and valued.

*So community life is good but when we don't really stick to what has brought us in religious life we can turn it into hell, the real hell but when the purpose, that the purpose to join religious life is to love, to accept one another it is very enjoyable really (UF 525 - 527).*

Closely related are comments about personal differences, sisters failing to understand and accept each other (ten comments), or showing preferences for some sisters over others, leading to special friendships and cliques. Interestingly, a small group of comments refers to the problem of loneliness in religious life, with some talking about the problems of isolation, discrimination and segregation in communities. Some express concern that sisters have either too many, or stronger relationships with those outside the community, including friends and work colleagues. They believe this leads to gossip and a lack of commitment to, and concern for, their own community.

In response to these kinds of situations, and despite the 11 comments calling for a renewed commitment, in the transcripts there are only two examples of sisters suggesting specifically coming together to evaluate community life and how the sisters are living this. One of these is from a community in Kenya.

*I am thinking concentrating on the quality, quality of community life that we are living in and evaluating it often so that we don't enter into that comfortable zone..... where because it can be a temptation in the community, you are assured of everything. So, there is no, no challenge so somebody can go to that kind of life that is, that is not bringing the essence of religious living. So by having frequent evaluation of the quality of life, quality of community life that we are living, I think it is very essential, where the community is able to meet and I see it often whereby there is this monthly community living where the sisters can sit down, and look at one another's eyes and say why are we here (KN 767 - 776).*

## The common timetable

The sisters' discussions reveal a common understanding which sees the sharing of tasks, income and talents as central to community life, whereby everything is done together, out of love for each other. The sisters are helped in their desire to do all things together, and thereby build this sense of unity by the common timetable or what would previously have been known in Europe as the horarium. This provided the daily structure for the common life, characterised by periods of prayer, work, meals and recreation. With roots in a monastic lifestyle it shows the elements of semi-monastic, or conventual, life which characterise many of the apostolic congregations participating in this study.

*If we are living in the community it implies that we have a common timetable that guides us, from the moment we wake up: what shall we begin with, what do we do in the afternoon, and so for the evening until the moment we go to bed. Whatever we are doing, we do it in unity (TL 313 – 316).*

In the discussions about community life, there are 32 different references to the timetable, from 15 congregations. These are mostly very positive and see the timetable as the framework which helps create unity of purpose and spirit of the community. These references originate largely from diocesan congregations in Uganda and Tanzania, but others from a mixture of international and diocesan congregations. Only one discussion questions the necessity for the framework of the timetable. A small number of comments -11- ask whether community needs to be equated with conformity and fulfilling obligations to a timetable, or whether it should be about living the life more deeply than this. Sisters ask whether a life lived in faith and in prayer, as disciples of Christ, needs to depend on a timetable or cannot a deeper shared communion develop without reference to a formal external structure.

This questioning of the necessity of the timetable comes from the sisters in one international congregation; the only example of a discussion which also raises the possibility of exploring other, less formal ways of living community life and whether this common form of community life is the only option for living in community. In this discussion the sisters suggest that structures enable community life to be lived with little communion beneath or within it, but communion can be present without the structure.

Aside from the suggestion that sisterly correction needs to be the responsibility of all, there are very few comments – only eight – stating that all sisters need to take responsibility for being in and building community. This small number of comments suggests that this responsibility cannot and should not be left to Superiors alone. All sisters are called to model religious life in the way it is to be lived in her congregation, suggestive of the old ideal of the 'living rule'.

*A sister who remains behind watching TV. The superior has seen her, and she is not taking action. You know, correcting each other in the community is not one man show. It's very true that sometimes we have leaders who may not have the courage to correct their members of the community and sometimes these very members of the community have very good friends in the community who are seeing wrong, and these could be the right people to help uh, sister who is weakening. So, I see it as a responsibility for each and every member of the community to take a step, in order to make a difference in the community (ZG 918 – 923).*

## Community life as a form of witnessing to God's loving action and the value of Christian life

In a large group of 82 comments, sisters state that community constitutes the main form of Christian witness. They go further in suggesting that this form of witness is a significant rationale for community living, to the extent that it becomes an apostolate in itself. They leave their natural families, and live together, as unmarried women, as a community in Christ, in faith and love. This is a central message about the place and action of God's love in their lives and in the world that they wish to communicate to others. Their apostolates are authenticated by community life, which becomes the corroborating witness to what they proclaim through their apostolates. It is a significant form of evangelisation, one identified by Sr Rita Namayanja IHMR, of the project's theological commentators' group.

*Community is a place of witness where members bear and share together the first fruits of prayer derived from their encounter with the Divine Master who transforms their prayers into acts of love and compassion witnessed in the harmonious community life.*

In emulating those first Christian communities, who shared everything in common, they know what it means to be Christian and they are called to give witness as one body, responding to God's call. Their coming together from different nationalities, tribes, districts, cultures and languages and living in unity in, and through, this diversity is seen as a significant form of witness and prophetic sign. Of the 51 comments which related specifically to this form of witness, just over half originate in congregations in Kenya, with the next largest group of comments from Uganda, followed by Tanzania, Zambia and Malawi.

*...[f]or me very often have thought of community life as a very distinct sign of witnessing religious life, witnessing to the people of God in the world the fact that all of us coming from different backgrounds,*

*different tribes, different culture, actually come to live together for a mission, for me first that is a sign of God because is really speaks about God is present with God all things are possible (ZC 84 - 88).*

This comment from an international congregation offers a slightly different perspective.

*The internationality bears witness that people from different places can harmoniously live together; that diversity is a beautiful place... we are different tribes living together, it's not a reason for people to be fighting but rather to bring together their richness the values and everything together so as to build one beautiful community where people can live... the internationality of congregations in Kenya in some way is bearing this witness in that sisters come together from different countries, from different tribes and then they are able to live together harmoniously. And so, this is what we are reflecting back to the society that the sisters can live together; they too can sit and talk and dialogue about their differences and be able to do that (KB 288 - 297).*

Although an ideal, multicultural living in turn poses one of the greatest challenges to community living; it is one of the aspects sisters say they find most difficult. They are also keenly aware of how others see them and view their community life. Where they are unable to live in harmony and communion, it undermines their consecration, vows and their evangelising. The sisters also witness by their moral and ethical behaviour, which they hope to model to others. A good illustration of this comes from a group of sisters in Uganda who note the importance of them being seen to conduct their General Chapter with transparency and trust, demonstrating their detachment from, and indifference to, power and politics, which they feel can be a model for wider society.

## God and prayer at the heart of community life

Discussions on prayer and community life divide loosely into three sub themes. In the first of these, a large group of 64 comments, sisters say that it is only God's love and grace which make it possible for the sisters to live together. Community life needs prayer at its centre; seeing Christ in one another makes community possible and sisters need intimacy with God in order to be in communion with each other.

The implications of community life without prayer at its heart are described vividly, using language such as: "failing to live as a community"; "too difficult without it"; "you perish"; "you die spiritually"; and "cannot do this task". Sisters say they feel dry personally without prayer and moreover, community life can be disastrous, with one sister saying, '[w]ithout prayer, community life is over, it is not feasible' (TM 226).

In community the sisters re/discover God's love and reveal it to one another, so they see Christ in each other, and God is at the heart of their encounters. This is where sisters learn to love Christ – and how and where they follow Christ. Symbolising the body of Christ, and sharing in the life of Christ, and united by the spirit of prayer; they learn to pray in community; it is a school for love.

*I want to affirm prayer in our communities. I think we are trying to imitate our Master by being together in times of prayer. And I see in many communities despite the other apostolates, we are trying to remind each other on the times of prayer. That's why on our timetables, prayer on daily basis it's there so that we try to imitate our Master who always used to pray before taking up any apostolate (ZE 263 - 266).*

Comments about prayer in the community are dominated by references to communal prayer with specific prayer practices or exercises, such as adoration, meditation, saying the Rosary, the Examen, as well as attending the Offices of Lauds and Vespers, and the Holy Eucharist. However, much of the time the reference is simply to community prayer. This may be a generic term, or it may be that praying together in community is seen as more important than personal prayer. Where forms of prayer are differentiated, those most commonly mentioned relate to communal prayers rather than personal prayer, although a small number of comments emphasise the need for, and balance between, both forms.

*Yes, we need both...because if it is constant that I have quality time with God alone, then where is my community life? Is it important to me or because I, I have quality time with God; the communal prayer doesn't matter, so it is both. What we need here is commitment, we really need commitment to both... ..so I would say once we are committed then things will flow...(ZB 719 - 720).*

Intercessory prayer is seen to be especially valuable in community as the discipline and practice of praying for each other appears to re-enforce the aspect of communal reconciliation and journeying together towards holiness.



## Community as a source from which to draw

The material collected through this project shows that the primary significance of community life is embedded in the mutual dynamic between God, self and those in need. It is a locus for (first) encountering God and for the following of Christ on a daily basis with one's sisters. Within this it also reveals a strong element of 'community first'. This indicates that sisters must learn to love and serve each other and give (of) themselves to each other in community before being able to take this love out to others. Therefore, community would seem to be regarded as the first and primary form of apostolate - this being in witness to, and evangelisation of, each other. In this sense, primacy has to be given to community life where sisters experience Christ in each other and God's love for each other and to serve and support each other.

*I see it very clear community coming first before ministry. As I wake up in the morning in community, that's why I say yes to God; that's why I respond to needs around (ZC 84 - 86).*

Two phrases are commonly heard in relation to community life: 'charity begins at home' and 'I cannot give what I don't have'. Both suggest a sense of the lived community itself as the source which generates the love and possibility of self-gift which sisters need to take out to others and further point to the primacy of community. In this extract, sisters express this primacy but at the same time, articulate that it is this very thing which then enables them to respond to others.

*So, I am seeing that community also supports me as I go out and also my community members are my neighbours. So, I cannot go to serve out before I serve my sisters in community (UA 188-189).*

In this next comment, the emphasis is slightly different. The sister here is saying that it not her sisters' first, but only through the loving of her sisters, can she go out and love others; that community is not the apostolate, but rather apostolates are an extension of what she has experienced in community.

*We always say... what I go and give out there is what am already sharing in here and receiving, so apostolate is almost like an extension of sharing of what I am experiencing or trying to give already in in this community with my sisters, so it's almost like this love that is in here want to go out and share it with others to go out and nurture and bring to birth the life of Christ in others which I am already nurturing in here. Like we talk about our vocation first and foremost to be sisters to one another, so when am going out to my apostolate, I am carrying that being sister that I am already living in this community to the people out there, so it also flows to my availability (ZC 246 - 253).*



Thus, another aspect also emerges in the discussions on community life. Alongside a theology of encountering God first in their sisters and extending this to others sits an understanding of community which exists also for its own sake and the sake of its members, perhaps in tension with the community-apostolate dynamic. Building on the notion of 'charity begins at home', one sister urges others to see the vulnerable in their own communities first.

*Rather than burning fuel going very far away that we are looking for the most vulnerable and you have left the Christ here. Hhhhm there is Christ here next to you crying and you are not attending to her (UE 308 – 310).*

One of the theological commentators, Sr Revocate Kabahuma MSOLA noted that it was clear from a text she reviewed that she observed a form of 'community living which is not for its own sake'. This is quite right. However, we feel that in places we see an understanding of community which is more commonly associated with more monastic or certainly semi-monastic communities in terms of the central significance of community, whereby community living itself is a form of apostolate. Community is given primacy in theological terms. Sisters express an understanding of having to give themselves first to the community before they can give to others, as mutual giving in community enables them to have something to give to others.

Is community in these apostolic communities rightly ever an end in itself, or is it only the means through which the wider apostolate and mission of the Church is achieved? This is not an invalid question, given the strength of the link between witness and community. This following comment reveals the joy experienced in community and the great longing for togetherness.

*Community life is also a place where all of us grow because there we can know who we are, and we come to appreciate one another. When we are outside, when we go for our apostolate if our community is good, we long to be at home. We long to be there and we feel to not delay with the people or do extra things outside but I should be with my sisters and therefore, the community life I live really influence or will affect the people that I serve so I feel community life is very, very important and where I am I am really enjoying to be there (KC1 513 – 518).*

This point is strengthened by the number of times communal prayer or prayer together in community is mentioned as opposed to individual, personal prayers and meditation, as explored in the section on prayer. Also, we have seen that mutuality is more strongly expressed as a feature of community life and less so in mission and ministries. Community life itself is the source of strength and must be nourished for that reason.

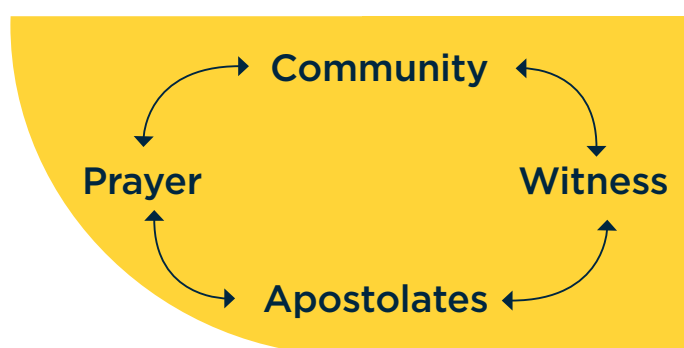
The 'source' of the love which drives, motivates and orients the sisters towards others is community, its relationships and the love of God which they learn and experience there. We have found ourselves asking whether this God-found-in-communion/ community is a more obvious and nourishing 'source' for sisters than their own private prayer which expresses and deepens their relationship with God. The bigger question is whether these two elements can or should be separated as they must surely nourish and reinforce each other.



## A second dynamic?

These observations and questions lead us to identify a second dynamic, further to that identified in the Chapter on relationship with God and prayer, we offer a second diagram representation of community as a source of life, energy, love and strength for the sisters.

**Figure 4: Dynamic of community as source**



As a result of this prominence of community life in their theology of religious life some sisters appear to have very high expectations of community life. They have left their own families for this togetherness, and they expect it to fulfil all their needs: emotional, financial, friendship, relationship, in faith and love and support for their apostolates. In some 12 excerpts, sisters make a strong link between the quality of their life in community and all other areas of their religious lives; if community is functioning well and meeting all their needs, then they function well as religious. If they are not happy in community, then all other aspects of their religious life, including apostolates and worship will be affected.

*When I am happy in a community, then I will be able to go out to serve people in a more energised way and be able to be happy and to give my whole self to others, but again when I am even in a community where I am frustrated, even my service will be very low. Therefore, I still believe that community life is a place where I get energised so that I am able to render services to the people (KM 302 – 306).*

Sisters also make a connection between their personal authenticity and identity as a Christian, and the 'authentic' self offered and found in community.

*If in community I am not able to live, what will I go out to offer? Otherwise we become, we wear mask we become irrelevant because in my community I am not true, I am not living fully, what will go to give to the people (KJ 78 – 80).*

Community life, both enables sisters to go out and gives them something to take to others. If things don't go well in community, then life outside will not go well (UJ 158). So, where their expectations and needs are met, sisters feel life is manageable. If community is in chaos, then life will be in chaos. In line with the oft-repeated phrase 'I can't give what I don't have', if sisters don't receive in community, they say they will have nothing to give. They need the support, encouragement and even protection offered by the community to function as religious women.

## Community as protection

There is an interesting set of 19 comments which refers to community life as a form and place of protection. It is thus acknowledged as the place where sisters learn how to live -the foundation for their vows. It is also seen as a place of protection for their vows: a framework of discipline and support. What these comments have in common is a strong link between community/communal life and a sister's ability to keep her vows, as if the temptations beyond the community boundary are too strong. Vows are easily broken; it's easier to keep them when you are all living together in community. This is well illustrated with a rich metaphor.

*Ah! Community life is the protection. They have said, when you look at animals, fish, I am taking you to animals, different animals, let's say zebra, eh, if the zebra is in a crowd and they are running together, no lion can catch any of them. But if the zebra is scattered, or one of them walks alone, what will the lion do? He will catch them. The same to us, if I am in the community, I am covered by an umbrella, and no rain can fall on me, and I cannot face any challenge or difficulty. I mean the community is the protection of community life, it is a protection of this life of ours, it is the community that protects me. First of all, when I have problems, I will tell the community, that I am facing this and that, so that they can advise me, they will pray for me, and I will be.... But without doing so, if I am not a member of the community, it is easy for me to go astray, because you are alone, doing your things, and that is not the community (TM 375 - 384).*

Community also acts as a protective barrier against the outside world and its temptations, where sisters clearly feel a sense of vulnerability. Another sister from the same congregation in Tanzania provides a different metaphor, describing community as a fence, or wall, with sisters inside, protected, undisturbed 'so you can nurse your vows very well' (TM 277 - 279). A sister from another Tanzanian congregation reinforces this image of community as a distinct, separate place which protects and enables the sisters' search for, and living of, holiness.

*Personally, I see the community as my fence of which I cannot go anywhere without informing the members of my community. I cannot also do anything without sharing it with my community members. My community should be my home (TP 630 - 631).*

Thus, togetherness creates and necessitates an actual boundary or fence, indicating a sense of apartness but also, generativity and protection, emphasising the bounded nature of community life.

## Dangers of being/living alone and not together in community

The emphasis on the need for protected togetherness is further illustrated by comments which highlight the dangers of living alone, rather than living together with other sisters in community. Not only are they vulnerable, particularly as single women in this cultural context, but they cannot live or achieve holiness by living singly.

*It is because of community life that we as congregation keep moving because when one lives in solitude or selfishness, then she cultivates in herself the negativity and like the outcome, she will be stepping aside from the essence of the will of God who wants us to be in unity. Loneliness makes the member of the community different from others and promotes her to the life that is different from other members of the community. Therefore, this is one of the expressions of the community life which we are living in the congregation and as the sisters (TL339 - 344).*

Sisters need the support, encouragement and the discipline offered by the structure of community life to pray and keep their vows. Happiness in, and faithfulness to, religious life cannot be achieved by oneself. In these comments, the role of support from community appears to be as prominent as, or one with the role of prayer and total reliance on God.

Most of the comments on community as protection and the dangers of living alone come from

34. Patricia Wittberg draws on resource mobilisation theory to explain the relationship between religious life and both the internal and external contexts it needs to flourish in her work. Wittberg, P. 1994. *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, Albany: SUNY Press.



Tanzania and Uganda and almost all from sisters in indigenous or diocesan congregations. This may highlight the vulnerability of women living alone, which would apply to all five project locations. Therefore, it also points to a societal context where many people do not understand religious life and the reputations and personal safety of the women may be at stake. In conversations with the wider project team, we discussed the fact that religious life is still relatively young in these countries and not yet firmly rooted in the soil of the local Church nor more widely in families, communities and society more generally. Thus, religious life, as a specific form of religious virtuosity may lack some of the internal defining and societal support it traditionally had in many European and North American settings;<sup>34</sup> support which enabled it to thrive in those contexts until recently when, as Wittberg (1994) suggests, the support began to collapse.

---

## Awareness of connection with wider community

A small group of 13 comments point to the nature of the relationship between religious community and religious life, suggesting an understanding of a very porous delineation, through which much is communicated.

*When the people in our localities see that the sisters can live together peacefully, sharing everything, in solidarity, then that peace spreads out to our community. It is a way of teaching the community around us the importance of living together (TJ 116 – 123).*

In this next comment from Zambia, a sister describes the experience of interconnectedness and even mutuality between the formal community of sisters, and the wider community in which they are inserted.

*There is a spirit of belonging both from the sister to the larger community and the larger community accepting the sister to be one of them. Example, the sister feels at home with the community as we visit families around community no matter the denomination, everyone is treated the same (ZC 71 – 73).*

There are many echoes of the ‘ideal community’ of the Acts of the Apostles, but there is stress on the fact that ‘healthy’ community life spreads out to the larger community outside, interacting with them and bringing God’s love to them.

Nonetheless, the question of a sense of separation arose and was discussed with the theological commentators. One of them, Sr Mercy Shumbamhini CJ, observed that the sisters’ portrayal of community life seemed very bounded and that she would expect to have seen a more, what she termed ‘African’ cultural understanding of community which would connect with, and extend beyond, the convent walls and compound. This observation sits alongside others which also indicate some sense not of separation but separateness.<sup>35</sup> This may form part of the call to religious to live on the peripheries of society – in the ‘world’ but not of it – in order to develop a perspective slightly removed from society and be able to speak prophetically into it. However, the extent to which sisters feel connected to and part of other forms of ‘community’ – local neighbourhoods and especially parish and Church opens up interesting questions about their ecclesiology.

There is a very small, but interesting group of comments where sisters appear to define themselves by being members of their community and congregation, and that community as Church. This leads us not to question the ecclesial nature of the sisters’ vocation, but to ask whether it is in community that sisters experience ‘Church’, given the difficulties sisters say they experience within ‘Church’ as an institution? Sisters very rarely refer to ‘Church’ as family or appear to have the same appreciation and experience of communion and mutuality in Church as in their community. Church for them may well be experienced primarily in their congregational community.

*In our communities we are living as a small church (KN 107 – 109).*

If this experience is viewed alongside the appearance of primacy of community of and for itself and even as an apostolate in itself, the picture becomes more complex. Describing herself as ‘an agent’ of her community, one sister says that wherever she is and whatever she is doing, she is

35. See also the discussion about consecration as set above rather than set apart on p.57, in Chapter 6.

only there because of who she is in community. As we have seen, this sense of identification with community runs equally strongly throughout the data. One sister appears to be answering the question about the essence of religious life with 'community'.

*I think that is why the sisters spoke more about the community because we feel it is the central. It is the beginning of any other thing that makes our life different...(KN 287 - 289).*

Rather than coming to conclusions after our analysis of the material on community life, we find ourselves with several questions. First, we ask to what extent is the form of community life which is formally communal and lived under-one-roof now an essential and defining feature of apostolic religious life for women in East and Central Africa, as lived by the majority - not all - congregations?

Second, if this is the case for most apostolic congregations, then we ask what is the basis for this line of development? Is this model rooted in the conventual, semi-monastic form of religious life which would have been prevalent at the time of the founding of many of the diocesan and indigenous congregations participating in this study? Or are we seeing an evolution of a form of religious life for women which has adapted to the socio-cultural context where extended family, community and even tribe are still the predominant forms of living? This is a cultural context which is already evolving, as urban development pulls in younger family members in search of employment, and marriage outside ethnic, tribal and geographical identities is now common. Nonetheless, sisters still express an identity articulated through ubuntu and communion theology. In Europe and North

America this model has generally evolved into other forms of community life, but in our work with sisters we have seen the simple joy women seem to experience in living together as they leave their families and come together to form a new family and new cultures. The gender implications and aspects of community living in this context cannot be ignored. Is this form of life gendered, and to what extent does it need to be in order to adapt to the cultural implications of, and pressures for, women living alone? This question warrants further investigation.

Our third question draws on one posed by Sr Marren Rose Awiti IBVM, who asked if community now 'trumps' charism. By this she was asking to what extent is this form of community life shaped by and rooted in the charism of each congregation or has this conventual form of life now become the norm for apostolic religious congregations, and more important than charism. Our question then is: does community life need to be evangelised by the apostolic charisms of each congregation?

We do not offer answers to these questions but would like to see fuller discussion of the role community life will and can play in the evolving future of apostolic religious life for women in these countries.



# Chapter 5 Mission, evangelisation and apostolates

## Mission

### The following of Christ into mission and service

In his feedback on the sisters' theology of mission, Fr Joe McCullough SPS noted:

*The communion and mission of these religious women, "called and sent" is set in the mystery of God's relationship with humanity; in their discussions they point towards God and God's limitless activity in their world. Their lives are situated explicitly within the context of God's plan for the world. They are called to a specific mission to be an ecclesial community in the Church and in the world, being witnesses and architects of God's plan for communion and mission which is the crowning point of human history in God's design for the world.*

McCullough identifies that it is in the sisters' 'ardent response' that we find 'a profound theology of grace, a theology of relationships divine and human'. Sisters receive the gift of religious life and express this 'ardent response' to God's call through embracing the Father's mission. The sisters here speak of being sent – or missioned – to take Christ to others.

*We are called to evangelise others; we are oriented towards others, and that is the response to God's call because the call is not for ourselves, but it is... we are called to be sent and that is mission (TA 64 – 65).*

Some sisters say that, as Christ is no longer physically present on earth, so they understand themselves as having received the gift of this legacy passed down to them through the tradition of disciples spreading the good news. In this group consisting of 77 comments on the following of Christ through mission and service, the sisters state that they commit their lives to carrying on that mission, as disciples of Christ, participating in his mission of evangelisation and reaching out to others. They speak of prolonging, carrying on and continuing his mission. They are co-workers,

becoming part of, and one with, Christ, in a specific and key expression of their vows and an understanding of religious life as the following and imitation of Christ, thereby bringing him alive to others. In the words of another of our theological commentators, Sr Joyce Meyer PBVM, 'The Jesus they follow is leader, teacher, community oriented, evangeliser and prayerful'.

*...[w]e understand the evangelical counsels lived by Christ himself and we follow his steps as we imitate him in his love and compassion. We share our time and resources with the needy. And as Christ did, we are never tired sharing with the people especially the poor around us sharing with them material things and also spending time with them (MD 20 – 24).*

### A mission of the community, congregation, Church and Christ

The sisters' experience of being called and sent by God is incarnated through their missioning to particular apostolates. They are sent out to bring life to the people as disciples and followers of Christ. In a small group of 14 comments, sisters explain the link between community and apostolates. Apostolates are done in the name of community, so each sister is missioned and enabled by her community.

*I am out there in ministry in the name of my community that my community missions me out and so like in our communities where everybody is involved probably in different things so that it's not a community ministry as such and yet I am there as a [members of Congregation ZC] knowing my community is behind me, my community supports me and (ZC 119 – 125).*

In this way, the sisters demonstrate their understanding that this mission is not theirs; the ministries do not 'belong' to them; they are part of a much larger, universal mission of the Church for the life of the world and the good of others.


This mission is also, therefore, the mission of the congregation, which participates in the mission of the Church. The particular aspect which the congregation is called to address, the purpose for which it was formed, was handed down by their founder/foundress in their charism. In this, they show a clear sense of connection with their patrimony and continuity of mission.

*...Jesus has entrusted our foundresses to entrust us to, to proclaim and to do his mission in this world (MA 517 - 518).*

The sisters are not motivated by honours, titles, money or enjoyment. Rather they carry out their mission in faith and for Christ and in responding to the call, they are but instruments of God's love. In recognising that their mission is at one with that of the Church and Christ, sisters are called to let go and hand the mission and specific ministries on to others when God sees fit. This comment below is a rare example of a sister recognising that other lay people, outside of the congregation will not only play a role in the mission but play a role in sharing and extending the charism itself.

*It's not my mission; it is God's mission entrusted to me at this time. When I move on and go somewhere else others will still have to continue maybe not eh strictly in this vocation but other vocations also...maybe that's why we need to care for the lay people out there so that they can have it in their hands and at the end of the day even if they are not sisters so speak, when they trust and believe in this charism they will be able to share it out in their own way (ZF 279 - 282).*

In this excerpt, the sister not only recognises other vocations in the Church but acknowledges that the sharing and passing on of their charism and allowing others to experience and identify with their charism also forms part of their approach to evangelisation. Thus, in this next section, we will turn to the specific ways in which the sisters participate in the mission of Christ, whereby mission is understood as service, evangelisation and reaching out to others.



*It's not my mission; it is God's mission entrusted to me at this time.*





## Evangelisation

In the feedback workshops held in each of the five project locations at the end of the project, sisters reacted very strongly to our separating out evangelisation and apostolates in our Stage 1 thematic analysis. For them, evangelisation and apostolates are inseparable, as apostolates are the means by which sisters participate in the evangelising mission of the Church.

Sr Rita Namayanja IHMR identified a shift which has taken place in recent decades in the meaning of evangelisation. This represents a turn away from an emphasis on the salvation of souls only towards one that deals with evangelising the whole human person – caring for and nurturing people's spiritual and physical needs.

A small set of 13 comments, a subset of evangelisation, demonstrate this specific perspective. Sisters understand that they evangelise through their apostolate; the two are inseparable, and they take a very holistic approach to evangelisation. Although their ministry may be addressing a physical need, they are trying to heal and care for the whole person and attend to their spiritual welfare.

*Relating the first point of 'called to serve' and serving the people corporal or spiritually, is like holistic way of serving them. Because, as [KB] we don't go out there only to serve...we carry the poor people in our hearts to the chapel for prayers. Even if we don't open Bibles for them while we are serving for them, we pray for them, either privately or with them (KB 119 - 122).*

Although we recognised that evangelisation and apostolates are inextricably linked, we labelled them as separate themes in order to be able to explore the content in greater detail. Furthermore, the naming of the two themes reflects the language of the sisters: where the word evangelisation was used, we categorised it as such.

## The work of redemption and salvation

In this first and largest group of 35 comments within this theme of 'evangelisation', the sisters speak of themselves as agents of making God known to others – not through any specific apostolates or activities but in a much more general sense. They display a consciousness of, what Dr. Susan O'Brien<sup>36</sup> has termed 'evangelism'.

*Acting for the Church and the Church's mission to bring people to Christ through preaching the Gospel: speaking or teaching with the intention of conversion or reconversion.*

The sisters display this specific intention of passing the faith on to others, often using phrases such as 'whatever I receive from Christ, I pass on'. They know that they are loved by Christ and want to share this love and knowledge with others and are called to 'give out the Christ that they have received' (KC 449 – 451).

*If I know that Jesus loves me so much, I will try to give the same thing to those that I am working with, to those I am living with (MA 273 - 275).*

They minister with the specific intentions of conversion and reconversion. They strive to attract others to follow in Christ's footsteps and to make his word known more widely; in fact, a key objective of recruiting other women to join them is to continue this mission.

*We recruit to fulfil the command of making all nations the disciples of Jesus. We make this going to the whole world and baptize, make all people my followers, my disciples. So, we recruit because the world has not become evangelized yet. There are people who have never heard about Jesus, there are people who have heard, and they have lost that voice; they want to hear it again rekindled (KQ1 380 - 384).*

36. Dr. O'Brien offered this definition in 2018 during her work assisting the team with transcript analysis.

## Apostolates

As the congregations participating in this research are apostolic in character, it is unsurprising that the theme of apostolates featured among the three most frequently occurring themes from Stage 1, which were then carried forward into the Stage 2 discussions groups, in almost every single congregation. There were 227 comments which focused on an aspect of apostolic activity, but as we have already seen, this material is intimately linked with comments on mission, evangelisation, the following of Christ, bearing witness, 'being sign', and others. The comments in this theme of apostolates largely relate to apostolic activities and how sisters connect them to other aspects of their religious life, as summarised by Sr Marren Rose Awiti IBVM.

*Apostolates...interpreted as being a voice to the voiceless, service to the poor, marginalised and vulnerable and a way of participating in the redemptive work of Jesus.*

This participation in Christ's redemptive mission is often illustrated with a range, or simply a list, of activities. However, many comments are often richer and more complex than this. Here the true significance of apostolates is imaginatively described by two sisters. The first uses the biblical metaphor of 'being salt and light'.

*...[w]e are helping in feeding the hungry and educating the children who are coming from poor families. And in doing so, we bring the light to the world because the work which we do, it brings joy in the hearts of the people and the people they come closer to God because they see the goodness of God through the work the sisters do. So, we are like the light to the world, we are like the salt to the world because we are changing the world, making a better place for the people to live (MB 420 - 425).*

The second uses a metaphor regarding how sisters insert themselves into the heart, or base of the community and people's lives, and minister from within, like yeast.

*It makes me think of ourselves as religious out there in the local community among our local people as the leaven the yeast. Like the yeast*



37. This is explored more fully in Chapter 10 on sustainability, poverty and empowerment.

*is working slowly, slowly, simply and is not even seen, is not even noticed but the effects are seen by the way the bread is rising. And, and maybe that's who we are like in, in within the life of our local people we are there at the base of our life; we are with them at the base of their life. In their struggles, in their poverty, in their fears. When we engage ourselves in the different activities in our parishes, we listen to them. We go to visit them, we stay with them, we think with them, we plan with them and in the way that we are responding to them and the way that we discussing or talking with them, the very first thing that always comes to us is, like we look at these situations with the eyes of Jesus (ZE 547 - 559).*

What the two comments have in common is a desire to improve the lives of those to whom the sisters minister: to support and encourage the flourishing of life before death, so that the kingdom is very real and very near. What differentiates the two is that the first uses more conventional and common language of service to others. In the second comment, we see a slightly different understanding of how sisters seek to bring about change, from working within and alongside. They may be unseen, but they strive to empower others in some way,<sup>37</sup> and bring about a permanent change in living conditions.

## **Apostolates and evangelisation as a manifestation of the charism**

Charism and mission complement each other, with mission adding purpose to the vision of the charism. As Sr Chama Mwila OP, another of our theological commentators said, 'following the gift of charism, mission, etc. is the work of the Holy Spirit'; it is charismatic. Ministry is the 'how' of their imitation of Christ and so becomes the expression of the institute's charism.

Within the overarching theme of apostolates (or ministries), the largest group of comments (47) express this understanding of the apostolate as an incarnational manifestation of their charism. Apostolates make the charism real and visible to the rest of society and the Church. It is the shape of the sisters' service; the particular way through or in which they serve. Congregation UF, for example, makes a very explicit link between a certain element of their charism and not only the care of orphans, but the way they care for them. Similarly, congregations UJ and ZF speak of preaching and sharing the word around specific aspects of the faith such as reconciliation, peace and justice, and make a link to precise characteristics of their charism. Sisters from another congregation have a particular love for Mary, the Mother of God, and are called to bring the virtues and characteristics associated with Mary and motherhood into the way they carry out their apostolates.

The material on evangelisation interacts with congregational charism in several ways. In some congregations, the charism specifies that members are called or have a responsibility to take the good news to others in some particular way. Other sisters see the act of sharing and making their charism known as a form of evangelism in and of itself, particularly in relation to making their charism known in the Church. Here apostolates and charism combine as the means by which sisters self-identify with Christ through imitating his own apostolates and way of being with others.

*Our charism calls us to identify ourselves with Christ crucified in the ministry of poverty and when I look at this, if we are called to be identified with Christ in the ministry of his poverty... Christ called us to identify with Him. He lived ministry, he lived the vow of life, he was able to enrich the people, so I feel it is our call, I affirm it (KJ 147-150).*

*[W]e are doing what he was doing (KJ 166).*

Congregational charisms featured in this project often offer specific articulations of how the members are called to imitate Christ, such as: the following of Christ crucified; the living and sharing of the heart of Jesus; bringing others back to God, and a specific dedication to evangelisation. In a small number of examples, their charism and founding traditions determine how they, as individual sisters, reach out to others: to whom they evangelise and how, for example, with compassion or loving mercy. However, mostly the expression of and transmission of charism through apostolates is expressed in very generalised terms.

Only a small number of congregations in the research make an explicit connection between their charism, their means of evangelisation, and the specific groups they are called to address. One example of this is where sisters from a congregation in Kenya discuss strategies for the evangelisation of youth and reaching them through social media. Discussion in a group from Zambia shows purpose, identity and mission intertwined, lived through evangelisation – both direct and indirect – bringing the word of God to others.

*Yet when we look at ourselves as [Congregation ZF], we are saying evangelisation is our aim and so it is not just evangelisation of the word of God; this is reflected in the way we do things because this is our life, this is our spirituality as [ZF]; this is our charism; evangelisation as whole. So, it is supposed to be mirrored in the apostolates and that is what we are called to do and I feel this is what we do most of the time that we mirror this evangelisation in our apostolates... (ZF 104 – 110).*

The interaction between charism, ministry and identity is explored more fully in Chapter 7 on Charism later in the report.

## Apostolates as a form of witness

In their comments on service as a form of witness, the sisters show that witness is intertwined with both prayer and apostolates. These comments are very closely related to evangelisation but frame apostolic activities in the light of witness. Indeed, in one congregation, the sisters did not want to see witness and apostolates/service separated into different themes.

*Witnessing is what we are doing in our apostolate. So, in a way even though prayer and witness they were put as one, when we witness, we are witnessing Christ's...God's love to people through our apostolate and service that we are giving out..instead even of us mentioning witnessing, we can simply leave it on apostolate and service because that is exactly what witnessing entails...(ZF 71 – 79).*

They witness to the glory of God through their apostolates, and, alongside community life, apostolates are understood as the chief form of bearing witness to the truth of God's word. Witnessing is, therefore, intricately connected with mission and its purpose.

*So for us, even from our mission, we are supposed to be sent, so, when we go out we are actually taking Christ, we are going to witness Christ to others as we can witness that our presence is always valued to the people we meet or we encounter (TK 131 – 134).*





## A theology of ministry as gift

In the research material we encountered discussions, and 28 specific comments, whereby sisters problematise the concept of 'profession', identifying what they call 'professionalism' i.e. understanding ministry as work, as a profession, and relating this to career progression. Sisters express a concern that for some sisters, obtaining qualifications, and their individual career progression has become more important than the offering of self to, through and for the mission, in obedience to the call from Christ. We have explored this more thoroughly in the section on distractions to religious life.

In contrast, the comments under the theme of apostolates offer examples of sisters articulating a theological distinction between work and profession on the one hand and ministry on the other. In a small number of comments, a link is made between formation in Christ and the charism and an understanding of ministry as gift. Once formed in this way, a sister understands that the primary focus of ministry is love, service and spreading the good news for the sake of the kingdom. This is set against the temptations of obtaining ever more qualifications, pursuing successful 'careers', high-profile positions, and the need to generate an income for the congregation or for individual institutions. In this comment, a sister gives absolute clarity to her vocation to live a life of love for God rather than rendering services for financial or personal gain.

*It does not depend on the choice that I want to, but it depends on the missionary congregation and that mission should be drawn from the charism. So, it not that which I look for, which will make me feel different or raise me to that. Very different from the secular world and the secular approach whereby one will look at maybe the amount of money I will get, the honour that I'll get and everything but here it's talking about the true service which is not self-righteous. It has not demand, it has not claim, no benefit; it is just there for Him. It always brings me back to say all is for you, there is nothing that belongs to me (ZA 690 - 695).*

Sisters say that young girls and women in formation need to be reminded that religious life is not about having a good career but about service and love. The level of salary earned should not be an indicator of an individual sister's worth and the primary aim of ministry is not to generate an income. Despite pressures on congregations to be financially self-reliant, sisters give of themselves to others for love and this is what they feel differentiates them from other lay people in service.

The sisters hear the cries of the poor and needy and reach out to them. Therefore, services offered need to be accessible to those who need them most. They allow children to study even when they cannot afford to pay fees. Congregations try to ensure that they have sisters ministering in fields such as catechetics and pastoral work, or in the poorest and most remote areas, even though they receive little financial return.

*[They do it] because it's a responsibility... because they rise from the fountain of love, Christ's love, God's love, that He intended to give to human beings. Jesus sacrificed himself out of love; we are offering ourselves out of love (TF 518 - 519).*

These comments point to a theology of ministry as gift – operating in an alternative economy of gift – the kingdom of heaven, rather than in a mainstream, profit-centred commercial economy. Sisters offer the gift of themselves: their time, their availability, their listening, their talents, their prayer and their love, with no aim in mind other than the building of the kingdom. In this they seek no other return.

## Drawing on Catholic social teaching and the Church's preferential option for the poor

The overwhelming emphasis in sisters' descriptions of their apostolates is on caring for the poor, the hungry, orphans and those in need. These comments generally draw on the language of charitable service rather than on the language of development. Just five comments make specific reference to addressing the causes of poverty and injustice, promoting self-reliance and empowerment and being the voice of the voiceless. Of these, only two explicitly draw on an element of, or refer to, Catholic Social Teaching.

Similarly, it is very rare for comments to refer to the Church being a Church of the poor, or to a stated commitment to the poorest framed in the language of the Church's preferential option for the poor. In fact, this teaching, originating from the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et spes* (1965)<sup>38</sup> is only mentioned three times, in 56 discussion groups, and from international congregations. We did not ask a specific question related to levels of knowledge of this teaching, so we cannot draw any firm conclusions. It is, however, surprising that there would not be greater explicit mention of this, given congregations' stated concern for targeting the poor.

Sr Rita Namayanja IHMR, noted that the spirit of the preferential option for the poor is recognisable but that there is a 'sad tone of failing to associate with them', specifically in terms of striving to live simply in solidarity with the poor. Fr Joe McCullough SPS noted that, within the sisters' theology of mission, whilst it is evident that they minister to the poor and the marginalised, and are deeply committed to this, 'there is little mention... about how the people they encounter in their various apostolates touch their lives and evangelise them'.

McCullough then contrasts this with the prominence of consideration given by sisters to all aspects of their community life<sup>39</sup> and comments, that within the sisters comments on apostolates 'I was expecting to hear more from the discussion about what stirs the sisters' hearts into hearing the call of Christ dying and rising in the anguish and aspirations of the men and women of their

time and place' as expressed in the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*. He goes on to note that 'the dynamic of this is obviously apparent in the religious lives of these women but there is little reference to it in their testimonies'. This leads us to ask whether the commitment to the preferential option for the poor is strongly implicit but weak in its explicit link to Catholic social teaching and thought on this area of theology of mission.

## Encountering God in the poor and being transformed

There are two other elements which we might expect to see forming part of a theology of mission. The first of these is an explicit articulation first, of encountering God in the poor, and then, of being transformed oneself through this contact.

There are a small number of 13 comments which express the experience of seeing God in the people the sisters serve. In these comments, the sisters see God in each other, in the face of their neighbour, and specifically in those whom they serve. One sister references Mother Theresa: as she helps her student in difficulties, so she touches the face of Christ (KE 393-394). Another from Tanzania identifies how she sees God in her sisters in community, and those beyond.

*We can see God in... God is present on the faces of everyone around us, even those we are staying with [laughter], with whom we are struggling [laughter]. When I meet any person, I recall the presence of God. Everybody around me is the revelation of God to me (TG 197 - 198).*

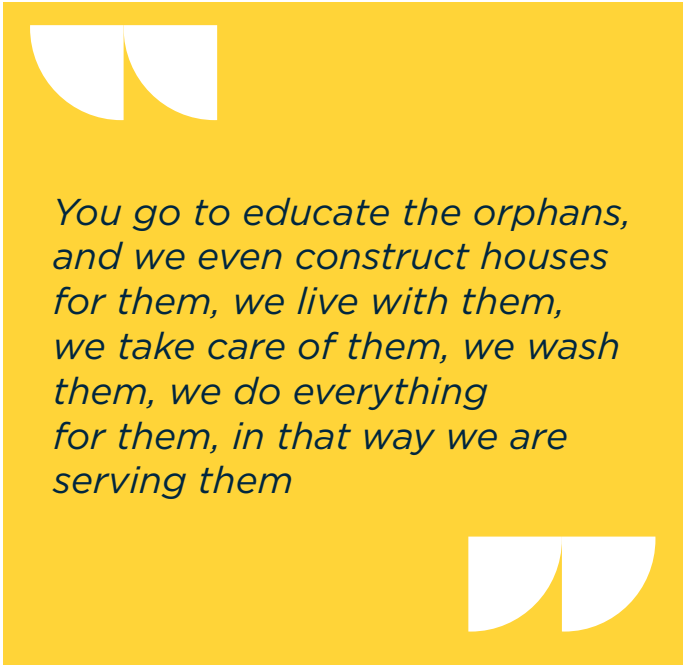
Another sister questions to what extent this is really the case, voicing her own questions and doubts.

*Do we really encounter Jesus in the people whom we serve? Do we really see Jesus? It is a call and a challenge for us also like our Mother foundress, like Christ Himself that those who approach us, the people we serve in our ministry can encounter and touch the face of Jesus. In seeing us they meet Jesus, like the... the disciples, when they went to Emmaus. Jesus explained to them. He explained the scriptures and they were able to have a personal encounter with Jesus (KJ 197 - 201).*

38. One of the four Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council 1962 - 1965.

39. This is further explored in Chapter 4 on Community Life.

The second of the two concepts we might expect to see arising in connection with ministry and mission is that of mutuality experienced between sisters and those they serve and those alongside whom they labour.



*You go to educate the orphans, and we even construct houses for them, we live with them, we take care of them, we wash them, we do everything for them, in that way we are serving them*

### Mutuality in ministry

In fact, we noted only four excerpts relating a sense or experience of mutuality within the sisters' ministerial activities and lives. The language used by sisters to speak of ministry and their apostolates is a language of charity, service and saving others. It draws very heavily on verbs which denote a one-way process: a taking out and giving from and of themselves. Words most commonly heard in the discussions on apostolates include:

*serve, service, help, interact with, take (God) to, caring for, attend to their needs, to heal, to preach, take care of, to visit, to educate, to live with and among, to respond to their needs, to educate, to counsel, we deepen their love of God, we minister to them, we feed them.*

The following extract is an example of the way sisters talk about their apostolates.

*You go to educate the orphans, and we even construct houses for them, we live with them, we take care of them, we wash them, we do everything for them, in that way we are serving them (TM 467 - 468).*

Whilst these are all words which would normally be associated with active service and apostolic activities, the sisters make little explicit mention of being enriched by those whom they encounter in, and through, their ministries or of being helped to grow in their own spiritual life by the poor. Overall, we have found fewer than ten comments of this nature, exemplified by this sister from Kenya.

*We are so enriched so much by the people we serve, because it is through them that we go back to serve even if it is not known and recognised by anybody (KC 804 - 805).*

In contrast, this last comment from an international congregation in Uganda illustrates the mutuality that sisters commonly identify in their community life and yet, in contrast, rarely mention in relation to mission and ministry:

*Really, we find difficulty in living together but your presence makes my life a bit better. And I do not see it today (laughs) but as time goes you will be like ohhh when I was with... there is something I learnt from this person. Even in my ministry, I say ohh, this but everything I do, the influence of others brings hope (UB950 - 958).*

So our conclusion in relation to mutuality and ministry, but also in more general terms, is that sisters are explicit about living in a state of mutual encounter and communion with their sisters in community, but the instances which demonstrate that sisters experience this sense of communion either in those whom they serve, or Church and society more widely, are rarely articulated.



## Chapter 6 Bearing witness and hope through consecrated being

### Introduction

Whilst the themes of apostolic activity and intentional evangelisation have generated a great deal of material and comments from the sisters, there is also evidence of their thinking differently and more broadly about what it means to be apostolic in their context. This opening up to other ways of being apostolic leads sisters beyond a dualism of 'doing' and 'being' into an understanding of religious life as a way of being which takes many forms. Being witness, channels of God's love, signs of eschatological hope and, most importantly, witnessing as themselves, through their consecrated celibacy enabled through the public profession of vows. Religious life is understood as a sign of God's presence, pointing to that presence both now and in the future, and embracing an eschatological orientation of trust and hope in the reality of the Resurrection. Thus, we see an understanding of the eschatological role and sign value of religious life. Broadening the meaning of 'apostolic' suggests a

model whereby religious understand themselves as following an exemplary path or modelling, not only as witnesses, but through their actual presence.

The comments explored in these following sections concern witnessing through word, behaviour, and being sign. The emphasis here is not on what the sisters do, but on how and who they are and can be understood as a deeply incarnational and implicitly sacramental concept of religious life. Sisters are living and bearing witness and indeed evangelising at a much deeper level, at the level of their consecrated being, through their presence, moulded by their formation in their charism and ongoing conversion in Christ. Their identity and reality as professed religious and consecrated women allow them to bear witness to the love of God and the reality of the risen Christ in a particular way and then enables them to be signs: making real that to which they point.





## The vows and consecration: speaking into the world or set apart from it?

The sisters are able to bear witness and be sign through a form of symbolic presence because their very consecration as vowed religious is in itself an embodied form of witness and sacramental presence. A group of 43 comments on the vows, the largest in that theme, demonstrate an incarnational understanding of the vows as the primary means by which sisters imitate and follow Christ and make the Gospel real in their own lives and those of others. Sisters refer to the vows as the cornerstones and landmarks of their lives. They are a defining element of their identity and religious life has no meaning without them. The women draw on this identity in their witnessing and being sign.

*When I look at [the vows], what unites them is Jesus Christ himself because he was the first person to live these vows. And these vows they are a witness. I am called to witness that love which unites these three vows. Love, faith and committedness (UJ 412 - 415).*

Their vows are a means of undergoing their 'second consecration', taking their single-minded dedication to God one step further and deeper than that offered to other all other Christians through the initial consecration to God in baptism.

*My call to consecrated life is really a unique call and very special to live to continue my baptismal consecration. I say let me take another mile, another step through the profession of these evangelical counsels which my mother didn't do at home (UK 159 - 162).*

The vows, as instruments of their religious consecration and ministry, are what enables this degree of giving; they are the means by which sisters say their 'Yes' to Christ and become available to others.

*So, we are following him by the vows we take; that we are, yes! We said the yes, we are ready to follow, we are ready to obey. That's why we are available, we are sent in different directions, go here today, do this and one is doing; so that availability and readiness to do the will of God through our apostolates (TK 245 - 249).*

Christ first calls a sister to her vocation and she in turn surrenders herself to God through consecration. As noted by Sr Redemista Ngonyani OSB, of our theological commentators.

*Religious life is about total surrender to God through the Church and about being available for the people of God and doing God's services. The sisters show that they are aware of what differentiates them as religious - that is, the total surrender to God.*

This surrender completes the sister's total consecration, for the Church's mission and service to others. It is a life of radical following of Christ, in deeper relationship with Christ, lived in a more intense manner than other lay people, and enabled by grace. This being set apart for sacred purposes, gives them a special identity and role in the Church, as noted by this sister.

*There should be a difference the way you carry out, whatever contribution you are doing to the Church and for me I take my contribution to the Church as a gift of myself (ZE 488 - 489).*

It is clear from our analysis of the material collected that consecration is a fundamental element of sisters' identity. Even though the project uses the terminology 'religious life' and 'women religious', the sisters use the language of 'consecrated life' and refer to themselves as consecrated women and people. This is very much in contrast to how we found sisters speaking of themselves in our first research project, the RLVP which identified a clear turn towards the ordinary among apostolic women religious in the UK and Ireland.<sup>40</sup>

40. See p.1.

## Concern with differentiation

Sisters in the five countries featured in this research are patently physically 'set apart' – distinguished by the outward signs of their habits and by living a communal form of life. The majority of the congregations taking part in the research wear a distinctive habit, which distinguishes them clearly from other lay people in the Church, and within wider society. Even the sisters in the small number of participant congregations who do not wear a formal habit, often dress in the same colour, wear a modified form of habit and a distinctive emblem representing their congregation.

Despite this evident physical difference, sisters in this study are still at pains to make it clear that they are differentiated and set apart in other, deeper ways. Through their religious consecration they have their own identity, role and function within the Church. In some 30 comments, sisters struggle to describe the often-intangible element that differentiates them from other lay people and their service and to articulate the particularity of their calling. In ecclesiological and ecclesial terms, sisters are lay people and yet they are keen to be distinguished and to highlight this different identity and purpose in their life.

Sisters are fully aware that often there is little difference in the nature of their actual 'work'<sup>41</sup> or apostolates and the 'work' of other people who offer their service to others. They are teachers, nurses, community animators, and even pastoral workers among other lay people, particularly non-government organisations – some Christian or Catholic – and many of no religious affiliation. Perhaps for this reason they attempt to distinguish themselves by their motivation and to articulate the distinctiveness of how they serve or minister. They describe themselves, their way of life and their form of service as unique, different and distinct. The aspect of differentiation seems to be particularly important as they constantly question and try to articulate what makes them different and what they are called to.

*Why do we leave our homes to be different? Everybody witnesses wherever they are. But for us we set aside everything and follow our master more closely in order to witness to the world that this is what we were created for. This is what we have to live for as Christians, then as religious (UI 50 - 54).*

In relation to apostolates and ministry, sisters show a theological understanding of consecration whose purpose is for mission – to love and serve this world in and as part of this world – to be in and of the world and not above or removed from it.

*This reminded me that the Lord sending me, when in the priestly prayer it says, that you are set aside from the world, but I will not remove you from this world... we women who have been set aside but we are not removed from this world. We are to live with these people (KC1 92 – 95).*

They understand that they live a distinct vocation for the purposes of witness and evangelisation, of being slightly removed from mainstream society and speaking into it. Another sister from Kenya says, 'we are set apart from the world but to go back to the same world' (KC1 341 - 344), explaining the connection with their very strong sense of bearing witness and call to be models and examples.

This 'difference' is explained in two ways. First, the sisters' surrendering to God is manifested as a motivation and desire to evangelise and proclaim the kingdom of God. The fruit of the absolute centrality of their relationship with God means that in all their 'works' they seek to serve the whole person and his or her needs. This is the 'holistic' approach to evangelisation referred to in the previous section, attending to both physical and spiritual needs.

Second, sisters differentiate themselves from other lay people through the source of their motivation. Of the 30 comments treating this topic, several identify the single-minded dedication to a relationship with God and a life of prayer being the very foundation of their lives.

*I feel it is that relationship with God, that closeness to God that makes our work unique, different eeeh different from others... Maybe that lay woman doesn't have much time to pray, to enter into deep relationship with God eeeh and so that deep relationship with God to assist her to lead a school in such a way that will draw other, the pupils and the students to God - that may be the, the difference (UE 160 – 171).*

41. Sisters frequently use the term 'work' to refer to apostolates or ministry.

They are motivated to serve by their love of God, which inspires a desire to serve others and understand their ministry as 'the sacrifice that goes with love' (KH 21). The paradox of the vows is that in vowing themselves to obedience, the sisters become free to give themselves, to offer all simply for the love of God and no other return. Thus, their profession of vows and religious consecration - this being 'set apart' for the things of God - results in the sisters' awareness of the sacrifice and self-denial they are making, for God and for others.

*Every work that I do has to show the difference eh, that I'm a different creature, I'm a sister consecrated, and so I am sacrificing myself through my obedience to my superior (TM 92 - 93).*



*I feel it is that relationship with God, that closeness to God that makes our work unique*

## Set apart or set above?

There are a very small number of comments from sisters, mainly in indigenous congregations in Uganda, who see this 'special call' as meaning 'higher', and one which accords them a new status in the Church. They understand this to be a 'special, unique call' (UK 158) and in this extract, the words 'more than any other Christian' reveal a particular understanding of this form of life.

*So, all the baptised I thought are witnesses of Christ, but my consecration to religious life makes me a unique witness of Christ...more than any other Christian.... Every day I feel that I strive to live like Christ himself from the vows - the chaste Christ who is obedient, who is poor. This prayer really helps me to live like Christ. My behaviour reveals who I am and reflects the Christ in me (UK 318 - 326).*

This next excerpt shows a clear reference to a new and different status in the Church.

*Consecrated life is a special grace that God gives to certain persons, calling them to a life of evangelical counsels. It is therefore a gift and an opportunity that must be freely responded to if the grace of God is not to remain sterile and ineffective. Something that is consecrated is made sacred and hence removed from the common use. It becomes designated or ordained towards something special and sacred. So, when God consecrates a person, the person is made sacred and is peculiarly set aside for God in this way the religious are removed from the style of lay people and given a new status in the Church (UL 116 - 123).*

Fr Joe McCullough SPS observed that some comments point to an understanding of consecration which not only sets them apart for God and the things of God but constitutes a slightly higher or superior calling in the Church.

*All Christians are consecrated by baptism... to the mission of Christ. Sometimes there is a tendency in religious institutions to usurp certain terms for their own exclusive use. The voices of the sisters point to a sign of the Kingdom of God in our midst, but they are not pointing to a model for Christian life, nor are they superior to other states of life*

*in the Church. Nevertheless, there is a fine line to be followed between overstating the distinctiveness of religious life and denying on the other hand a specific quality to it. One must be very cautious of using any terminology which carries a 'holier than thou' mentality.*

The following are two contrasting experiences of sisters and how they respond to being distinguished as religious in the Church, as evidenced by their treatment at a celebration of the national martyrs at the shrine at Namugongo, Uganda. The first is from a sister in an indigenous congregation, celebrating how special the experience made her feel.

*Just to share with you I had an experience ... I made a pilgrimage to Namugongo [date] because I was not able to go on 3rd June. So, when we were celebrating mass, the main celebrant invited all the religious who were there, because the priests were few, that all the religious come over to help in the distribution of Holy Eucharist. In fact I was so happy and impressed that yeah I am impressed (laughter) as I walked majestically towards the altar to distribute the Eucharist I was like yeah this is really a special call - not any other person was invited or was called upon, but all the religious who were there were called (UK 177 - 187).*

In contrast, in the second quote, a sister from an international congregation recounts how being treated as 'special' at the shrine made her feel uncomfortable. Note her reference to Pope Francis's teaching on this issue.

*That is what Pope Francis is talking about - we have to smell of a sheep but there are sheep that we are not able to smell because it is very difficult look at....we are put in a certain category - even on Uganda Martyrs Day, we do not sit with people to smell what they are smelling. Even our own special VIP toilets [that's true] clean and perfect where the ordinary person doesn't have that...I think that is part of the Church we live in (UP 412 - 419).*

McCullough claims that sisters are not modelling a form of Christian life. However, as we will show in the following section on witness as modelling, the sisters do seem to believe they are called to exemplify elements of a Christian life, even if not a model for such a life. Furthermore, they maintain that their life is distinct because of the centrality of their relationship with God, and that they are motivated purely by this love of God and to serve others, rather than to earn money or gain prestige.

It may be that we are seeing are traces of a theology which predates the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, whereby the Catholic Church recognised three states of life: ordained, religious and lay. However, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, one of the four Constitutions or key teaching documents of the Second Vatican Council, established that there are only two states of life in the Church: lay and ordained. In this teaching, religious were 'subsumed' into the lay state. This has left many religious and also 'lay' people uncertain of the ecclesial identity of religious: of where and how they fit in the Church.<sup>42</sup> This experience has been widespread and by no means restricted to sisters in these five countries, but it may be one factor which explains sisters' concern with differentiating themselves from other lay people and the way that they minister. There may also, however, be other socio-cultural factors which support sisters seeing themselves as different from and superior in some way to other lay people in the church. We have mentioned elsewhere the perception of sisters as *religious virtuosi*, as some form of higher, and holier being, of whom much is expected. This creates its own pressures for sisters as they are expected to model some form of religious perfection in behaviour, values and actions, as we shall see in the following section.

42. As explored in Chapter 8 on sisters' experience of their reception in the local Church.



## Witness

The call to be witnesses has emerged as a very significant expression and aspect of religious life for the women in this study. In a large group of 104 comments, sisters identify witnessing as a very important function they play not only for other Christians but for wider society. They understand both community life and apostolic activity to have a deeper meaning of witnessing to the value of the Christian life, as seen in the sections of this report exploring that material. In their comments, sisters state that bearing witness is the true function and meaning of religious life, with one sister describing it as the 'first chief apostolate' (UL 92 – 93). Sr Redemista Ngonyani OSB reminds us that witness is the primary goal of consecrated persons, and of the clear teaching on this matter from *Lumen Gentium* (1964, n.46) and also *Mutuae Relationes* (1978), the document directing relations between Bishops and religious in the Church.

*Religious and their communities are called to give clear testimony in the Church of total dedication to God. This is the fundamental option of their Christian existence and their primary duty in their distinctive way of life (Mutuae Relationes, 1978, n. 14, a).*

A sister from Zambia here gives a clear explanation of what it means for her to bear witness as a religious.

*A witness is somebody who has an encounter with something and explains to others what happened...I am called to be a witness to the risen Christ, to be the witness to the Holy Spirit, to know works of the Holy Spirit and by so doing, I become service to those in my community and those around me, those whom I am called to serve as a religious sister of [CONGREGATION ZH] and in turn I become a sign of hope especially to those whom I am called to serve. I give hope and I restore hope (ZH 59 - 63).*

She goes on to say that this gives them 'an identity of being Christ's ambassadors' in a difficult world, which is very much in need of reminding that Christ has risen.

## Witness as modelling the Christian life

Sisters model the following of Christ and the living of the Gospel through their lives and by being good examples to others. Through this very incarnated living of the life: their actions and behaviours, they spread the word of God so that they themselves become the medium of evangelisation.

*So, when I behave like a religious, I will be knowing that yah this is the true witness of Christ. Depending on my actions, my words, my fruits really will show the world, will show the people that ohhhh this is a special person is a unique person because of this consecration then I witness Christ in that way or another. So, I can only be Jesus' witness when I live that life and bear fruit that are expected of me as a religious (UK 329 - 333).*

Sisters feel that others will learn from their behaviour and become better Christians, emulating them in their search for God and living of the Gospel and will start behaving in the same way.

*When people see the trust, we have in God they also, they are also energised to trust God in everything they do and mostly in their challenges (UD 751 – 752).*

Sisters also bear witness through the way they live and demonstrate their values and virtues, such as modesty, simplicity and humility. They feel they should witness by all that they do and are as they are called to be witnesses in the world and as those who live the Gospel. Their very lives should speak their message through embodied witness.

*We have been called to be ministry. So, it is important the ministry, at the same time, the sign it is the attraction that we give to our people, so they have to see (KJ 17 -18).*

A sister who lives in the mother house with novices reflects on the need for her to be a model and exemplar, through her witnessing, to encourage younger sisters.

*Witness is very important and because one would say you are a teacher...how do I do the teaching differently from maybe another*

*person? Do, do I bring out the witness in whatever I am doing basing to Christ even amidst challenges? Hmmm am I witnessing the way I dress, the way I talk, the way I behave, the way I handle issues, the way I pray? Me who stays at the mother house. In fact, if you don't witness especially prayer period and the novices are there then we might as well be sending away vocations really (UI 80 - 87).*

Their ability to be witnesses is understood to be the fruit of their life of prayer and commitment to lifelong conversion. As noted in our explorations of the themes of community life, prayer and apostolates, sisters draw on the language of 'I cannot give what I have not received'.

*We need to be connected with God... It is by getting that strength from God, the first priority, then I take the service within the self and from there I go to witness to the people. I cannot go to witness what I don't have. So, I need to gain strength from God; I need to ask that wisdom from him so that when I go outside there to witness him, I already have, I am already self-contained (KC3 96 - 100).*

Their behaviour, actions and words and manner with those in need, and their commitment to others are, in themselves, a very strong and significant form of witnessing to the love of God and God's concern for others, especially the poor and marginalised.



## Being signs of eschatological hope

Religious life has an explicitly eschatological function with a focus on looking ahead to, and in expectation of, the Kingdom of God. The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996, Ch.2, n.26) explains that this basic attitude of trust and hope in the reality of the resurrection, and both the pointing and bearing witness to this reality, is a fundamental aspect of religious life. Sr Margaret Kubanze LSOSF, of our theological commentators, identifies the role and function of even apostolic religious as lying beneath and beyond their apostolic activities.

*Here is the need to consider the presence of the religious in the Church beyond the visible apostolate offered. Religious have an eschatological function among the people. Their lifestyle points to the life that is to come. Religious consecration does not only engage the religious in the Pilgrim Church but also leads them to put their feet on to the threshold of eternal life – looking forward to joining the Church Triumphant and leading other people along that path.*

Only a very small number of sisters use explicitly eschatological language in reference to themselves as religious, such as this sister below.

*The eschatology is that I am not just looking at the present life or the past that have experienced but am looking to the future with hope and that's what a religious is called to be in our world that is broken, that is injured, that is looking for something better, is to look up to the future with hope (ZH 53 - 55).*

There are a small number of comments where sisters are explicit about their role as pointing to a future that will be in the 'next world' and communicating a hope and belief that there is a better world to come. However, sisters more commonly demonstrate a broader understanding of their role as signs. Within this we see two expressions of being sign: first how they understand and identify themselves as signs and second that they have an external sign function for others. Thus, they have a sign value both for themselves, and one which helps others identify and understand who they are and what they represent. These two internal and external aspects of sign can be hard to disentangle. Furthermore, we can only read this through the sisters' own

representation of how they see themselves and how they believe others see them. Nevertheless, they clearly experience a strong sense of a call to be signs to others in making God visible to others.

*We are going to spread the Merciful Love of God to be the sign of the Merciful Love of God (KJ 24-25).*

Within the 40 comments in which sisters refer to being sign, there is a clear call to point to the risen Christ and become a source of hope for themselves and to others. This stress on sign also implies an incarnational theology and a deeply sacramental (if implicit) understanding of what their life is. Their apostolates or ministry and sign become identity and identify the purpose of religious life itself.

*Is also our call that we be, to ministry to express this sign of our maternal love, we are called to be this sign of consolation (KJ 26-27)?*

However, they also understand that Christ is alive now in them and that their life also gives rise to hope in the current reality of the kingdom. They understand their significance is to lead others to God. One sister draws on the image of John the Baptist to convey this understanding.

*As religious women we lead people towards God. If we see people becoming more Christian, more prayerful, more God seeking, trust in God, that is our greatest joy. To lead people as Jesus said that, as John the Baptist said, that this is the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world...like St Paul says imitate me as I imitate Christ. We have not reached there but we are still struggling (KJ 700 - 704).*

This presence in the form of their consecrated being is sometimes all that they can offer – they acknowledge that they encounter situations which are so difficult, they have nothing to give but themselves. In a sense, saying that 'all' they have to offer is their presence undermines the enormous witness and sign value of their presence, and it is the offering of this gift of self – their presence – which these next comments touch upon.



## Ministry of Presence

In the chapter on Mission we presented how sisters feel called to continue God's work, through their commitment to his mission, or through embodiment, by their consecrated celibacy, to become an extension of his mission. An important element of their function as 'external' signs is to be Christian in a way which enables people to see Christ in them; they are called to make the face of Christ visible in the world. They understand themselves to be used by God as an instrument, and as channels of God's love and thus Christ is present, through them, in their apostolates, and also in the aspects of their apostolates that are not about 'doing' or undertaking activities. The comment below shows how they see themselves.

*Going to give hope, going to console, going to counsel them and going to be with these people and therefore they help, they are the sign of God's presence in the lives of these maybe (Clears throat) the sick, the lame, the aged who many times may feel the loneliness, some abandonment ...but that these are creatures of God and he needs or she needs to experience love (KQ1 886 - 892).*

Some sisters understand this ministry, whether apostolic activity or simple presence, as making room for Christ, enabling intimate and transformative encounters with Christ for those to

whom they minister and, less often articulated, for themselves. One of the very few times that elderly sisters are mentioned anywhere in the transcripts is in a congregation from Zambia, where sisters show an appreciation of their elderly sisters having achieved this embodied ministry of presence.

*In our communities where we have our elderly sisters, that prayer life, that presence in community becomes a ministry as they are being there for us, we can still be going out... it becomes a powerful ministry to us. When we look at for some of our sisters who talk about today, we talk about their being where there is seven years ridden in bed, we talk about how they have touched our lives and... that's what we carry to the people (ZC 56 - 60).*

The language the sisters use reflects both their belief that they themselves are signs, and that others also see them in this way. They feel that people should see Christ in them and feel God's presence in and through them so that they even 'become another Jesus' (TG 150 - 153). Thus, their mission in this context becomes as much about who they are and how they are, as what they do, and draws on how they have been formed and transformed. Thus, even their very personality becomes an aspect of their sign value.





## Presence as security

The sisters also speak of how others perceive them as signs and indicators of God's presence among them, and of the impact of their presence.

*As we work in our ministry, when you enter, let me say, like in the hospital, once people see you they really see Christ; they change the mood, the attitude - even when you enter a bus anyway, not only in the ministry, when you enter the bus you will see that everybody is moved he just sees God as if God has entered. Even some make the sign of the cross [laughs] because they see Christ in us (UF 641 - 646).*

A concrete example of the impact of their presence is shown in the group of 14 comments pointing out that even just their physical presence is a source of comfort and security and people value that presence.

*...[A]lso we take communion to the sick, attending to the Small Christian Communities, taking out of the Church decoration, also being present for the functions and the programmes in the parish; our presence is very much appreciated, even without be given chance to be a fixed teacher, but our presence, silent presence is there. Yah, uh. So, in that way, this place cannot be taken by someone else, only, I, as a consecrated woman, I have my place there (TK - 1454- 1460).*

Sisters attribute their being valued to 'how' they are or what some refer to as 'our special way of doing' (KR 577) and by this they mean it is their spirit, formed in their charism, which attracts people. They say that what people appreciate is not necessarily only their apostolic activities; they may only be 'doing' 'small, small things'. People notice and miss them when they are not there, even temporarily - in the parish, and in villages, because of these 'small, small things' they contribute.

*Sister, since you left the place, we are missing you. That walking around you used to do, we are missing you, you know (KH 464).*

Sisters report that people have a great deal of respect for and trust in sisters, regarding them as *religious virtuosi*,<sup>43</sup> so that even touching their habit becomes more an example of perceived enchantment than simply respect, but reminiscent of the woman touching the hem of Jesus's garment in the Gospel.

*I feel also you see when these Christians see religious, they value us more and they feel happy when they see us. Even just a Christian to come and touch you like this.... 'I have touched sister!' (UO 734 - 5).*

## Intentional presence of self

In a group of 39 comments sisters refer to 'ministry of presence' both in terms of how they 'are' in their ministry, and also as an intentional ministry in and of itself. In recognising that people are hungry to be listened to, sisters identify a locus for ministry. They share their selves and their time as they, visit, chat, and sit down with people and just listen. One sister from Uganda describes a sister who gives of herself in this way.

*They called her the moving God because she could go... somebody who has lost a baby, she is there. She is saying, she didn't know much Luganda but she would say 'nga olabye' and she would go still maybe in the community there are sweets there, she brings a sweet, she cooks a cup of tea, she brings, she said that's my role. It might not be much but to be with people where they are. That's where I see myself. I might not do much, but when I walk on the road, I might stop and say how are you? How is today? In [place name] there was a woman, I used as we are going home, she was selling clothes, I could stop and then I greet her and then she tells me what, we share. That is my role. That is our role as religious. (UB 706 - 716).*

The term 'ministry of presence', as used by the sisters, seems to encompass behaviours and small actions such as visiting, listening, comforting the sick, talking to people, listening to them, sitting in silence or saying the rosary together.

43. After Weber, M. 1958. *From Max Weber: Essays on Sociology*. Translated and edited by H.H. Garth and C.W. Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.

*The charism of the congregation and my also charism can work together because we even become more effective in what we are doing and I find that like where I am, I say rosaries with families...I just go in the house, we sit, we say our rosary, we talk about our problems after that we come back. ...So, you feel that there is something is going through to the people. If it would fulfil these apostolates even if am not doing the apostolate which am trained for. I still have something to do if am still able to give to the people, to bring Christ the way others have said...bring Christ to people and Christ to us (ZA 794 - 800).*

To be simply present among people and offering their selves, their time and their faith is an important form of evangelisation as sisters reveal the presence of Christ through their lives. They themselves are the ministry, and an embodiment of mission.

*I think there is more in my ministry. It is not the general ministry for our congregation but wherever I am there is a ministry; whatever I do is a ministry; it's your presence, my presence (UB 260 - 264).*

For one group of sisters in the project, this realisation that they themselves can be a mission is something of a revelation, which they find very liberating.

*We are not centred around apostolate or what we do, you know the whole conversations that we have been having that it's not what we do but it's actually how you do it and that is not about doing but it's about being...so how am I with you whether I am having in quotes "a job" or I am at home and for me I really think it's really freeing... that we are not gathered here because we need to go and work here or work there but it's how we are...it's how I am and therefore I can respond to whoever, wherever and whichever way and it's not about what I have done but it's even about how I am doing it, so it's how I am with the person wherever I am...(ZC 359 - 366).*

In coming to this realisation and identifying that this way of being can be raised up to a form of ministry, the sisters are identifying an ideal they can follow; a form of ministry that gives much, is focused on others and requires no qualifications. However, as noted in the beginning of this section, this understanding that ways of being are as important as undertaking apostolic activity is fundamental to the understanding of what it means to profess public vows in order to live life as a consecrated celibate.



# Chapter 7 Charism

## Introduction

One of the objectives of the guiding questions set for the Stage 2 discussion groups was to ask sisters to consider the three themes which had emerged most frequently in their Stage 1 responses (such as witness, evangelisation and community life) in light of their charism. We wanted to know to what extent these themes affirmed or resonated with their charism. We were also interested in whether the prominence of these themes in the responses reflected the degree of prominence in their charism. To this end, we asked a specific question: *How do these three themes a) affirm and b) challenge your charism?*

We soon became aware that sisters experienced difficulty in answering this question. The themes are quite broad, and the wording seems to have been unclear. Despite clarifications, and much discussion with the Project Support Assistants, very few groups answered it in the way we had intended. Nevertheless, the question did elicit a good deal of material (303 comments) on, or referring to, charism. So although we had not set out explicitly to explore the theme of charism in and of itself, we had to consider the perspective through which we could analyse this material in order that we could offer some analysis of what sisters had said.

In deciding on our perspective, we drew on two sources. First, the CICLSAL<sup>44</sup> document *Mutuae Relationes* (1978), which establishes some signs of a genuine 'charism'.

*Every authentic charism implies a certain element of genuine originality and of special initiative for the spiritual life of the Church... The specific charismatic note of any institute demands, both of the Founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord; docility to His Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times; the will to be part of the Church; the awareness of subordination to the sacred hierarchy; boldness of initiatives; constancy in the giving of self; humility in bearing with adversities (1978, n.12).*

The second source used was Cruz's (2016)<sup>45</sup> paper on the development of charism in religious congregations in Africa. From these two sources, we decided to consider the material through the lens of the following key questions.

1. Whether the discussions demonstrate charismatic maturity i.e. do the sisters speak of and describe the multi-faceted aspects of charism and in ways beyond just a slogan or motto? Do they describe it rather than state it and refer to various aspects of it?
2. Do sisters relate the charism to all other aspects of how they live their religious lives, thereby providing a unifying element? Does it also give them a clear identity which differentiates them from other religious institutes?
3. Whether the charism is understood to be, and treated as, a source of renewal and as a means of informing discernment about ministerial choices.
4. To what extent is the charism understood as a gift of the Holy Spirit, and as ecclesial i.e. that it is a gift to the Church and shapes the sisters' ministry in/for and as Church and beyond (not owned by themselves)?

Our analysis of the material elicited on charism was grouped thematically along these lines and provides at least partial responses to the questions above. In this section we have completely anonymised the identity of congregations where elements of their charism may be recognisable.

44. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican dicastery or department which deals with religious institutes and other forms of consecrated life.

45. Cruz, R. 2016. 'Charismatic maturity and its impediments: considerations on a persistent challenge for consecrated life in Africa': In *Consecrated Life in Africa: yesterday, today and tomorrow*. Papers from a symposium on the consecrated life. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa. pp. 59 - 87

## Charismatic maturity through expressed complexity

In these comments, the largest single sub theme within this material, we found a complex and mature understanding of charism, where it is described rather than stated. These 79 excerpts, from 19 congregations, contained description and discussion of the charism, which showed an awareness of the complexity of charism. Although often the sisters drew on congregational straplines or mottos to explain their charism, they did not rely solely upon these, or short statements of their charism. The multi-faceted nature of these comments demonstrates that the way of life is rooted in, and shaped by, the charism.

*I would like to re-echo the words in our charism that the Sisters of [congregation name] we are called to continue Christ's mission through our dedication and openness to the personal action of the Holy Spirit and these words I feel that the three themes affirm the charism in that they are calling us to be on the move which means calling us to continue Christ's mission in what ways, for example, in witnessing I feel we are being called to be alert to what is happening around me in my context at a given time and then the second theme is about responding to God's call. This affirms the demand of our charism to be on mission as Christ was and continuing where he left and the third theme on eschatology affirms the call to openness to the personal action of the Holy Spirit where I as a sister of [congregation name], have to radiate the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit wherever I am and these are to bring out or radiate joy, to radiate love, to radiate peace, to radiate self-control and other gifts of counsel, of patience/peace and the others (anonymous congregation).*

Comments in this group also demonstrate an awareness of how the charism makes each congregation's life distinctive from that of others. Some 20 comments demonstrate the sisters' understanding that the charism is unique to their congregation and that it provides them with an identity that differentiates them from other congregations.

*The spirit of our charisms. That we have the Spirit which guides us as a family and which directs the way we live and the way we perform our tasks, the distinctive characteristics which makes our way of life as [anonymous*

*congregation] sisters different from other congregations (anonymous congregation).*

We were able to identify examples of an understanding of the complexity of charism, as something with several interlocking and related elements in more international congregations than in diocesan or indigenous congregations.

## Oversimplification of the charism

Many of the Stage 2 discussion groups began with a hymn, or a congregational song, often referring to the congregation's charism in some way. Fr Tim Redmond SPS, of our theological commentators' group, noted of one of the transcripts he reviewed. 'What struck me forcibly about this group was a very strong identification with their own charism, stated at the outset in a song.' He goes on to remind us that 'Songs and mottos can be very significant and indeed we might overlook their significance...'. We acknowledge the validity of this as a comment and particularly in a context where meetings often begin and end with songs and hymns.

However, set against this is the tendency in some discussions to rely solely on a song, or more commonly, a motto or slogan, even presented as a vision statement, when referring to their charism. Often, at the beginning of the discussion on charism, a sister is asked to remind the group of the congregation's charism, presenting it as a slogan. At other times, the sisters will simply refer repeatedly to the charism, produced in motto form. This can be a helpful way of embedding the charism in a congregation, and, after all, one of the oldest religious orders of all, the Benedictines, is perhaps best known for its 'motto' of *ora et labora*.

However, Cruz (2016, p.74) identifies 'oversimplification: reducing charisms to slogans' as one of the four impediments to charismatic maturity in religious life in Africa. In the data gathered by the project, we found 40 examples of this, from 20 different congregations, spread evenly across all five countries. These comments include not only examples of over reliance on slogans, but also instances where the charism, as stated, appears to be too general to differentiate it from either religious life in general, or even from the vocation of every individual follower of Christ.



*Because just as the charism of our congregation states: as the members of the congregation we have to do everything together and in unity (anonymous congregation).*

There are many other such examples which could be offered but would compromise the anonymity of the congregations. Therefore, we have decided not to share them, but they are broadly in line with the examples offered in Cruz (2016).

Analysis of the discussions of charism, and triangulation with the work done by theological commentators, shows that a small number of these congregations have comments grouped both

as demonstrating complexity, and at the same time, appearing to oversimplify the charism. This could be for several reasons: comments are from individuals and, therefore, they show the varying levels of understanding of the charism among the members of the group. It is also possible that the group has a very mature understanding of the charism but is using the motto as a form of shorthand among themselves. However, overall, we found more examples of the charism only being expressed in shorthand or as a motto in diocesan or indigenous congregations than in congregations of pontifical right.

## Relating the charism to other aspects of Religious Life

The majority of the congregations who linked their charism to other aspects of religious life, also provided comments which demonstrated an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of their charism. These 71 excerpts from 20 different congregations, again from across the five countries, show sisters making a connection between their charism and other aspects of their religious lives, be that community life, witness, apostolates or other elements. In linking it to community life, sisters note that they learn their charism in community from others and also practise it there. Other comments point to charism being a unifying factor in community.

*We are united by the same God, sharing the same vocation, charism, in faith you see if we can combine putting both them, sharing the same God, we see can combine both different, then sharing ideas, in faith (KE 344 - 346).*

For many sisters, charism shapes the way they behave, especially towards others by, for example living the values represented in their charism such as treating people with real compassion. A small group of 12 comments associates charism with witness, both in seeing the charism itself as a form of witness, and the charism shaping how the sisters bear witness to the life of Christ.

*About [our charism]. What will people understand? People want to see completely that this is what we mean by [our charism]. When I am, they look at my life they see the quality of my service, the quality of my life,*

*they see the quality of my interactions with people, how do I relate with them? That is why, so for me witness, wherever I am, whether I am with in the community or out there alone, I look at witness as a way of incarnation. Or bringing into, into to flesh. It is how my call becomes, like you would say, the word became flesh (anonymous congregation).*

In terms of articulations of how the charism shapes other aspects of religious life, we found this to be expressed more often and more clearly in more international congregations than diocesan congregations.



## Relationship between charism and ministry or apostolates

A substantial number of 47 comments demonstrate a clear link between apostolates and charism. A key feature of these is that sisters see their charism being incarnated through their apostolates.

*According to our charism, it is true, that the mission we are doing helps us to implement our charism. In our mission we work with different people, we serve different people, and in different locations. It could be astonishing if our charism is being close to people and we instead are remaining enclosed in our houses focusing only on prayers. How could we meet such people? Instead, it is absolutely correct that our mission helps us to implement our charism (anonymous congregation).*

Whilst these comments showing this intimate association between ministry and charism form the largest sub-theme within the theme of Apostolates, most of them connect their charism with wider-ranging and more general forms of apostolic activities.

*By the services we are rendering, like teaching religion in schools, caring for children, taking care of the old people, educating the women and mothers about the development skills and others of the like. Through these activities or these services, we promote our charism according to the order and the objective of our founder (TJ 203 – 206).*

A small number of comments make a very clear link between ministry and identity, to the extent that ministry itself is understood as the charism, rather than charism shaping the ministry. In these congregations, ministry is fundamental to the sisters' sense of identity and is inseparable from their own self-understanding, with one sister saying, 'when we talk of our ministries, we find we are at our own charism' (KB 63). In the following example, the sisters' understanding of themselves as members of congregation KB is entangled with their ministry to the poorest and most marginalised in society. Ministry is, for them, the most important expression of their charism.

*When we talk about ministry we will also talk about our charism. Without a charism what are we doing? So, ministry covers the charism and part of the charism is who we are, because we are different from other congregations (anonymous congregation).*

This smaller group of comments seem to form part of a continuum leading into a larger group of 34 comments from 20 congregations where there is such a high degree of identification of charism with ministries or apostolates, that there could be said to be some confusion between the two. This confusion was noted and identified by several of our theological commentators, with Sr Rael Otieno SMK asking whether some sisters see charism and what is termed 'works' as one and the same thing and in some cases, confuse spirituality with charism.

*Our charism, that is taking care of the needy, when you obey you are obeying Christ Himself. If I look at community life, the ones we are taking care of are in communities, so we are trying to live that. In communities we have to care, we have to love, we have to help one another so we are helping Christ Himself who is in need. Not leaving our charism behind, taking care of the needy. Then by the centrality with the relationship of God our actions towards the needy, we are relating our relationship to Jesus Christ. So, they are affirming our charism (anonymous congregation).*

At various points in discussions, sisters have asked for an explanation of the difference between spirituality and charism. Sr Rael offered a powerful image of a basket of fruit, where the basket is the charism, the fruit is the apostolates or works and the spirituality is the way the basket is carried. Sisters found this image helpful.

In a smaller group of 13 comments, sisters seem to conflate the charism with the constitutions and the vows, particularly in certain cases the vow of obedience and sometimes the vow of poverty, and, keeping that in relation to ministry.

We found within these first two sub-themes of charism, that there is a high level of convergence between the congregations where sisters seem to confuse charism with ministry, and those where the discussion offers a very reduced or synthesised statement of the charism. We have decided not to provide examples of these here as it would enable these congregations to be easily identified.

However, they are very much in line with those examples given in Cruz (2016). In our analysis of the frequency of instances of apparent confusion of apostolates with charism, we found almost equal numbers of frequency in both diocesan or indigenous congregations and international congregations, or those of pontifical right.

## Charism as a source of renewal

Sisters show both some concern for a return to the congregation's patrimonial sources, chiefly the charism, and an awareness that the charism offers itself as source and resource for renewal and discernment. They show an openness to embrace renewal, as urged by *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965, n. 2 – 3). In a context whereby sisters understand their ministries as incarnating their charism, they see that charism provides them with a central and unifying focus, both to ministry and to their life more broadly.

*Our charism strengthens us; it strengthens our lives and gives us a central focus as a community and as a congregation at large (KA 70 – 71).*

In this comment, the speakers show that their charism functions as a road map and a resource, with which to discern if they are on the right track in terms of ministry.

*These services with the poor, of engaging with the, with maybe the programmes of fighting against the trafficking of women and other injustice and peace issues. This, this will not pay us but these, these are in line with our charism. And therefore, they are a challenge to us and a call, and I feel we are called more today, to these kind of jobs (UC 412- 415).*

Many such comments are also connected with sisters' interpreting and responding to the needs of the people around them through the challenge issued by the Second Vatican Council to 'read the signs of the times'. This is a call to reflect deeply on

their context and environment as an essential part of shaping their response to the world as imitators and followers of Christ.

*These are the signs of time that we, I am, close our eyes to. A call to open our eyes to. A call to open our eyes and see what reality Christ is calling us to serve. How can we be Christ to others in various needs? (KJ 214-216).*

Sisters undertake this reading of the signs of the times as an exercise of discernment, often communal. They assess their continuing fidelity to their vocation, their charism and to Christ, to see how they can become and live an incarnational presence of Christ in their own context. Many congregations recognise the charism as a source of renewal and understand that it can be the wellspring to which they return as they ask how their charism can help shape their responses to new and emerging needs around them. We found a good number of congregations, both international of pontifical right and indigenous, expressing this recognition and either a need to return to this source for renewal or referring to a process which they are already undertaking.

## Charism understood as both gift and ecclesial in nature

Sisters recognise their charism as a gift from the Holy Spirit, to their founders, passed on to them, to be passed on to and shared with others in turn. Nineteen comments equate the continuity and strength of the charism with new vocations and the recruitment of new members is certainly viewed as the way to ensure the charism stays alive.

*...[O]ur mission as [Congregation ZC] or our charism is not a personal thing, it's a continuous thing...it's something that is passed on to us, and us we need on to pass it on to others...so it continues, it evolves and in the way it will evolve it will be different...in my time, my formation and those who have gone before us their formation...(ZC 412 - 415).*

Sr Margaret Kubanze LSOSF took issue with this understanding of 'passing on' the charism.

*I was rather concerned about the way some of the sisters understand what a charism is, especially when they say that charism is passed on to candidates in formation. To some extent this might appear to be true. Nevertheless, charism, being the gift which the Holy Spirit gives to the Founder/Foundress, attracts those that already share in it and want to live in it.*

A small number of sisters and congregations seek to spread the charism more widely beyond their congregation, even to those who do not have a vocation to religious life, and several of these recognise that whoever received it will be enriched, and the charism will in turn be enriched. These sisters acknowledge that neither they nor their congregation own their charism; it is a gift to the Church and the world. Their charism shapes their role in the Church and also shapes who and how they are in the Church and helps them contribute to and heal the Church.

*I can hear you say the gift is the charism to the local church. That's the main gift of the [sisters of congregation ZE] to the local Church, the gift of the charism from our congregation and then from the individual.... our contribution to the local Church is our charism as [sisters of congregation ZE] (ZE 513 - 514: 538).*

There seem to be two key ways, or reasons, for the charism to be shared. There are 11 comments from sisters who believe sharing their charism more systematically with lay people would help foster a broader and deeper understanding of religious life in Church and society, and the place of sisters within the Church. Furthermore, they recognise that explaining it to their co-workers in parishes and in their schools and others outside the congregation, constitutes a form of evangelisation. Some see it as a gift to the world; the sister in this excerpt expresses great joy and love for the charism and desires to see others sharing in it.

*It's beautiful; it's a gift given to the church; this charism is the given to the Church to continue the work of Christ! Therefore, it should continue, it should not end with me! That I just enjoy it and then when I die, ah, I didn't pass it on to somebody else. I feel it is our, our joy to pass it on and also our responsibility; responsibility to Christ, responsibility to the Church that this charism will be passed on and continue in the Church so that the service which this congregation is offering can continue in the Church (TA 589 - 597).*

The second and the chief reason to share the charism with others is still to attract new vocations. Despite the 11 comments referred to above, there appears to be limited concern with the communicating of the charism outside of the congregation for other reasons. This sits in sharp contrast to the finding of the RLVP that the expression of the charism as a shared reality for the future beyond the congregation is a key concern. This in turn reflects the current contrasting situations in growth and decline of membership among the congregations participating in this research and those in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland.



## Chapter 8 Sisters and the local Church

### Introduction: Sisters as part of the life and energy of the Church

In Stage 2 of the project, sisters were asked to discuss where they fit in the Church and what they offer. The response was overwhelmingly one of 'we fit everywhere'. The apostolic exhortation on the consecrated life, *Vita Consecrata* (1996) reminds us that religious life sits at the very heart of the Church and 'is also a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission' (n.3). Sisters show themselves to be of one mind with this expression, with one sister declaring enthusiastically:

*Do we testify that we are a gift to the Church? We are -Yes -And are ready to continue sacrificing for the local Church? Yes (ZG 1188 - 1191).*

A congregation from Tanzania describes themselves as:

*...daughters of the Church; we are women of the Church and we are part of the evangelisation process taking place in the Church (TP 318 - 319).*

The sisters' comments confirm an understanding that religious life exists to serve the mission of the Church and that it cannot, therefore, exist or have any meaning outside the Church. As consecrated women, they understand their vocation to be an ecclesial one, and their purpose is to participate in Christ's mission, that of the Church and play their part in building Christ's reign here on earth.

*Traditionally and theologically, there is no religious life that can exist outside the local Church let alone the universal Church. So, it is each congregation to fit themselves into the mission of the local Church. And as we read those pastoral letters from the bishops, we also try to implement what they are asking us and very importantly to do what is necessary at the right time in the right place (UI 770 - 775).*

The sisters show a high degree of commitment in all aspects of the life of the Church, participating in its celebrations, pilgrimages, activities and even parish strategic planning. They describe themselves as being 'part and parcel of the Church'. They are clear that the Church - people and priests - needs them and would not function effectively without them. They take care of the domestic aspects of the parish: cleaning the church, preparing and washing vestments, working in the sacristy, serving as housekeepers and cooks and carrying out other 'small, small tasks' as they say. Many say they are prepared to do as requested, and as told by priests and work together for the sake of the Church's mission. They have a special role in caring for people; they are called to be among and with the people, going to the peripheries and margins in order to do so.

*The women religious they do mostly what other people will not do. They are the ones who touch what other people will not touch. They enter where other people will not go, where many, many people will not go, it is only when the sisters enter, that people start now to come and build near where they are... we go in where there is nobody and we start with very young children, we start with the sick, we go on with orphans, we go on with the desperate visiting the, the, ... it is very hard for other people to do what the religious do. So, I see that we have a big role in the, in the Church... (KC2 790 - 802).*

So, sisters express no doubt about the ecclesial nature of their grounding or that they belong at the heart of the life of the Church. They even see themselves as necessary to the very existence and smooth running of parish life. We will now examine the ways in which they do this.

## Sisters in and as the mission of the Church

Sisters identify themselves as participating in the life of the Church in a number of ways, such as through evangelisation, their apostolic activity, as caregivers and often simply by being present, offering hope and solace to those in need.

### As intentional evangelisers

The largest group of comments on sisters' role in the church, some 70 in total, relate to their role as intentional evangelisers. Sisters see themselves as playing a significant role in evangelisation within the Church and view this as their primary role in the life of the Church, which they play either through intentional evangelisation activities such as catechesis, or via their apostolic activities.

*In the Church we really play really a very important role ...our involvement in our evangelization through the ministries, I see it is a very big reinforcement to the Church. I think that was also what pushed our founder to start our congregation, to answer to the needs of the Church at that time (UF 1393 - 1399).*

Instilling the faith in the young, and deepening the faith of those already converted, the sisters involve themselves in religious education programmes, formation of youth and First Holy Communion and Confirmation classes. They teach others about the faith and how to practise it, handing on their own knowledge and experience, and nurturing others' spiritual and faith development. However, it is very rare to hear sisters mention leading or giving retreats within the parish, or to other sisters; this appears to be a role that is largely reserved for priests.

### Ministries of healing, teaching, and pastoral work

In a smaller group of 35 comments, sisters say their main role in the Church is in carrying out social and pastoral activities in the parish. They minister to a range of groups: married couples, families, youth, widows and orphans and many also state they feel a particular concern for, and call to work with, other women and girls.

Their pastoral activities include being Eucharistic ministers, counselling, praying with families, praying for the Church and supporting children's (Holy Child Jesus) groups and pastoral movements such as Small Christian Communities (SCCs). A second, smaller group understand their contribution in terms of more general apostolic activities, referred to often simply as health and education work, or social and pastoral activities. The most common of these are: feeding the hungry, taking care of those with HIV/AIDS, visiting the sick, ministering to youth and widows, providing dispensary services, involvement in community development.



## Accompanying and animating the grassroots

Sisters' self-understanding, and their perception of themselves in the Church is one of being with and for the people, being among and alongside them. In a large group of 37 comments sisters describe the ways in which they are present in the parishes, serving others through their own participation. Even those who are not parish sisters, and have other full-time ministries, feel it is important to be available in the parish on evenings and weekends, through activities such as teaching Sunday School, participating in SCCs, the Catholic Women's Association and other grassroots groups. Many sisters say they feel the laity appreciate their presence and their contribution. Some 23 comments relate explicitly to this experience of being welcomed and appreciated by people in the Church. Sisters feel they are invited to share what they have with others, so that they can enrich the lives of others.

*We are respected in the Church especially where we are working...especially the poor people; they are really happy even when we promise we go and meet them and with the religious classes and even counselling them and maybe when sitting with them in the hospitals, when they call us we are sick or something else is taking place... They see in the villages we are able to reach out to them. And still we can try, or we can go to especially in deeper places. So, they feel our presence is a blessing (UO 698 - 705).*

Some sisters say they believe they have much to give to the Church, with one sister commenting that her formation has given her a good education and skill set which she is eager to share with others. They also work together with the laity, describing themselves as co-partners and co-workers with the faithful, collaborating and working together as a team in the local Church. This is made possible by their being among the grassroots faithful, and not of the hierarchy.

*We are co-partners, or we are workers, co-workers. We are not in the hierarchy; we are among the faithful. Um, for us, we really work as a team in the local Church (TC 621 - 625).*

The material, however, does not provide details of instances and examples of what this might comprise. Nonetheless, there are a small number of sisters who experience some reciprocity and

mutuality in this experience. They note that, for their efforts of working alongside people in the Church, they also receive in return. Where they are there for people, people are there for them.

*Through this role that we are playing in the Church, we find also that not only those whom we serve that are being nourished or are being enriched, we are also enriched by them. As we continue serving the people and the Church, also there are things that we learn from them; maybe through their suffering, how they carry their struggles in their life, their difficult life. So, it teaches us also, ah, to learn how to carry ourselves, how to carry our burden that we encounter in this religious life (TC 668 - 674).*

However, as discussed in the section on apostolates, much of the language used by sisters to describe the ways in which they form part of the Church reflects a one-way movement; the laity are there to be helped. Sisters impart knowledge, love, guidance but they don't often record receiving from others in the parish. Where they work hand-in-hand with others and participate themselves as parishioners, they are more often participating in order to be the leaven in the yeast: to strengthen, enable, support, teach and help others; to serve and accompany rather than as parishioners in communion with others.

A question for us is whether the sisters are always the 'other' in the parish context. Are they almost always the givers and rarely the receivers? In our feedback meetings with sisters, we raised this question, sharing that the data provides very few examples of expressions of mutuality experienced within the Church. Sisters seemed surprised at our comment and question. Several said that they did experience this, and yet others said they did, but felt they should not be asking or expecting this. This led us to consider the articulations of ecclesiology we saw in the material.

## Are we Church?

In speaking of how they understand Church - their ecclesiology, a small number of sisters articulate an understanding of Church as communion, such as in the excerpt from congregation TC above. There are also a few comments expressing an understanding of the Church as the people of God, rather than comprising simply the hierarchy, or religious, and that they themselves are part of this people of God and, therefore, are also Church.

*[I am] not talking of the building. I am not talking of the hierarchy of the Church because we are religious. We are not friends. We are consecrated persons in the church, and we serve the people of God and the church is, the people of God (UB 650 - 652).*

However, these comments are very rare. In our workshops with sisters we spoke about how we think sisters participate in, or see themselves in, the Church. In one meeting, a sister challenged us, saying 'sisters do not participate in the mission of the Church - they ARE Church'. We do not disagree with this statement, but note that this language, and this ecclesiology is very rarely encountered in the transcripts. One Kenyan sister, in talking about joining in with parish groups said: 'we are not separate from them; we are part of the local Church' (KH 408 - 410). The only other articulation of this ecclesiology we have noted, is in the discussion group of a congregation from Zambia, one of the few where sisters challenge each other on how they are in the Church. They assert that they are Church, but also observe that often they distance themselves from the Church, and from other women in the Church and so question their own participation in Church activity. A fellow sister responds by suggesting they must immerse themselves more deeply in the Church to realise that they also are the Church. This may come down to the sisters' ecclesiology and an understanding of Church as living and experiencing mutuality for the sake of the Kingdom. This means being with and being for each other, sharing but also gaining nourishment from in each other in a way that builds communion and the kingdom as experienced here on earth. Sisters are also parishioners; they are also Church, although this is very rarely expressed in the transcripts.

A sister from Uganda is equally candid about the struggle for sisters in the Church, in terms of finding their place, but urges caution against

giving up and walking away, emphasising that their vocation is a deeply ecclesial one.

*It is a hierarchy Church; you have bishops, you put there priests, the deacons, we have the seminarians and religious catechists and the rest of the people [parishioners] so knowing that is the structure of the Church at the moment, what can we offer? I think for me our presence - more and more our presence in the Church to the extent that yes, I know am not a Bishop, am not consulting anybody, the parish priest will stand there and say whom do you think you are? ... in circumstance that's how it ends up to but not to say 'I don't have any place let me get away from being part of the Church'... Because one of the things that if we are not careful as religious, we tend to say they don't consult us, the schools they want to take their institutions so also, we begin our own. This, we serve our own in our own ways also that is not good enough. I think as part of the Church, and even our Constitution is saying we are sent by the Church. [Right] we have to be part of the Church no matter what (UP 350 - 361).*

Sisters emphasise their place at the heart of the Church and many are involved in all aspects of Church life yet at the same time there is an air of uncertainty that sits alongside the unambiguous statements about belonging, which seems to have two sources. First from an impression that many lay people do not understand their function or purpose in the Church. Sisters say that many people think the only thing they can do is pray.

*I would also say that the role of women in the Church in these days is a bit challenging because we find that some of the churches that we are, we are supposed to be serving, some roles of woman have been taken by other people. For example if we take the area of distributing the holy communion we find that some churches have allocated these responsibilities to lay people, and sisters have not been given a chance, for example, it becomes a challenge because the role of the sisters is not well defined at that particular time (KC2 807-816).*

Whilst there are many comments which show that sisters' often feel appreciated by the people for their presence and their services, they also recognise that their contribution or their value is



not always acknowledged. This recognition is of interest as these comments suggest a confusion about roles within the Church among lay people and sometimes, among sisters themselves.

The second source of the unease we have seen in the material is an awareness that not all clergy understand or value sisters' involvement and role in the Church. It is to that issue that we now turn.



*When I talk about the apostolic mission of the Church, it is mostly by religious women: what the priest preach about is put into practice by the religious.*

## Sisters and clergy: differentiated roles and power dynamics

Sisters in the consultation meeting held in Kasisi in Zambia in 2016 identified the issue of sisters' roles in Church and society and forming sisters to play these roles most effectively as one of the top three questions from our two days of discussions. This surprised us as we had assumed greater clarity around this. As reported earlier, many sisters' response to our question 'where do sisters fit in the Church?' was 'we fit everywhere'. However, we also heard over 100 comments which shed light on the importance and relevance of the sisters' original concern as expressed in Kasisi. From these comments it becomes clear why sisters struggle – a word they use often – to identify and take up their role within the local Church.

### Roles of sisters and clergy

Sisters know full well they are not part of the hierarchy and, in several comments, they set out the ways in which their roles are differentiated. They acknowledge that priests play a clerical and sacramental role of presiding, preaching and administering the sacraments. Nonetheless, they seek to complement each other for the sake of the mission. They seem to understand the differentiation as: the priest preaches, and they put it into practice and there are many comments which set out these differentiated roles.

*When I talk about the apostolic mission of the Church, it is mostly by religious women: what the priest preach about is put into practice by the religious. They are there to impart the knowledge, they give, and we are also beneficiaries from the homilies which they give and from what they give they share about Christ - what Christ did and what what...So who carries out the practical? It's the religious, because without...them they are there as sisters mentioned that they are recognised and everybody even parishioners they'll just say yes but who really does the work? It's the religious themselves. (ZA 1146 – 1152).*

One sister understands her role in quite different ecclesiological terms, locating it within the concept of the priesthood of all peoples. This though, is a unique articulation within the material collected for the project. More often, the sisters simply see themselves as those who do the hard work

of accompanying and serving the poor as they educate, provide medical, social and pastoral care, and carry out much of the catechetical work. They describe themselves as being the anchor to the apostolic mission of the Church. They feel it is they, rather than the clergy who reach and support the people, and are there, alongside the people witnessing and ministering to them. Without their presence and often unseen ministries, they feel there would be no Church.

*That sister who is going everyday moving to the groups and giving catechesis maybe at times is not seen; that sister is not visible...that Christian talks of how they have learnt to pray in their families because the children are insisting; the children say sister told us we cannot sleep without praying the rosary; sister told us you don't just grab food and eat but you first pray and give thanks. When the sister is not present in those groups, the peers, the youth groups, you find that the groups have no direction (KQ2 861 - 867).*

In this sense, they even see themselves as a bridge between the institutional Church and the people.

*We the religious are called among the many faithful but a special class which connects between the lay completely and the Church so given the point that we are between there in a special category and then given the fact that the sisters and the priests we are the majority... We are the linkage so we can do a better work than the priests. Most times sisters do more work than the priests down here. So, we as the religious we have to awaken our duties why are we consecrated. The primary core values are in our hands. The priest just comes to baptize but the formation down here is us. We are like women in the family. When a woman is in a family, things move on well. So, with the Church we are the breathing lungs for the Church (UL 936 - 945).*

## Experiences of inclusion and welcome

In some 11 comments, mostly from Zambia and Uganda, sisters describe feeling welcomed and appreciated by the clergy – usually the parish priest, but sometimes the local Bishop. They describe being invited by priests to establish new missions, to run the marriage classes, to work with youth, widows and many other groups. One congregation in Zambia even reports being invited to preach. Sisters are made to feel they belong in the centre of the parish.

*In our church we are working in the sacristy helping there, then we are even taking Christ may be on Sunday or other days and then there is, we are on the parish council because at least we sit there and then represent the religious and what not. And then like now in I think most of the dioceses at least in our diocese here in [place name] the bishop has made sure that religious have a place in the local Church. We have even the council, at least every time every year he has to meet us and then talk to us (UI 751 - 757).*

Where sisters feel included and appreciated, they are more than willing to accept direction from clergy, to adapt to their plans and cooperate for the sake of mission, as one sister from Zambia says.

*We cooperate in the growth of the Christian community with our evangelical testimony of life and with our generous response to the diverse pastoral needs, according to our charism in due respect for the ministry of bishops. We readily accept their concrete pastoral directives (ZB 1154 - 1156).*

However, it is also clear that possibilities for cooperation vary from diocese to diocese and parish to parish and ultimately depends on the attitude of the individual priest to the sisters. Therefore, although these comments are positive, they also suggest a passive role for sisters in that they have to accept the attitude encountered.

*I think that it can be done but that depend, it depends the character of the priest; some priests love the sisters, some priests love the sisters very much! Everything acquired to the parish share with the sisters, but some priests, my goodness! Even they don't like to see you in the face! And we are working, we are on the same way of serving God but, really, it is*

*a pity the way the priests they treat us in the parishes (TC 824 - 828).*

So, despite the positive experiences noted above, there are many more which are troubled and where sisters report that they can sometimes struggle to find how and where they fit in the hierarchical Church to ensure that their gifts and talents can be used to the full. It is to these we now turn.

## Power dynamics between clergy and sisters

The sisters who reflect on how to play full and effective roles in the Church identify that the struggle to do so reflects the reality of the society and culture in which they live. Their experience as religious women in the Church reflects the patriarchal attitudes in society where women are still marginalised and undermined.

*When we reflect on our African traditions and customs, in which masculinism dominates, we can say that even in the Church there is masculinism [patriarchy?], because, a woman has no value, as if she has no contribution to the society. She has to listen, to be obedient and follow the instructions only. Because of that, even we the [TI] sisters feel weak, valueless, and that we cannot do anything. In another language, I could say we have stigmatized ourselves (TI 686 - 691).*

They may see this begin to change in society but have yet to see movement in the Church.

*Yes it is a challenge in the African society because for us, we have been brought up in a culture that looks at men as superior, women as inferior and that's why even we have, in the society we have been fighting for gender equality you find even in the government that is what happening, that also is crippling in the Church but we also want equality now that we are sisters like equality between sisters and priests (KC 714 - 716).*

Their analysis may contribute to some passivity, as in the comment from Congregation TC above. This appears to reflect an acceptance of and a fatalistic outlook towards their situation as they acknowledge that this tension will remain as long as the Church and their cultures support men to feel superior towards them.



## The Parish Priest as Chief and King

Over 60 comments refer to or describe the conflicted and often oppressive nature of the relationship between sisters and the parish priest, or sometimes the Bishop. These comments are found in discussions across all five countries and come from at least 20 of the congregations, dominated by Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia. However, in our workshops sharing the project's analysis, this was the topic which always elicited the most lively and angry discussion, with sisters eager to relate their personal experiences. We have few written comments from Malawi, as we had fewer transcripts but the discussion there was as lively as elsewhere.

Some of the examples of unease or discomfort result from the lack of recognition accorded to sisters for their hard work and service to the Church, and respect for who they are and what skills and experience they bring. However, most of the comments reveal a more serious situation and greater depths of conflict. Sisters refer to the parish priest understanding himself as boss, chief and king, because of the behaviour and sometimes arrogance they display towards the sisters. Many of these comments are characterised by real anger and strength of feeling. Therefore, we have chosen to share a larger number of comments than in other sections of the report. These first two, from Kenya, communicate something of the dismissive and disrespectful attitudes sisters claim to have experienced.

*We were talking with our priest and he said may I tell you; the parish is comprised of the Bishop and the priest. That is a diocese. I told him what about the sisters? He said you are nowhere. I told him if it were not for the sisters you would be dead like long time ago. You are just there: we prepare for you; we cook for you but then you are saying you are the main people who make a diocese (KQ1 946 - 950).*

*I think it's just, it has to do it, eeh, recognition or appreciation of what women religious can do that which men can't do... because you see.... this is your job and all the dirty job goes to the sisters and then the priest we are the boss, huuu, no, because that is the mentality here - I am the king, I, I command all of you and the sisters are nowhere (KE 1117 - 1120).*

In addition to the analysis of power in society, sisters offer a variety of explanations for the difficulties experienced in their relationships. They believe that a major cause lies in the priests' resentment of how popular sisters can be with the people.

*One, some of our priests seem to be negative to sisters in a way that they feel the sisters don't know much, two, the sisters have a lot of attention when they go out with the sister, the sister is more attended to than them so they kind of, there is a bit of pressure and pull there (UL 1066 - 1068).*

The concepts of competition, jealousy and feeling threatened are frequently used to characterise the way clergy feel towards sisters. Some sisters attribute this to the fact that they are sometimes more able to access resources to support themselves and their ministries. Others to the fact that they feel themselves to be closer to and more popular with ordinary people and parishioners, often being seen as more accessible.

*In the Church, the Christians out there, they value sisters and they have a great desire to work with them but the challenge comes when for example in a certain parish or local Church, the priest is not ready to receive those sisters who are sent there because of either differences or fear or because sometimes Christians prefer the presence of sisters things like that so there is always that competition but I think even if they are not ready to give us that chance to minister in the Church, they prefer the lay people to prepare communion, depending on the Church (KC2 848 - 855).*

Sisters refer to 'struggles' in the Church between them and priests. They feel at the very least unsupported, and their expertise disregarded, and at worst, undermined and made to feel inferior. Sisters from a congregation in Tanzania report being made to feel that they are not part of the Church and being excluded from all forms of decision-making, unable to contribute and not even being allowed to serve on the parish council.

*I think also what I want to add is sharing of parish priest as king. The possibility given to sisters or even women or even religious sisters*



*for decision making. I think this also they have to look into, we are equal we already know in preparation, theology and all so are we really given welcome into decision making or we are just sent away what they have decided you know in the Church, parish council, the sisters are not part of the parish council they are only told we have decided this, so I think that is also what we have to improve (KE 1129 - 1133).*

Sisters report instances of the priest denying permission to go out and visit parishioners (Tanzania), being told that it is not their responsibility. Instead they are encouraged to stay in the parish and do the washing, cleaning and ironing despite being highly qualified and experienced.

*Let's say I am either a catechist or a teacher or doctor, then I am sent to work either as a teacher, a doctor or a catechist. When I reach my station, I do not get the opportunity to give that right service to people who need my assistance. In such a situation, a [missionary sister of Congregation TI] faces a challenge because she cannot do ministerial job freely (TI2 736 - 739).*

The exclusion also extends to sisters' professional training to take up their ministerial roles. One sister from Kenya reports feeling excluded and underused in her parish despite – or perhaps because of – her experience teaching seminarians, parish organisation and planning.

*They totally disregarded any expertise I might have... Are we allowed to contribute to the pastoral planning of the diocese? Even when I was Director of Education, not really, and that I find a pity that there is still much clericalism in the Church. Anyway sorry. I could go on about this for hours (KH 585 - 587).*

Another sister reports simply having to force her way in and insist on taking up roles for which she was qualified. Others report being undermined and publicly humiliated because the priest regards them as inadequately qualified and experienced. Sisters understand only too well that their being perceived as a threat by the priest, rather than a co-worker, undermines all their efforts, and affects the quality of the Church's witness.

*Sometimes we have misunderstanding of leadership in the local Church, especially when we, we, we disagree, we disagree maybe with the leaders from the local Church, and maybe that thing can be, ah, seen by other Christians or those whom we serve, ah, this a little bit, it is a challenge which put into question our essence as religious people. I mean there we fail to show really who we are, our identity a little bit is put into question (TC 710 - 715).*

A sister from Zambia who has heard of many individual cases of conflict between sisters and clergy accepts it could simply be a question of individuals not getting along. However, as instances of such conflict are reported by many congregations, she suggests that the issue is indeed more systematic.

The power dynamic also manifests itself in the extent to which sisters feel valued by their parishes. In quite a substantial group of 30 comments, from all five countries, but especially Kenya and Zambia, sisters note that that parishes do not often support them either financially or with working conditions commensurate with their contribution, or on a par with other lay people ministering in the parish. There are instances reported where sisters are paid so little that they have to give up parish ministries and look for paid opportunities elsewhere because the congregation needs the income. They are more ready to accept low levels of remuneration when they know the parish cannot afford to offer them even subsistence monies. However, when such financial support is provided to other lay people ministering in the parish, or to the priest, then this becomes a source of disquiet. One sister from Kenya states that a lay person would be paid for a job that sisters do for free. '[I]f it is a lay person who is working there, he could be paid a lot. (...) but you need to value me as a human. As a human. Yes, I am a religious but I'm as a human I need also the basic need.' (KJ 855 - 862).

In the majority of the comments about remuneration and working conditions in the parish sisters connect this to priests' or parishioners' attitudes towards them. This is clearly a substantial issue, but there are also other ways in which sisters feel they are undervalued.

*Until they change the mentality, it remains the same; the challenge remains the same. But we hope that one day one time they will realise.*

*Sometimes we would like to make an effective contribution to the Church, but we lack also the means because there's no Church support, there is Church, so we lack the means, nobody really cares about us. They expect you to go with the motorbike, but then they go with the car (KN 710 - 713).*

As in this example, lack of transport, equipment and facilities needed for apostolates is a particularly bitter source of conflict. This lies in issues of support to institutions, and in particular issues regarding ownership and management of institutions.



*Sometimes we would like to make an effective contribution to the Church, but we lack also the means because there's no Church support, there is Church, so we lack the means, nobody really cares about us.*



## Conflict over land and institutions

Comments on the theme of sisters in the Church touch on the issue of land and institutions in three ways. The first is in relation to the differentiation of roles, where sisters often state that they are generally more effective at running and managing institutions than priests. They see themselves as being more practically oriented and generally more efficient and capable of running institutions, whether they be retreat houses, hospitals, schools or clinics.

*There is a kind of competition in the Church. They can call it competition whereby especially in the mission, the schools, they need to be the, like I give you an example in a parish there is a school, especially when the, the sisters run the school, the school progresses because you work as a team not as an individual but when the priest takes over, the school collapse because he cannot reach everywhere and this competition has always been a witness (...) so the presence it is still there. The role of women religious in the Church is not, is not supported by the Church (KN 717 - 721).*

Second, the institutions themselves seem to afford sisters some protection from clergy trying to wrestle control of the land or institution. A sister from an international congregation in Kenya observes that congregations which own institutions, as opposed to staffing them on behalf of the diocese are, to an extent, protected from dioceses attempting to take successful institutions away from sisters in order to bring them under the banner of the diocese. The congregations who do not own their schools, clinics and other institutions are those that are most vulnerable and open to this kind of treatment. It is, therefore, often the diocesan or indigenous congregations who are most vulnerable to these moves, as they are less likely to own the institutions which they run.

*I think that is why they are saying where do we fit? This is our land, no, this is parish land, don't cultivate. I remember one, I went even to visit them. They were stopped. This is diocese land don't cultivate anymore. You know this land to the parish, so the sisters now are working within the parish compound... to those kinds of thing I think..... What is our role in the Church, where are they placing us? (KE 1096 -1099).*

We frequently heard of instances of dioceses allowing sisters to build on or develop land they have occupied for many years, but when the land becomes profitable, the diocese then reclaims it, forcing the sisters off. Where land is already profitable, the diocese can refuse permission for the sisters to develop it for the purposes of ministry and instead appropriate it for the diocese. One sister links this to the issue of female equality in the local culture and in the law, pointing out that the problems with land and the Church mirror where the local law or custom either prevents or makes land ownership for women difficult. These experiences reinforce the sense of exclusion that many sisters feel; of not being part of the Church, of being 'chased away' (ZA 1185) and of not quite knowing if and where they fit at all. They both create and point to a lack of trust and transparency in relationships between the parish/diocese and the individual congregations, particularly in relation to institutions and projects run by sisters.

*We the religious are considered as strangers especially when it comes to the ownership of assets like land. When the sisters, I mean the religious of [Congregation TI] want to do some economic activities in the places where they live, they face difficulties in getting the permission to construct buildings, let's say when they want to construct a technical college or school and so on. We meet some difficulties somehow on getting the permission because we are considered as foreigners, as if the land is not our property. It looks as if we are not part of the Church. It appears as if the land is the property of the priests and some lay faithful, and the bishops only, but not the religious people. The sisters are considered as a group outside the members of the Church (TI 651 - 657).*

Sisters report confusion among parishioners as to what constitutes participation in the Church's mission in terms of institutions and apostolates. There is some suggestion from both sisters and ordinary parishioners, that they distinguish between Church-based pastoral activities which are part of the Church, and other more mainstream apostolates, such as education and health work, not identified as carried out in the name of the Church, but rather the sisters or the congregation.

*Unfortunately the definition of the Church when we are talking about roles has been limited to parish pastoral work to the extent*

*that people have forgotten that other pastoral structures that offer things like health care and education have been side-lined as being part of the Church and unfortunately that's where most of us women religious are found in health care institutions and education such that when you are found in there somebody would wonder what you are doing in the Church because they think the Church is at the parish and doing parish pastoral ministry (ZH 345 - 353).*

Divisions between clergy and religious in a diocese can thus contribute to this perception among ordinary Catholics that apostolates and institutions of religious congregations are not part of the Church's mission.

*We take the example of hospitals, like in Zambia, how many hospitals...all the hospitals are run by religious women. So, you find that mercy is talked about, but it is whenever the diocese or whenever feel like taking away a project to say no, you, you are sisters so we... it's this separation for me. The separation of the projects of the diocese and what the sisters are doing. Why not incorporate everything because it's for the mission of the Church and us we are all local Church. So why not incorporating everything? So again, on the side of religious women, we have seen that we are certain to say this is...this belongs to the congregation and that project or activity it is for the congregation and therefore it is not line with the local Church (ZA 1192 - 1196).*

Drawing distinctions of this kind, and instances of conflict lead to mistrust, suspicion and sisters feeling driven from the institutional Church. Therefore, we wonder whether it is a realistic proposition to expect sisters to feel a true sense of communion within the Church, where they both give and receive, love and are loved, and can truly say, of the institution anyway, 'we are Church'?

## Ways forward - Asserting their place and their role in the Church

So far in this chapter we have presented some positive experiences of inclusion in the Church, but also some very challenging experiences of a lack of reception in their parishes and dioceses, and not a small amount of uncertainty about roles. In this next part, we will explore the ways sisters identify which can help them experience Church as something which supports their own flourishing, as well as that of others?

In contrast to some of the passivity or fatalism, we hear a large number of comments from other sisters which show it is clearly important to them that they either be granted, or that they achieve, a greater role in the Church – at both local and more global levels. A sister from Kenya comments ‘I want to be more than “Father’s little help”’ (KH 104). They urge their fellow sisters to be confident in taking their place in the Church, encouraging them not to give up in the face of misunderstanding or intolerance or of ignorance about religious life. In the following extract from a conversation, one sister makes this point and another thanks her, saying how helpful her comment has been.

*I request that we do not give up but act upon that which has been granted us to serve; let us use our talents, our abilities, as God has given us special talents. When we use these special talents well, everyone will view religious life as clean and precious before God and the society in general.....*

*.....Thank you very much sister; you have comforted me by your nice words because I have been reflecting so much on these criticism from the faithful that they do not recognise the value of religious sisters in the Church; I appreciate so much. I have been comforted (TF 342 - 348).*

They insist they should respect themselves and their ministry and not allow themselves to be pushed out or even to choose to opt out, because that is easier at times than insisting on engaging. They are also Church, and they belong at its heart. However, sisters from one congregation in Malawi discuss serving as religious in a context where society and even parishioners do not understand religious life.

*The people, they don't have idea the clear idea of importance of having a religious woman in the Church - in parish in the schools, in the, in any position you know. And I think that the society is not yet ready to accept the role of the religious woman as part important (MA 464 - 466).*

As a result, and perhaps also due to a lack of formation which will give them the confidence, sisters can be hesitant in taking up roles, in stepping forward to take responsibility. They fear being too visible, and open to criticism. Sisters in the same congregation from Malawi discuss how, when called to religious life, they hadn't really grasped that it was a vocation for the Church, and really had only been concerned with the work and matters of their congregation. However, they feel that they must be courageous and step up, as they are needed in the Church.

In 24 comments, sisters express a variety of ideas and suggestions for how to address this situation and improve relationships between sisters and clergy in their local areas. The most commonly mentioned idea is the need to dialogue with individual priests and the diocese in order to improve relationships. Sisters understand that in order to reduce conflict, and demonstrate they can work in harmony with clergy, they must accept the priest's authority, but negotiate boundaries in which they can operate. Other comments suggest greater harmonisation between sisters' apostolates and diocesan activities, so that they are working as one mission, but acknowledge the potential for tension with their congregational charism. Another group feel that people do not understand who sisters are nor what they do.

*They expect us all the time with them...they don't know that we need to go for prayer, we need to do what...they are just saying they are doing nothing these sisters. So, I think the local Church needs to know about our charism so that even when we go out to visit the families, we go out to do our...to go for work...whatever we are doing they are understand the charism and what we normally do when they don't see us. I think this is what am seeing being a pastoral worker out there...it's really a challenge. You find that even the local priest...they don't know exactly what our charism is. So, no wonder you find that people...the sisters they are always sleeping...So I think as a congregation or as congregations in Africa we need really to explain our charism... what we stand for, I think they are not aware (ZA 890 - 899).*



Some sisters believe it would be helpful to frame what they can offer to the Church through their charism and explain this as their gift to the Church. Thus, their charism becomes a resource which may help priests and people alike understand the nature of religious life and where and how they fit in the Church. Those who have encountered misunderstanding from ordinary parishioners feel that if priests understood religious life, then they could help explain to the people about sisters, their lives, their charism and their place in the Church:

Several sisters comment that they have not really tried to introduce their way of life or their charism to the local Church, and perhaps they are missing an opportunity. Sr Joyce Meyer PBVM observed this point in transcripts she reviewed and challenges sisters to help people understand more about religious life. Of sisters who claim that they are often hindered from using their gifts and talents, she notes that religious life seems to have 'no role identification in the Church – even with priests, laity' who think sisters only pray. In response she poses the question: 'Have they talked about how they want to be identified?'



## Training and preparation for ministry in the institutional Church

Whilst some sisters admit they are reticent and lack confidence, others insist that they should identify and nurture their gifts and put them to good use. The group of sisters in Malawi believe their congregation should take responsibility for preparing them to be effective in the parish and diocese. A small group of 11 comments show sisters discussing the need to be better formed and trained in order to take up roles in the Church, feeling they would thereby gain more respect and understanding. This preparation includes catechesis and better theological and philosophical formation. However, as we have seen, education and experience are not necessarily the answer to resolving the situation with some clergy.

There are very few occasions when sisters either express an explicit vocation to the priesthood, or a desire to see women take up more formal roles within the Church as deacons or priests. These are expressed in a small number of five comments, most of which derive from an indigenous congregation in Tanzania.

*I could say it is true that sisters have a variety of talents, and there are some who could be prepared and they could be given this gift of serving in a special way in the Church... there are some positions like that of being the deacons, or even to be given chance to preach in the Church while a priest is left to say the Holy Mass. A sister could be invited to preach the word, to make her talents emerge, and that could be a special contribution to the faithful who are in the Church... it is important that the sister does the services which are preserved for the deacon except saying the Holy Mass (Tanzania – anonymous congregation).*

One sister from Kenya is influenced in her thinking by the formal ministerial roles women have been able to take up in Anglican and Presbyterian churches and asks why women cannot be given more responsibility so as to bring all of their gifts into the Church.

*I feel that also it is important to give the place to women, even sometimes you see some sisters working in the Church so that there are conflict between them and the, the parish priest or whatever, because they know that women have also that the quality they don't need give them the place, to give that place of women we can bring more in the Church (KR 605 - 608).*

## Prophetic voices in the Church: speaking out on injustice and abuse?

Another point of contrast with discussions on religious life in the UK and Ireland is the use of the word 'prophetic'. In this material, the word is only used 16 times in all the discussions, from ten congregations in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, all but two of which (in Uganda) are international and of pontifical right. Of these comments about the need to be prophets in their time, or ways in which they are called to be prophetic, only one comment (from Tanzania) relates to the Church.

*Our position in the Church in general is prophecy: we are not preachers; we are prophets. People who look at us see the kingdom of God. Therefore, we have to make sure that, the Kingdom of God is continuously improved and purified so as to make us obedient. We should not let people see negative deeds that go against our vows of obedience, chastity and poverty about us (TP 374 - 378).*

This is in striking contrast to discussions about the role and nature of religious life in the global north, where it would be common to hear sisters discussing the prophetic role of religious life. References to a prophetic role for religious in this research data are made in very general terms. This may indicate that the potential for such prophetic activity for women is limited, or not taken up, or that sisters believe that

all Christian activity can be prophetic. One sister, however, identifies her role as one of being the voice of the voiceless within the institutional Church.

*The role of religious people is to be a voice in the hierarchal Church because there is a multitude of people whose voice is left out and those are the people that have the message but are they heard, are we facilitating their being heard, can we risk to be the voice of the voiceless of the population of the Church? (UP 369 - 371).*

The one area where sisters do speak of a specific role for prophecy in relation to the Church is that of clerical abuse. Sisters in one congregation in Tanzania experience a call to be prophetic both in speaking out about the issue of abuse within the Church and in supporting those who have been abused and report hearing of sisters who have been mistreated and 'misused' by priests.



*In terms of abuse of sisters by priests, sisters have to start speaking out in public about these things. Some kind of change is coming but there is a long way to go (TB 1501).*

Sisters from a congregation in Zambia also wonder what role they should play in speaking out about abuse scandals and see themselves called to speak into this situation. Another talks of being called to be ‘an instrument of healing’ to those who have experienced abuse. So, whilst in some of these examples, sisters do not use the word ‘prophetic’, they are clearly discussing a call to prophecy in their time and their context.

It is hard and perhaps inappropriate for us as a research team to comment on the issue of clerical sexual abuse in these countries, either in the relation to sisters, or as encountered more broadly in the Church, as it rarely featured in the Stage 1 and 2 data we collected. The comments above are the only instances of this arising in the Stage 2 discussions, and there are a handful of references to abuse scandals in Stage 1 comments.

However, the issue of abuse was raised in each of the five feedback workshops run in the final stages of the project - not by the research team, and generally not by sisters of the country we were in, but by sisters from elsewhere in Africa. These sisters usually challenged the group to acknowledge the reality of the situation and to speak out about it. One sister in Kenya said that if ever there was a need for sisters to speak with a prophetic voice, it was in relation to this issue. Even though responses to the call frequently led to impassioned discussion, for whatever reason, sisters are mostly choosing not to speak or write publicly. The term 'culture of silence' was used a lot in these meetings. Aware of the sensitivity of this topic, and the emotions it causes, we asked several groups, and also the theological commentators meeting in Nairobi, for permission to make our own comment on the topic. They readily agreed that we could or should comment, but the reality is that, as a research

team, our only legitimate comment can be to reflect that sisters chose to stay silent in the formal stages of the research, and sometimes chose to silence each other in the feedback workshops.

We heard a range of opinions and positions, and much anger, fear and sometimes refusal to recognise that abuse is actually taking place, or that priests bear any responsibility. We heard the opinion that sisters bring this on themselves through their own behaviour, and that if the situation needs to be addressed through formation, then it is that of sisters rather than priests which needs to be addressed. Some are angry and bitterly disappointed with clergy and yet others freely admit that sisters in their own congregations are being, and have been, sexually abused by clergy and feel powerless to take any action or find recourse. We were told that this will change in time; that speaking out will happen in time, but that it may take ten years, or more. From our perspective as Europe-based researchers, we interpreted much of what we heard as resulting from a lack of understanding of both the nature and impact of abuse. We are also aware of our own lack of full understanding of the consequences currently for individual sisters – whether the sister in charge, or the one abused – of speaking out.





## Chapter 9 Sisters' sense of identity

In this section, we look at the sisters' sense of identity using two different perspectives. The first one is by examining sisters' perceptions of how others see them; in other words, we look at how they describe themselves, not directly, but by using the eyes of others as filters. We understand 'others' as those who are not Religious, and with whom sisters interact. They could be beneficiaries of the sisters' services, family members or part of the local church. Our second perspective is a more direct one. We analyse sisters' descriptions of themselves and their claims about the impact they have on their surrounding communities. In both cases, we understand that sisters' identity is complex and multi-layered as well as gendered, subjective and rooted in a specific cultural context.

### Under the gaze of society

Sisters' comments reveal at times contradictory perceptions they believe other people hold of them. Sisters feel that they are generally valued in society, trusted and thought of as inherently good. However, they are also constantly under the gaze of others, who are often ready to judge them if they, as '*religious virtuosos*' fail to meet their expectations. Sisters also state that people often believe they are rich, and thus able and expected to help the poor. The final perception sisters believe that others have of religious life, is really one of misunderstanding. It is a way of life which challenges traditional ideas of marriage, motherhood and gender roles in general and, therefore, their motivations for choosing this life can be difficult for others to understand.

### Appreciated and inherently good

There were 16 comments about people in general being appreciative of sisters and valuing what they do and the services they provide. These comments state that people see them as kind, caring women who make a difference in all the places they are and in all the activities they are involved in. Their institutions, such as schools and hospitals are respected and very popular with the general public; in the comments, sisters give specific examples of people praising their services and saying they prefer them to other private or public services.

*...[H]ow many people have passed through the [congregation's] schools? Very many. Very many. Big or small, ministers' wives, presidents' wives, what. And you will always find the greater section of the country wanting their, their children to be educated by the sister, by the religious, because they know there is some moral output there, input to their children (UI 368 - 375).*

As they are considered good, they are thought of as role models to young women (six comments). A sister in Kenya believes that young people look to them to find Christ. 'The young people are always looking at us and they want to see the religious people who are living the authentic and integral life .... the young people want to see Christ in us' (KQ2 1064 - 1066). In addition, there were 13 comments about young girls being attracted to religious life because of the sisters' behaviour. Authenticity and being truthful to their principles, coupled with sisters' capacity to love and care for others is what attracts new candidates to religious life.

*They see us, sisters, as people who, who can love, someone who see, she's, she can be in need of love and no one can tell, I love you, or can give something to that person and when they come to you, you show that love and someone feels it and said, yes, me too, maybe I can become a sister because of that sister (TK 586 - 590).*

People expect sisters to behave well at all times and be good examples to others. This means that they are under continuous scrutiny and when they do not behave in the way people expect them to, especially



if they fail to keep their vows, it drives people away from the Church (ten comments). There is one comment from a sister in Malawi describing how scandals in the Catholic Church have diminished the respect people have for sisters, but most of these comments concern individual sisters misbehaving. Social media is especially damaging as people can share their misdemeanours with the wider community, as this comment shows.

*[S]ometimes many people consider us to be perfect always as religious, perfect in this, perfect in that since in most cases we are examples to them ... when they see any mistake done or when they hear of any mistake done they become discouraged, and when they come to know about our failures, weaknesses, if you consider these ones which are, which are public which come out in newspapers, television, ... WhatsApp these days, ... Facebook, anything can be published and it remains a challenge that whether it is true or false or what, some become discouraged because they know we are their examples, we are their role models. So, it remains a challenge to live an exemplary life which is sometimes difficult since we are human (UQ 177 – 188).*

Sisters know that they must be very careful of how they act and behave in public if they don't want to lose the respect of others. The problem is that people are not forgiving because they see sisters as almost perfect and holy as we will discuss in the following section.

## Women of God, women of prayer

As sisters are considered women of God they are expected to pray and to be seen to pray. Because of this, their time is seen as valuable and sisters claim people do not want to take them away from their prayers. 'Nobody will excuse us religious if we don't pray' (UE 820 – 827). Sisters place prayer at the core of their religious life and understand their commitment to prayer as one of the distinguishing features of religious life. They appreciate people asking them to pray for them because they see intercessory prayer as part of their apostolate.

The wearing of the habit is the most visible sign of religious life. It is the first thing that people see and is a further confirmation that they have dedicated their lives to God. In total there were 16 comments about the habit as a signifier of, and witness to, religious life. In the following example a sister from

Kenya talks about being 'marked by the habit' that sets them apart from the world and transforms them into signs of God's presence.

*....[W]hatever we do we are always called to remember whenever we see the religious marked by the habit ... we remind people of the presence of God, because whenever we see a religious we see the presence of God. So, in that way we are witnessing even without words (KC1 338 – 348).*

Furthermore, sisters believe that the habit reiterates the image of religious women as simple and modest: women not interested in banalities such as fashion. This is in contradiction with the stereotype of women as overly concerned with their appearance, and dressed to attract men, as this sister from Zambia states.

*Then we are also... very keen or rather it's much emphasized to wear our religious habits. I think as [Congregation ZG], we are one of the congregations that have kept the habit up to today, a very long one, long sleeved, up to the neck, and so there is that dignity, as well as modesty in our dress so that actually comes out very much and we do not compete with women out there. Because by wearing the same dress every day, the same colour, I will not want to go and buy what is on the market, what is on fashion today there is this, because I have my habit which shows the simplicity in me as a religious woman (ZG 86 – 93).*

In all these comments it is evident that people in general have a good opinion of sisters; in fact, it seems that they are considered nearly perfect. However, sometimes the purpose and nature of religious life is not well understood and that is what we are going to look at in the following section.

## Misconceptions about religious life and sisters' purpose

We found eight comments in which sisters complain that sometimes they and their apostolates, are misunderstood. There are people who do not understand what religious life means and they are surprised that sisters do not get married and that they live in community. Not understanding their mission or the purpose of religious life means that some people see sisters as no different from other service providers and do not realise that their apostolates have an evangelising dimension. '.... [T]he community sees us as irrelevant; they see us like professionals, and they see us like white collar professionals' (UF 1424 – 1436).

In addition, there were eight comments about people's perceptions of sisters as rich; an unfair portrayal according to them as they see themselves as struggling financially as is noted in Chapter 10 on financial sustainability. This false impression leads to people expecting and even demanding sisters to help them. Also, people find it confusing to reconcile their accepted image of the poor sister, bound by the vow of poverty with the image of a sister with financial resources.

*The people sometimes, they are confused. They are questioning us to say are these really religious people? How can a religious person drive a nice car like this? Of course, in some situations well, it's worth it to drive a car because of the conditions of where the missions are. We need a strong car, but they do not understand. Also, there are some bit of exaggerations how we are furnishing our houses. (ZG 169 – 175).*

Furthermore, some people question whose side the sisters are on as sometimes they seem to be serving the rich. Well-resourced institutions, with high fees, for example, that do not cater for the poor put congregational apostolates on the same level as businesses. Sisters are aware that having institutions that serve the rich contradicts their mission, again, as discussed in the Chapter on financial sustainability and there were eight comments about sisters justifying why they had expensive institutions and the steps they were taking to make them more inclusive.

*Apart from striking a balance. I think its high time we made our.....our intentions known, like we could have a private school charging lot of money, but have a percentage out of those profits to plough back to the poor people, the poor children in the same school, we may say 10 or 20 we support them and the PTA, the... the parents... (...) they have to know and take it as a deliberate policy, so that as we discuss, they know that they are rich people and poor families so that we also keep that preferential love for the poor. It could be a hospital, it could any entity that we enter in, and otherwise they will take us as we have said as business women (ZB 648 – 655).*

Religious life in these five countries in Africa still has a relatively short history and is relatively little understood. Therefore, many people find it difficult to understand the notion of a community of single women as we will discuss in the following segment.

## The concept of 'Africa' and religious life as a challenge to African values and traditional gender roles

Sisters sometimes refer to themselves as 'African' and they talk about African 'culture', 'values', 'traditions' and 'point of view' as homogenous, in other words as something that all sisters born in the continent share. These values are rarely specified except when sisters discuss what is expected of women in this society in terms of behaviour and roles. Here sisters have a very clear vision of what it means to be a woman in these countries. There are also mentions of African values when sisters talk about family life in these countries. Yet again, sisters refer to family life in a very homogenous and idealistic way, where everything is shared, and all members contribute to the wellbeing of the whole; individualism and selfishness have no place in this model. It is not surprising then, that this ideal family becomes the foundation on how sisters understand, and live, community life as was mentioned on page 30. Thus, the concept of Africa seems to be relegated to very specific aspects. In the discussions, for example, there were no mentions of inculturation, a topic very much debated by African theologians.<sup>46</sup> In addition, sisters rarely questioned the concept of Africa as a unit, and although they recognise and acknowledge differences within countries, regions and tribes, they did not discuss the nature of these.

Regarding gender, there were 15 comments that describe how religious life challenges traditional African values and women's expected roles. In these comments, sisters say that cultural gender norms make religious life difficult to understand and accept. There are two aspects that are countercultural: adult women living in community and not getting married and women remaining chaste and not having children. This last point seems to be the most challenging to African societies. A sister from Tanzania argues that some tribes believe that having a child constitutes leaving a mark, a legacy in the community. In other words, it gives women importance within the

community. A woman without children is 'barren' and lacking something essential to her definition of femaleness (TA 549 – 554). Thus, the community and even the sisters' own families may see them as abnormal and may find it difficult to understand their choice. The following comment is an example of this.

*Let's look at the challenge in living the vows. Our vows are not understandable in African culture; that is, the religious life does not exist in the tradition, and culture of Africans. And the community does not understand us who have volunteered to dedicate ourselves to live this life. And we face those challenges often because the society believes that, a woman or a man who reaches 18 years and above should get married and bear children. Now they are surprised to see an African girl gathering in a place neither does she get married or bear children. They pose questions most of the times and think that we are not perfect. Now, the challenge we have is to explain and still teach them about the meaning of the vows and what religious life requires. Slowly some begin to understand and see that the life of dedication and sacrifice intercessions and prayers, and they pray for us (TJ 350 – 361).*

Up to now we have looked at sisters' lives, choices and behaviour through the eyes of the people around them. In the following section we will look at how sisters see themselves and the impact their work has on others.

46. For a detailed discussion see Baawobr, R. 2017. *Consecrated Life in Africa: Chances and Challenges* <https://mafrsaprovince.com/tag/solwezi/>; Burke, J. 2001. *Towards the Inculturation of Religious Life in Africa*, Paulines: Nairobi; and Gifford, P. 2015. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*. Hurst & Co: London.

## How sisters see themselves

These sets of comments are about sisters' perceptions of themselves as women religious living and working in an African country. We will start by looking at how they see their apostolates and how they describe the impact of their work on the poor. We will then analyse what it means for them to be a woman and what characteristics this entails. Finally, we will look at how sisters see themselves as different from others, those that are not in religious life.

### Available and going where no one goes

There are 72 comments where sisters talk about being available to go wherever they are sent; they understand this availability and freedom as resulting from being vowed religious. However, sisters not only go where they are sent, they often choose to go where no one goes in terms of ministry (14 comments). They go to remote areas, with no easy access and difficult living conditions; peripheries inhabited by poor people. Sisters describe how they live without comforts and without complaining and how sometimes, they even risk their lives to serve the poorest of the poor. The following is a good example of how a sister describes her congregation's dedication to the poor.

*Sisters of [Congregation UL] serve in the most remotest parts of Uganda characterized by landslides, mountainous landscapes, seasonal roads, low income earners, low standards of living and high cost of living, early pregnancies, school drop outs, high rates of HIV and AIDS and others. As Sisters of [Congregation UL], we work in [place names], where most congregations have refused to go and work because of the low domain, aspects and risks to lives. Our sisters work in these areas share the challenges with these native people without complaining (UL 425 - 432).*

There were seven comments where sisters talk about their total availability to serve the poor. It means that sisters go beyond their duty to serve them and help them holistically, attempting to address the needs of both body and spirit. Sisters bring the people they serve closer to God; they nurture their students spiritually and reach the families, the community. In summary, they go the extra mile and they do this because they care about the people they serve, and they do their duties with love and compassion. '...[W]e can offer service with

a difference we are supposed to serve these people and go an extra mile doing something exceptional rather than what any other person can do' (KO 321 - 323). In general sisters claim that their work transforms lives and has an impact on the people they serve (ten comments). They are there for those who need them as the sister below describes their work.

*So, the sisters, they play a big role in the society; we are helping in feeding the hungry, educating the children who are coming from poor families. And in doing so, we bring the light to the world because the work which we do, it brings joy in the hearts of the people and the people they come closer to God because they see the goodness of God through the work the sisters do. So, we are like the light to the world, we are like the salt to the world because we are changing the world, making a better place for the people to live (MB 420 - 425).*

A further aspect of availability is that living in community and according to publicly professed vows gives them a freedom that many do not have, a freedom of movement and paradoxically, of choice. It makes it possible to go where they are needed, without the encumbrance of a family, or of material possessions. Sisters' choices may not be easy to understand, for why would they renounce having a family of their own, owning a house, wearing different clothes every day? A sister in Tanzania argues that they live in this way in imitation of Christ.'... [T]hat is why we become a bit different from the rest in the society, we are ... like an example of Christ himself, to cleanse the world, bring salvation, to progress on with the faith started by Christ himself' (TF 187 - 195). Sisters believe that the way they live and the choices they make makes them different but also makes them very much relevant in society (ZE 137 - 141).



## Mothers to all and femininity as a gift

There were 30 comments in which sisters defined themselves as mothers to all. Motherhood is seen as a gift to all women and that includes sisters. As such, they look after others, as any mother would do and because they don't have biological children, they are available to all, without discriminating against anyone. As a sister from Tanzania stated, if she were married, she would have a few children but as a sister she has many and '... that is another joy of my consecrated chastity which has brought joy in me' (TB 595 - 598). As mothers they are committed, protective, compassionate, welcoming, serving others. Motherhood for them is 'bringing life... carrying a person...' (TA 843 - 849). As we mentioned before, motherhood allows women to leave a mark in society so being mothers to all becomes a symbolic way of leaving a legacy. The gift of motherhood attracts people to them. It makes them approachable. They are mothers in imitation of the Virgin Mary.

*So, our role as religious women in the church we are called to imitate Mother Mary and, in the imitation, we become that mother and we serve the church. It is not a must we do practically but our way of living, we witness the Christ who is in us. So, we have a big role in the church and our role is to become a mother, to be like our mother Mary and to offer what we have. If we have, if we have material things yes, but we offer our whole life as our mother Mary offered herself to God (KC3 313 - 318).*

In addition, sisters see themselves as having gendered qualities (22 comments). Women are essentially spontaneous, generous, sensitive, maternal, compassionate, kind, forgiving. Essentialist characteristics are described as feminine gifts (as opposed to masculine gifts), feminine qualities, the feminine touch or the feminine dimension. Women were created to 'bear and nourish life' and these characteristics make them 'unique' and special. Because of these gendered qualities, sisters claim in six comments that they do what no one else is willing to do; they believe they have a special role that no one else fulfils as these activities are seen as specifically female and are tasks that men do not do either because they don't know how to or because they are not willing to do them. Sisters give examples of differentiated roles in the church, as already discussed in the earlier chapter on ecclesial roles and power dynamics between sisters and clergy. In this chapter we argue that these roles are

gendered and assigned to sisters because they are women who are supposed to have specific 'gifts' to fulfil these tasks. Here is an example.

*And of course, as women we have the feminine gifts which the church cannot do without them. The Lord in His wisdom has not given anyone all the gifts. So, we have the feminine gifts they have also the masculine gifts, and they are all needed. So, we have our part, ah, I can't imagine the church without women [giggles] impossible! Even parishes where there are no sisters, they are always a bit lame, and they are always the priests are very much aware they are missing something. So, we have our role and we do our part, eh (TA 818 - 823).*

## Identities as multi-layered

In this section we have tried to compose a picture of sisters' sense of identity using different perspectives. We know that it is a partial view as we did not ask people around sisters how they see religious life. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how sisters see themselves, as different to and in relation to others, and how these differences help them make an impact, either by challenging cultural norms or by being available to all. Sisters have chosen a life that is not motivated by greed but by love of God and others; this life helps them care for the poor. In addition, in their discussions, sisters remind us that they are gendered individuals; they strongly believe that they have essential characteristics that make them different to men and were created for a different purpose. This belief may put them at times in a position of disadvantage when dealing with local priests and may limit the roles they are given and that they are willing to take.



## Chapter 10 Sustainability, poverty, empowerment

### Introduction

The difficulties of achieving financial sustainability were discussed in all of the groups, in part because one of the guidance questions for Stage 2 asked about challenges to religious life and proposed the three identified by the Kasisi consultation meeting as examples (of which financial sustainability was one). However, this was also because most congregations agree that achieving a balance between living their own vowed poverty and engaging with poverty in their external environment is an important issue that greatly affects them and their apostolates.

This chapter explores sisters' thoughts and worries about their congregations' financial situation and about poverty: their own poverty due to a lack of resources, their experience of living in accordance with the vow of poverty and the poverty that surrounds them in their environment. The sisters in the discussion group asks themselves the same question as in the Kasisi consultation meeting: how to balance their own financial needs with their impulse and call to care for the poor. In addition, this chapter will discuss how sisters define and characterise the poor and the ways in which they serve them.

### Sustainability of congregations

#### Challenges

The discussions concerning sustainability are not uniform since congregations experience different realities. Congregations of pontifical right might not face the same economic difficulties as diocesan congregations and small congregations in rural areas might experience poverty in their surroundings differently to those in a big city. Furthermore, from the discussions it is clear that poverty is relative; the sisters' own needs are not comparable to those of the people they serve. Despite different contexts, all the congregations in some measure acknowledged that it was difficult to balance their needs with the needs of those they serve and sisters' words give the impression that achieving financial sustainability is not easy as was conveyed in 43 comments. Here is an example of sisters feeling overwhelmed by their financial status.

*Okay on financial I don't know if we are limping or whether we are standing on one leg? Aren't we really limping? We are crawling. One said we are standing on one leg. If we stand on one leg, then we are still strong. I think we are living from hand to mouth because all the little which comes in all is consumed. And is that good? Hand to mouth? But it has to be said it is a challenge. It is a danger because hand to mouth which means from the garden to mouth (UL 838 - 847).*

From the discussions, it is difficult to know for certain if the financial situation of the sisters is deteriorating or is the same as before, but some do refer to changing circumstances that affect their financial situation. There were ten comments about how congregations that are reliant on financial support from abroad no longer receive as much financial support from international sources as before. For example, congregations that used to

depend on donors argue that the rate of funding has slowed down, and its focus has changed. The perception seems to be that previously the congregations' core costs were funded, but now the focus is on supporting projects serving the poor. One sister from Zambia argues that money from donors should be used to feed the sisters so that they can free up their time for non-remunerated apostolates.

Some congregations report that they still receive money from donors especially when compared to congregations in other parts of the developing world and sisters believe this is because of widespread conditions of poverty in the African continent.

*...[S]o here in Africa, we depend on the NGOs and the external support. So, this is clear, you know, I mean for our projects, our programmes, we are not able to do that with our own funds. We need the NGOs you know' (MA 452 - 458).*

This dependence on external aid makes them extremely vulnerable to donors changing their priorities. It also means congregations are not free to pursue their own objectives; they are tied to the donors' agenda and guidelines.

Second, international congregations now receive less money from their sisters abroad (nine comments from six different congregations). The sisters are aware that the demographic composition of sisters in Europe and North America is changing as numbers are fewer, sisters are getting older and dying, or they are relying more on their pensions and are no longer able to send as much money as before. There were also comments about how sisters in Africa may need to help sisters in Europe in the near future. These remarks show that sisters in Africa are aware of the changes that are happening in congregations in Europe and North America. They also show how interconnected and transnational religious life is: changes in the global north have consequences on the global south. In the following quote a sister from an international congregation in Zambia relates what is happening in her own congregation.

*When we think of sustainability today and we think of our mission, it has a different connotation altogether. Initially, when we had our missionary sisters coming from [Country in Europe], from other places, they came, and they had sources of income. Today we have to think and plan for ourselves how are we going to live? How are we going even to care for ourselves in old age? So, we've to have a double mount to it. First of all, sustaining our institutions, sustaining ourselves in order for us to sustain the mission of God because if we are hungry, if we are naked will not go anywhere (ZF 310 - 314).*



*When we think of sustainability today and we think of our mission, it has a different connotation altogether.*

There are other conditions that affect the financial situation of congregations. First, with a total of ten comments, is the perception that poor people often depend on the sisters' help. Sisters are aware that they have a responsibility towards the people that depend on them and they feel that they need to respond to their needs not only with prayers and their presence but also with material things:

*When we go to visit the sick or the prisoners, we cannot go empty-handed. What we earn from our collections and from works of our hands, is what we can share with people in need... We cannot say, let's pray so that a sick person gets healing, it's merely impossible. This patient might be starving for three days ... Now when we are rendering our service, we have to, I mean we try to take with us something to console these people in need, the prisoners, or the sick. When we have something to give them, then even our prayers get meaning. So, we go to console them by prayers and material things which come out of the work of our hands (TM 504 - 512).*

Additionally, people not only need but also expect financial help from sisters, as they believe they have unlimited resources. There are ten comments about perceptions of sisters as rich, a perception which seems true for international congregations (seven out of the ten comments) and according to the sisters, is widespread. For example, they claim that all service users, regardless of their economic needs, can sometimes be unwilling to pay for the services sisters provide. The comments below are from sisters from an international congregation who feel they themselves are struggling financially but that it is not recognised by the wider society; conditions have changed but perceptions of them have not.

*Concerning the challenge of our sustainability and meeting the needs for the poor. ... somebody was saying should the poor people who are coming to our hospital ... should they pay, pay to be treated... and so the response from this another person was that actually they should, because things are not as it was before, because before people when the missionary came actually everything was free, people could come to the hospital be treated for*

*free, to the schools they could not pay anything but now, most people they try think, even sisters being missionary schools they can still be helped without paying any coin. But looking at today's challenges, people should pay because the economy has gone high, the support we used to get is not there, and so to support these poor people even though we really are still trying is, is still a very big challenge, even to make them understand (KC2 672 - 687).*

There are two other issues that impact on congregations' finances. The first set of eight comments concerns parishes not always able or willing to support the sisters financially. The complexity of the relationship between sisters and the clergy has already been discussed in Chapter 8. Here we will simply mention that sometimes sisters have to withdraw from ministries and look for paid opportunities elsewhere because the congregation needs the income. Another aspect, mentioned in three comments, that impacts on finances) is that not all sisters receive a salary. Thus, the money that some sisters earn needs to support all the other sisters and sometimes this is not enough as a sister from Zambia relates.

*... [T]he only money that the congregation depend on is the salaries. Now in a case maybe we have here is a big community, a community of 13 sisters, and they are only 2 or 3 salaries, it's not a complaint but it's a reality of our communities, and then only have 3 salaries, and then when you put the 3 salaries together and then you share it, you find that it is completely gone (ZB 1017 - 1027).*



## Balance between the needs of the congregation and the needs of the poor

Using the same language as was used in the 2016 Kasisi consultation, all groups discussed how to achieve a balance between their own need for self-reliance and their commitment to serve the poor. We have a total of 51 comments about this. Sisters acknowledge that their financial situation is not ideal; with the money they have they need to provide for all the sisters and support their institutions. However, they also need money to help others, thus a balance is very difficult to achieve. For example, a sister from a diocesan congregation in Tanzania is worried about what the sisters in formation are going to eat and at the same time, she says she is 'frustrated' as the congregation is not able to help those in need as much as they would like to (TK 461 – 474). A sister from a local congregation in Zambia mentions that it is not fair to cover the sisters' basic needs and tell the poor 'to continue praying and God loves you and all the beautiful consoling words on a hungry stomach' (ZE 389 – 394).

The quote below, from a sister in Tanzania, exemplifies how these sisters understand achieving a balance. It is not about making money per se or completely dedicating their resources and time to the poor, but rather about the continuity of the congregation's mission in favour of those in need. It means looking after their sisters so they can continue with their pastoral activities.

*It is absolutely true. To balance the religious life, to be, I mean the way of managing our congregations and rendering services, we have to balance them all to ensure that the congregation stands firm and it does not lose its direction. My point is we should not concentrate more on making money and forget pastoral activities, or we base completely on the pastoral activities and fail even to pay for our medication, and at the end the congregation dies (TJ 475 – 483).*

Some groups argue that they have attained a balance between attending to the needs of the congregation and their apostolates. Most of the ten comments on this come from diocesan congregations in Tanzania. In these comments they list some of the things they do to earn an income, with examples given ranging from farming, technical education such as tailoring and construction, to applying for funds from donors. However, the reality for some congregations, explained in some 17 comments, is that a balance has not been achieved; the poor get a smaller share of the congregations' resources. In addition, sisters acknowledge that their institutions and the services they provide do not reach those in real need. They argue that running good and effective institutions is not cheap and so, they need to charge for their services, which makes them inaccessible to poor people. This in turn reinforces the view that sisters are rich. The comment below is about admitting their shortcomings regarding what they give to the poor.

*I am sorry to say that occasionally we may have found ourselves perhaps looking for help financial help, financial support....The poor get a smaller share but the congregation gets a bigger share which is very unfortunate (KO 262 - 267).*



## What to do?

The discussions about sustainability usually touch on ideas of what the sisters are or could be doing to improve their economic situation. The most mentioned solution, with 32 comments, is to develop new forms of income-generating activities. A sister from an international congregation in Zambia thinks 'we are fond of hospitals and schools and yet there is no profit, but maybe we should take another way...' (ZB 1142 - 1143). Other congregations suggest going back to more traditional occupations such as animal husbandry and vegetable growing.

In a group of 21 comments, sisters explore a second suggestion, which is for them to be trained and empowered. Highly trained sisters can get better paid positions and are also able to choose where to serve; they are not confined to their local parishes. In addition, sisters can serve in their own institutions, instead of paying outside workers, thus saving the congregation's money. A good education also prepares the sisters better for their ministries and builds sisters' confidence. Here is an example of what the sisters said.

*The other challenge is that we lack knowledge and skills which will allow us to render the best service, and from which we could be earning our daily bread, that we could break and share with others. I see this as a challenge in living the charism of our congregation (TG 342 - 348).*

The third solution in terms of number of comments is to trust in God's providence. In some 18 comments the sisters express the need to trust in God as he will reward them for doing his work. These comments do not provide examples of how this help is translated into practice. Rather, they are an exhortation for sisters to stop worrying about money all the time and do the work they were called to do as the quote below shows.

*I believe that when you give, God will have his ways of giving back. In other words, if we do our work, if we live out our charism, the reason for our joy and ...If we dedicate ourselves with what we have, even when the personnel we have are not well trained or maybe are not trained at all, even if we do not have many sisters, if we listen attentively to the needs of the people... to the needs of the church, God will take care of us (KQ1 679 - 684).*

As noted before, not many sisters receive a salary, so another suggestion is to find a balance between sisters who are remunerated for their apostolates and sisters that are not (eight comments). As all of the salaries are pooled together, the money sisters earn enables the community to fund other apostolates. However, a sister from Uganda warns that receiving a salary should not distract them from their main objective which is working for the needy and so those that work in paying institutions should make an effort to go out and reach for the poor. '[E]ven those people who are working in offices to spare some time, sacrifice some time to go out and reach and reach and meet those poor people in their different villages' (UC 787 - 802).

Other suggestions from sisters on how to address the issue of financial sustainability include: fundraising from people and agencies who are willing to help them and that have trust in the work that sisters do (six comments), using sisters' gifts and talents for the good of the congregation in order to generate resources (five comments), and simply working harder (six comments). In this last set of comments sisters believe that it is time to go back to the congregation's roots and founding vision and work as hard as sisters used to do in the early days of the congregation. This vision almost always seems to entail living more simply, and making a living with their hands, through manual work. The following quote is an example for this last group.

*I think we also need to encourage people to be hard working. The spirit all sisters had we need to encourage the spirit we have I think we want to go back to the roots and see how were they working to make the congregation reach where it is? We have become very lady, small thing a garden even people can prefer buying vegetables in the market, but they have land around them. So, I think we also have to build that spirit of hard work for the betterment of our sustainability (UL 1286 - 1292).*

## Living vowed poverty

As stated in the preceding sections, most congregations would argue that they are far from achieving self-sufficiency. However, there were five comments about how their economic situation is still better than that of the community that surrounds them. Nevertheless, there are eight comments in which sisters describe themselves as poor and feel their own poverty at two levels: the first one is about their incapacity to help others if they don't have enough resources. This causes them frustration as we will explore later. The second level is that sisters feel that they cannot control their finances as this quote shows.

*... [P]overty is, really, it's not that we have everything, no. I also feel deprived many times; so, I cannot make, eh, phone calls as I like, to my, eh, to the persons whom I, want to, like my father. I cannot call him every day; I cannot afford, isn't? So, there, is, eh, there is that; even what I like to eat, I don't care, isn't? So, we may feel and say, have everything; but, not everything according to how I want! You understand, know? Yes, so, there is so much deprivation in poverty (TB 615 – 621).*

Sisters have voluntarily renounced worldly possessions and financial control but that doesn't mean it is an easy thing to do. In addition, sisters' demands for material objects such as phones, cars, shoes are sometimes unattainable as the congregations must cover basic needs of all sisters first. In fact, there were eight comments about separating sisters' real 'needs' from their 'wants'. '... [S]ometimes to look at our needs, our real needs, it, is it this a real need before I spend my money. If not, how shall I spend? How we use it? For what? Is it necessary for the mission?' (KR 510 – 516). An excessive desire for material objects is, according to the sisters, a threat to their way of life especially in light of the vow of poverty, a defining element of sisters' lives.

The sisters' own poverty is evidenced by, and also a product of, the low level of sisters' education, as highlighted in comments from two diocesan congregations in Tanzania. Sisters admit that their level of education is low; this makes it difficult for them to talk confidently to people who are more educated than them. This is especially relevant when evangelising. '... [O]ur education is surely not enough. With secondary school education, how will you reach a degree holder? (TM 713 – 716).

When the congregation does not have enough funds to cover their needs and those of the people around them, several things happen. The most commonly discussed, with ten comments, is that apostolates are stopped or reduced. A sister from Tanzania talks about 'failing to do their mission' because of a lack of resources (TM 692 – 696). Another sister from a different congregation in Tanzania attributes this 'failure' to the fact that they are not 'self-sustainable' (TG 334 – 341). One sister from Uganda describes how the lack of even small amounts of money for transport force a sister to withdraw from an apostolate and how the local church was unable to help.

Recruitment and formation of new vocations are also affected when funds are low, as expressed in four comments. Sisters need money to support those in initial formation and there is the concern that new entrants are made to help in the community or to generate income instead of being able to concentrate on formation. In addition, congregations need funds to promote vocations (leaflets and participating in seminars, for example). The following comment is from a Ugandan sister from a diocesan congregation.

*...[B]ecause of the need for funds, the formees should be exposed to manual work especially the garden, you know field work also affects a bit of the timetable of the formation instead of the conference and then sometimes they go past time, or have to do at least quality work in order to also get food produce to sustain. This also should be looked into especially in our case - seriously it came to our attention and we try to find ways how it could also because now like in first year a novice is canonical year is for deepening spirituality but because of that need it was somehow being interrupted (UF 1335 - 1344).*

Sisters agree in 11 comments that the search for financial stability should not threaten their way of life. They should consider carefully their motives for applying for project funds and how these projects relate to, or are in line with, their charism. Furthermore, sisters should not look for apostolates which are paid, but do not fit with their charism. Finally, the search for funds can also affect their community life and divert them from the core purpose of their mission (or their core mission of evangelisation). However, sisters worry about their economic situation. The following quote shows this ambivalence between their need



for money and the need to preserve the nature of religious life.

*... [A]re (we) walking into all these projects to make money for what? At the end of the day are we going to you know focus on these projects to the detriment of actually living our charism and giving witness to our charism but it is true that you know it is a subject myself also that one thing I was worried because I was thinking ah, where will be tomorrow? Will money be there to sustain us? (ZC UK 540 - 547).*

### **Sisters' understanding of the vow of poverty**

There were 33 comments about the vow of poverty and how it guides and defines sisters' lives. Sisters argue that the vow of poverty for apostolic religious is not about hardship. '... [P]overty in religious life does not mean living in poor conditions to the extent of missing food' (TF 305 - 307). Rather, the vow of poverty is a call to detach themselves from the desire for material things and not be motivated by making money for themselves. Material resources serve a purpose, but the accumulation of money should not be their ultimate goal. It is more important to be generous and share what they have with their own sisters and with people outside of the community and for that to happen they should renounce ownership.

*I find that I am called to do, to live with my sisters, we put ... whatever we have so that we can share with others. ... I do not have anything that I own myself you cannot say I have this house I have this it is mine. Everything is together (KR 163 - 167).*

The vow of poverty means living a life in imitation of Christ who lived a life of poverty. In this quote the sister puts Jesus as an example of the vow of poverty and, like him, she exhorts the other sisters to share what they have.

*The vow of poverty is an element that we, we have chosen freely to live it as Jesus Christ lived it because we are following Christ of the gospel ... (he) came to show us the way by becoming man like us, living in, in poor family in Nazareth and so as each one of us was called we came to follow that Christ of the gospel. ... I feel that my presence as a religious am to live a life in simplicity by disowning*

*riches of the earth, by using what is available in the right way, that is by sharing my talents with my sisters, sharing my talents with the people around me, giving knowledge to those who may not have knowledge about God, who may need assistance by bringing them to Christ (UD 1089 - 1104).*

Moreover, detachment from the material world enables sisters to be available to dedicate themselves to serve others. Without the burden of material belongings sisters are able to go where needed. This availability and the freedom to move are characteristics of apostolic religious life and demonstrate sisters' readiness to serve those in need. In summary, the vow of poverty is in itself an enabler for sisters as they try to live religious life more authentically, as this sister explains in a rather poetic way.

*...[A]nd then I find joy now the way I am living... I find myself like a rose with the thorns and the flower... I find myself blooming though I have where to grow... poverty, the vow of poverty it helped me to become who I am (KR 139 - 144).*

The vow also gives witness to the outside world that it is possible to lead a less materialistic life and, therefore, this vow marks sisters as different and as role models to others. A sister in Kenya states how sisters can be tempted like everyone else, but the vow of poverty gives her a framework for discernment and making choices, so that she can resist greed and become an example to others.

There were 14 comments, all from sisters in Uganda referring to breaking the vow of poverty. They described the ways in which sisters disregarded this vow. Some examples of this include: not sharing what they have with other members of the community; failing to live a simple life and giving too much importance to material things. The sisters listed greed, envy and the influence of a materialistic world as some of the main causes leading sisters to break this vow. Thus, living the vow of poverty is not without its challenges, especially when sisters are faced with outside influences and competition among sisters as to who owns what. These challenges and how they deal with them will be analysed in more detail in the chapter on distractions to religious life.



## Engaging with poverty in their external environment

We found ten comments where sisters describe poverty in their countries and how it affects and marks their everyday lives and their apostolates. Some of them see poverty in the region as a result of global conditions of inequality and a financial crisis over which they have no control. Comments from two diocesan congregations in Tanzania describe how a lack of adequate infrastructure make their apostolates harder. Sisters stress that these difficulties do not cause them to give up on their apostolates. However, negotiating these difficulties takes time, and this interferes with their community life.

*Let us say we are in villages where there are no means of transport; the infrastructure is poor, roads are awful, but we have to encounter those difficulties. We walk on foot until we reach these students to educate them in the Word of God. And so, we do not get tired, our mission and objective as a congregation is service giving. We endure, praying to God so that we can cope with the difficulties we encounter (TL 138 – 140).*

Despite the difficulties, there are four comments in which sisters explicitly mention that they have

chosen to live among the poor and share what they have although they do not use the Church's language of the preferential option for the poor as was mentioned on page 51. The lack of financial resources to alleviate poverty causes sisters frustration, expressed in ten comments. They recognise that the poor need more than just prayers and their presence; they need material support, and they have to make choices between these needs and those of their sisters.

*... [T]he student who will be in the school of nursing or in a secondary school may need school fees, but we might not be able to help everybody... Another patient may need hospital fees or prisoner knocks at your door...maybe transport money to go to another station after they are released then we find that we become limited in these areas concerning our service to our sister...(ZH 230 – 235).*

As we discussed before, sisters' resources are scarce so they need to prioritise their needs and devise ways of working with the poor that have an impact as we will discuss next.



## Working with the poor

Many of the sisters' apostolates focus on helping the poor in some way or other. In the sisters' analysis the poor are mainly defined by their lack of financial resources and we do not have much information about them. Even though sisters talk about specific groups such as women, migrants, children, among others, the poor as a category, and what it means to live in poverty are not clearly delineated. In addition, the comments do not specify what kind of relationships sisters establish with them and if they see them as partners or collaborators or if they are only recipients of help. What we know about them, is that there are many and that sisters cannot possibly help them all. In addition, the poor are in a different level than the sisters because although sisters consider themselves financially deprived, they understand that in relation to them, they are better off.

In a small number of comments, sisters specifically reflect on the question of who the poor are. They want to know how to identify those that are in most need of help and they talk about learning to work with new forms of poverty such as refugees, migrants and victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, they feel the concept of poverty needs to be widened to include those that have other needs. In six comments, sisters argue that their apostolates should not only be about providing material help to the poor. For example, there are people who have money but need other types of support such as company or being listened to or need the gift of faith. '[W]e see, the rich ones...those we consider they have everything ... they need to be reached to as well because they may have all those things ... (but) they need Christ in their lives' (ZA 857 – 864).

In the discussion groups sisters talked about how they help and work with the poor (eight comments). In half of these comments, they use the word 'empowerment' to mean helping people. This is done by teaching them skills so they can get better jobs or by facilitating the access to resources such as clean water. The use of the word 'empowerment' does not imply a questioning of the status quo or of enabling self-sufficiency, choice or agency. Here is an example.

*We have sisters who are well skilled and prepared and they are able to look around and see maybe from this it is possible to get maybe water...so that we are empowering these people so that their poorest situation to raise up to a certain level and that will help them to be with dignity which is also very important for us (KQ1 527 – 531).*

Women are very important recipients of sisters' help and there were 12 comments describing how they work with them. In a similar way, they use the word empowerment in six of these comments. When they talk about empowering women, they are really talking about support of some sort, not necessarily intended to contest unequal power relations between men and women. It is mostly about equipping women to better perform what sisters think are natural gender roles such as being wives and mothers. Usually in these comments, women are solely recipients of help; they are not considered agents who can make decisions. In fact, there is only one comment from a sister in Uganda about the need to ask women what they need instead of imposing solutions. In general, most comments are about sisters providing solutions and helping women to get an income. The assumption is that, by helping the women, they are helping the family.

*Sisters empower women to learn how to care for their families and to do some small- scale jobs. So, you know women there is a lot of divorce going on in families, why? Because women are very poor down there. Men don't, some men don't care but as these sisters come into contact with these women, they help them to learn some small, small scale businesses. Small scale jobs to get some little money for self- sustenance (UH ID 212 – 217).*

There are nine comments where sisters use the word 'empowerment' in reference to themselves. They believe empowered sisters are better prepared for their apostolates and, therefore, better qualified to help the poor. They use the word empowerment as a synonym for education and training as the following quote shows.

*... [A]s we continue growing in the, the, congregation, many sisters need to be empowered through education, to be educated in different aspects in life. maybe education, health, may be social life, social apostolates and when we educate them we will be able to take them to, to some of the institutions that need maybe lay people and when we take our sisters who are well equipped in these institutions, we will be saving something in this project and then after a while we will have surplus that will enable us also to have other projects that favour the poor (KC3 239 – 245).*

Even if much of what sisters do and the way they work with the poor is focused on charity there were 14 comments demonstrating their awareness that overcoming poverty is a long-term goal. They want to assist those in poverty to self-sufficiency. ‘... [Y]ou give a fish to someone who is hungry, tomorrow the person will wait for the fish. But if you give a fishing rod, you have given a means of living. That person will not come for you tomorrow’ (KJ 818 – 820). Additionally, helping them is not only about handing them money but treating them with dignity and respect.

It is interesting to note that there were only two comments where sisters see their role as defending the vulnerable and speaking up for others. The two comments came from one sister in Uganda. In these comments, the sister advocates for the vulnerable, mostly women and children. ‘Sisters ... are the voices to the, for the voiceless children and women. We know very well there in the villages and elsewhere, children are vulnerable and women’ (UH ID 202 – 206).

### Discernment in ministry

As mentioned above, sisters see their roles and the support they provide as very varied and ranging from undertaking basic charity work to thinking of the long-term support of people in need. Because of this variety of roles and limited resources, sisters discussed how they discern the need for new or continuing ministries and when doing so, there are two main approaches that they need to take: the first one is reading the signs of the times and the second one is deciding how best to use sisters’ gifts and talents.

Discernment in ministry entails reading the signs of the times, which is explicitly mentioned in 17

comments. This means being attentive to the context in which they live, aware of new needs, open to new ministries and responsive to what God calls them to do. Reading the signs of the times also entails understanding new types of poverty and working out how best to respond. Sisters may require a different set of skills to work in new areas such as alcohol and drug addiction, broken marriages, sex trafficking, among others. Sisters need to discern how this work fits in with their charism and with the characteristics of their congregations.

Discernment in ministry also involves questioning the purpose of their apostolates and/or institutions. For example, should they leave their institutions to the government or their apostolates to other congregations with a charism that is a better fit? With so many congregations, should they be looking for a gap that needs to be addressed? What is God calling them to? As one sister from Kenya says: ‘ministry is a challenge and calls for constant discernment’ (KB 600 – 609). Deciding which sisters to allocate to which ministry should also take into account individual sisters’ interests, gifts and talents. Not doing so risks unhappy sisters, not suited to a particular task and as a sister from Uganda argues: ‘the fruits may not be as expected’ (UK 983 – 990).

---

## Poverty and the impact on sisters’ apostolates

In this section, we have looked at sisters’ thoughts on financial sustainability, their perceptions about achieving or not a balance between attending to their own needs and to those of the people they serve and the suggested paths for self-reliance. In addition, we have looked at how sisters understand their own poverty in view of the vow of poverty and the ways they work with the poor. It is difficult to draw conclusions as individual congregations face different challenges; however, we can affirm that poverty, their own vowed poverty and that in their environment, shapes how sisters live religious life and the choices they make. Poverty is understood mainly as a lack of financial resources and sisters see their role as supporting the poor with immediate help. Thus, they see themselves as providers of charity and seem less concerned with contesting and denouncing inequalities. This of course, does not make their role less important, especially in a context of widespread poverty.

# Chapter 11 Recruitment and initial formation of new members

## Introduction

In this chapter we discuss sisters' thoughts regarding attracting new members. First, we look at the reasons why sisters think new members are important for their mission and this is mainly because young sisters bring life to the congregation and the promise of continuity. Next, we look at the challenges congregations experience during the process of recruitment and discernment. Some of these challenges include young girls coming into religious life for the wrong reasons or having unrealistic expectations. Finally, we look at formation of these young sisters: what is expected of them and what are the main problems experienced during this process. These are mostly related to a lack of sisters willing to take on the role of formators and limited financial resources.

The word recruitment may seem a bit too regimented and even militaristic as a sister from Uganda remarked in one of the groups. However, this is their choice of word when talking about the process of welcoming new members and it was first used by the sisters present at the Kasisi consultation meeting. One of the concerns of the sisters in the meeting was that congregations were not questioning why, and for what reason, they were recruiting new members. These concerns were also voiced in the discussion groups as we will analyse in the following section.

## Reasons to continue to attract new members

Most of the discussions about recruitment started with the belief that there are very good reasons to continue with it. There were only three comments about how obvious it was for congregations to recruit, so they thought it strange that the group in Kasisi had even posed it as a challenge.

*... [W]hen I looked at this question and the way it has been formulated, it took me a little bit aback; because, I said what kind of question that a person wants to ask! We are in the religious community and we want ... the congregation to continue... (TA 544 - 548).*

There were 26 comments in which sisters argued that it's not they who 'recruit' but rather it is the work of God, as a vocation comes from God. 'It is not us deciding let's, let's recruit. Actually, it is God who continues to call young people.... So, I think when we are recruiting, we are being obedient to God who calls' (KQ1 334 - 338). Furthermore, with 19 comments, sisters explain that a vocation is understood to be a gift from God to the Church and congregations know they have a responsibility to take on these girls and form them as this sister in Tanzania expresses it.

*This is a great joy as a response to God; we respond to God by receiving His gift, coming to us through these persons who are coming and receiving them on behalf of the church because they are the gift to the church, yah! (TE 662 - 664).*

When talking about recruitment, the sisters pinpointed several reasons why it was important to encourage and accept new vocations. The first and main reason identified with 48 comments relates to the continuation of the congregation in general. In many of these comments, congregations were compared to living organisms that would die if not tended to. Young vocations are the new life that keeps congregations alive.

*I say that in a family where you don't see young ones being born, it means that family is dead. ... if we are sisters and we don't see the young ones coming up then it means charism is a dying charism (KC1 818 - 822).*

New entrants are also described as the fruit of the congregation's charism; they are a result of a charism that is alive and thriving. '.... [W]e encourage vocations in our congregation to promote the charism of our founder [name] and make it bear fruits. Therefore, we can understand very well that vocations give life to our congregation. Vocations are the essence of the congregation' (T12 440 - 447). Thus, a congregation with new members is considered viable and effective and one that is not attractive to new members will have no future and eventually die.



The second most commonly cited reason, with 46 comments, is because new members are needed to continue Christ's mission. Sisters compare these young girls and women to disciples, especially selected by Jesus to evangelise the world. Young sisters not only continue Christ's mission by being disciples, but they also keep the church alive and this was expressed in seven comments. They rejuvenate the Church and at the same time, provide continuity with its past. New entrants also make Catholicism seem relevant to young people in general as they become examples of the value of living such a life to other girls. In an increasingly secular world joining a religious congregation means a different, more committed way of life is possible. In summary, new members represent a source of hope to the Church.

*...[T]he reason why we recruit the young ones in the formation is to keep the church alive because when the church or even when our congregation, if the old who are ahead of us, sees young live in them they feel encouraged. They feel even if they are dying, they die with a lot of hope, with a lot of calmness, without any fear that what we have invested is going to a waste. They believe that there are people will put things in place. And this gives the joy of recruiting the members that the lord wants (KC2 596 - 603).*

A third reason to recruit is to continue with the congregation's apostolates, which is expressed in 26 comments. New members are needed to staff existing apostolates and increase the congregation's service to the poorest, as sisters think that poverty is on the rise while the number of vocations is decreasing according to sisters' perceptions. The following quote is from a sister in Tanzania who talks about increasing needs in the world that sisters have to tend to.

*The world is in constant change. There is this integration of values in the world; increase in needs, such as the new poor, the immigrants, refugees, trafficked people, alcoholics, drug abusers, sick; the list is endless of the people in need, and the labourers are few, as we've already mentioned (TB 915 - 919).*

Sisters also mention the sharing of the charism of the congregation as a fourth reason to recruit (33 comments). The sisters argue that the charism is a very valuable element of religious life, to be looked

after and handed on to new generations. But it is not only the charism that needs to be preserved for the future; according to 11 comments, the congregation's patrimony – its identity, traditions and history as well as the purpose of the founder/foundress are also important elements that should be kept alive because congregations are unique institutions that should be valued.

Finally, a fifth reason to recruit is because sisters want to pass on to others their love of God, of the charism of the congregation, of the congregation itself and more generally, the love of religious life to young women who are being called (15 comments). Here is an example of a sister manifesting her joy of being a religious.

*I think all of us would witness to the fact that uh, it just gives joy to serve the Lord in the way we do. And so for me, I even consider, you know, inviting others to come and experience this joy that I am experiencing as I am giving service to, to God (ZG 438 - 440).*

All of these are seen as good reasons to recruit. However, in some discussion groups there were mentions of reasons that were not good enough. These were very similar to those reasons considered good. For example, there were ten comments where sisters expressed that recruiting new members only to fill in their apostolates was an inadequate reason to do so. 'Are we recruiting candidates or girls to become consecrated persons or to run our institutions?' (MA 503 - 504). Related to this, there were five comments asking if recruiting for the sake of the congregation's sustainability was valid. A sister from Zambia asks '[f]or what are we recruiting the girls? To fill up our houses? To help us uh, get on government payroll and get some money so that we sustain ourselves in the community?' (ZG 385 - 387). Finally, there were three comments stating that reviving a dying congregation was not a good enough reason to recruit (mainly when talking about European communities). In other words, recruiting for continuity's sake. The difference between perceptions of good and bad reasons to recruit depends on the context of which the lives of the sisters take place and their understanding of the purpose of religious life.

## New members: what is expected of them and what they expect from religious life

As seen in the previous section, there seems to be a consensus that attracting new vocations is not only about sharing of faith and love for religious life but necessary if congregations are to continue with their apostolic work. There were 14 comments that expressed worries that the number of new vocations was falling. Ten of these comments came from three congregations in Zambia (two international and one diocesan congregation) and although it is difficult to know for sure, it may be that recruiting new sisters is becoming more difficult in this country. For the sisters in Zambia, the main problem with falling numbers is that there are not enough sisters to cover the needs of the people they serve. 'Now, the challenge in this area is that the needs are more than that we can do; we have been overwhelmed by the needs of the people' (ZE 277 – 278).

Sisters find different explanations for the falling numbers of vocations. One of these is the arrival of new ideas and values from western countries such as family planning. This reduces the number of children per family; sisters believe that '... this lifestyle will also be a challenge in the future because with this system of family planning, there will be no more youths joining religious life...' (TP 428 – 435). Also, sisters think that falling numbers are related to younger generations having different values from their generation. They are more interested in material things, status and wealth than in serving others as this sister from Uganda argues.

*It can be a challenge to recruit girls because when they come now imagine these days children from home, they have phones. You bring a girl in the congregation and say you have to hand over your phone to your mistress. Who will accept? Nobody. Secondly the way they are treated right from home is quite different from how they are going to be trained. Nobody will abide with us, with that. So, it is becoming a challenge today. When they come today then they see how you are putting up rules they feel then they remember home they say 'no this is not the way' then they prefer being at home. So even if you go back and recruit you have to convince them (UO 927 – 933).*

If recruitment stops, then congregations can suffer the same fate as European and North American congregations that are closing convents and are disappearing. In addition, fewer vocations mean either more work for existing sisters or an impact on the quality and intensity of existing apostolates. Sisters argue that they already try to address too many needs without the necessary resources, financial or human. It could be argued that in a context of extended poverty in which sisters live this is unavoidable, however, in other sections of the report we have discussed how sisters long for a balance between different elements of religious life and how they question their dedication to their apostolates in detriment to their commitment to community life and prayer.

## Changing context for new vocations

Decreasing numbers of vocations is not the only concern sisters have. There are comments about the 'quality' of these vocations. Quality for them refers to the values held by the young girls willing to enter and the kind of education they have received and also the kind of outside influences they have been exposed to, mainly through new communication technologies and social media.

With regards to family upbringing, we found 17 comments in which sisters mentioned two issues that worry them. The first one is what they see as 'broken families' or as a sister from Uganda calls them 'distorted family set ups' (UH 340). There is a rather negative view of the contemporary reality of family life in their comments. They talk about 'inappropriate family backgrounds' where the 'moral fibre has broken down' (UI 170 – 176). In such families, sisters believe that children grow up on their own, without guidance or rules. In addition, children from broken families do not receive the love and care of both parents. Unloved children, or children with psychological problems will have difficulties entering religious life as this quote explains.

*And there are a lot of challenges in formation especially in the intake of candidates. First of all the problem is right from their biological families most of them have even grown in, in dysfunctional*

*families some with single parents ... then she has become a sister or a priest and so forth and maybe if the parents have died or the mother, they had been not bonding, that bonding has not been there. So you find the problem is right from the moment of conception and when the person comes in the congregation will fail to have that, that love and if the person does not have that love will go to look for it somewhere thinking that she can get it through WhatsApp (UE 1120 - 1133).*

However, even in more 'normal' families, Catholic values are not passed on to children and this was discussed in seven comments. Sisters argue that If children are not properly catechised, it becomes difficult to instil these values when they are older, and it may even be too late once these girls join religious life. Additionally, sisters argue that It is not only the fault of the families; there were four comments about schools not giving children an adequate religious formation. It then becomes the sisters' role to teach the basics of Catholicism and the catechism to new vocations. Here are the words from a sister in Uganda who thinks that a lack of Christian education in childhood affects the 'quality' of new entrants as they do not have a defined Christian identity.

*Some schools unfortunately where these candidates have gone have also lacked these Christian, morals and so on, values. And it is really affecting even the quality of candidates that we are recruiting. When you look at their identity, religious identity, are they Christians or not? Because they don't have these values. If they have them, they are just minimum (UK 1183 - 1187).*

Bringing up children without a good solid Christian, or specifically Catholic, education has consequences as these young girls replace Christian values with other beliefs and interests and there are seven comments about this. Sisters complain that younger generations are very different to how current sisters were when young. 'The things we valued when we were joining the congregation will not be valued right now. So, one of the challenges is the changes of time...' (KQ2 1019 - 1022). To compound the problem, sisters have to deal with the influence that social media and the internet in general exerts on young women (seven comments). The influence of technology is such that new members complain when their phones are taken away from them and will not refrain from using social media even if asked to. The following quote comes from a sister in Kenya

and it exemplifies how social media and technology makes the task of forming young sisters even more difficult.

*I also support what sister PJ is saying the use of media has really destroyed the essence of religious life because the people who are coming especially coming to join us majority of them they have been so much advanced in this usage of technology and therefore, to enculturate them with the charism and what we are, we are called for it becomes a big challenge (KC2 932 - 936).*

There were 11 comments in which sisters affirmed that when considering new vocations, quality is more important than quantity.

*... [W]e seem to be growing very slow in numbers because we are very particular with the quality of candidates that we admit to the congregation, we are not so much for quantity ...but we are very serious in discerning the quality of the candidates that we accept... (ZH 258 - 261).*

Also, in a set of seven comments, sisters show they are more interested in young women's motivations and values than their academic qualifications. Sisters are aware that poor academic performance may be a result of poverty and lack of opportunities, something that the congregation can help with, if the novice has a strong and authentic vocation and a good disposition.

Thus, there are many concerns with those discerning a vocation: their families of origin, the schools they attended, the influences of technology and the level and quality of their education. Congregations need to be aware of these issues and sisters in the discussion groups suggested that, as a minimum, those in vocation promotion need to go to the communities and meet the parents of potential new members and understand better the context and situation in which these girls live (six comments). In addition, there was a group of ten comments where sisters express that formators and congregational leaders must help the girls discern their real motivations for entering religious life and assess how truthful they are about their real motivation for joining.

*If these people come, have their own agenda we could, we could, we could find out from*

*the beginning before even they are recruited because the person who is, who is doing the enrolment should be able to, to, to, to understand these people. That is why we have these programmes of come and see and then also in formation these people should be helped. If you see that they cannot really their primary goal is not to be religious they have come with other motives, then we can help them find another way where they can serve God not in the religious life (UC 992 – 1000).*

There were 12 comments in which sisters expressed their worries and thoughts about young entrants' true motives. Sisters mentioned the desire to study or gain qualifications, financial security and a higher social status as, in some cases, the real reasons young girls joined a congregation. In addition, new members sometimes do not understand the nature of religious life and, as an example, are not prepared to pray every day or are not happy living in community. So initial discernment is very important: girls need to understand what religious life entails, and the nature of the congregation they are joining, and the congregation has a very significant role in helping them make the right decision.

In some cases, it is the community that insists on keeping new members that are unsuited to religious life for the wrong reasons such as a fear of diminishment or the need to have personnel or sisters for the apostolates as this sister argues.

*However, we had a temptation, to take many novices ... sacrificing quality! Which truly doesn't help at all... There is a kind of anxiety that we may diminish, or our congregation, disappear; but I believe, that it is the Lord's work, and it will continue (TB 924 – 929).*

It is clear that sisters consider young entrants as the future of the congregation and thus very important. However, there were only four comments where they explicitly express how these young sisters benefit the communities. Sisters think that even if young girls have different values, they are also more technologically aware which is an advantage to the congregation in the modern world, if the knowledge is properly used and applied, and the girls are also now more likely to be more educated than earlier generations of sisters. Additionally, young girls are open to new ideas which can help congregations grow.

*Ah, as the old sisters, we know what we had learned in the past; so, these new things we know a bit, but these the young ones, some of them they applied and they are open; and if they learn new things, and it is ease to help the congregation to grow by bringing new ways of doing things. So, it is good to allow them and to accept them to join us (MB 494 – 496).*

Thus, sisters are on the one hand worried about new entrants' values, quality of their Catholic/religious education and upbringing and on the other hand, they see them as new life, vital for the future of the congregations and valuable. In the next section we will see what sisters think initial formation should cover and what they expect new members to learn.

---

## Initial formation

### What should initial formation include?

According to the sisters, the goal of initial formation should be to aid the young women to discern their vocation. Therefore, understanding the charism, values, history and tradition of the congregation is crucial and this was expressed in 34 comments. These are some of the questions that sisters think new members should be asking themselves in initial formation: Do they understand the charism of the congregation? Do they have an affinity with it? Do they feel attracted to the values and vision of the founder / foundress of the congregation? Do they feel moved by the history and traditions of the congregation? Most importantly, can they see themselves in this congregation and its story? If they answer affirmatively to these questions, then it means that they are in the right place. In the following quote a sister from Zambia argues that congregations are not interchangeable and that new members should understand and embrace the particularities of the congregation they are about to enter.

*...[T]hat's why we have these stages like the candidates, aspirants, so that they learn the spirit in which we want them to offer a service to Christ. So, I feel when we are recruiting, let these young girls know who the [Sisters of Congregation ZE] are and what they do so that when they come to join, they come with that spirit. I think what is important is to live the charism of our Father Founder and those*



*like offering services and what, it should come later when somebody really understands why he or she wants to become a sister and in particular, a [Sister of Congregation ZE] (ZE 337 – 342).*

The second most discussed issue, with nine comments, is to teach young girls in formation about religious life in general. What is it and what are its values? What is expected of them as religious? What are the evangelical counsels? The argument is that teaching girls about the reality of the life they are entering will help them in their discernment. Sisters also agree that initial formation is the time when new members deepen their love of God and learn how to pray (eight comments). This comment from Malawi summarises these ideas.

*And we are forming these sisters, what we want first for them to know Jesus Christ who has called them. We want the sisters to build deep relationship with God, with Jesus, so that when they start to serve him, they will be able to move with him, to come to him at all times and build that intimate relationship so that they will be able to withstand the challenges which they may face in their religious life (MB 318 – 321).*

A deep relationship formed with God early on in their formation will enable these new members to become followers of Christ, as explained by a sister from Uganda. '[W]hen you talk of formation that means our aim being able to form people who can follow Christ. That means these people we are forming, they have to resemble Christ, that means like Christ, to be like Christ' (UC 738 – 747). Furthermore, there are six comments that express that the role of formation is to teach the young girls how to serve the poor in imitation of Christ, so that they become proclaimers and transmitters of the Good News.

Sisters also mention that one important aim of formation is to instil independence in these young women; it should also empower them, make them confident. The comment below argues that new sisters come with skills and gifts that need to be developed; they are not empty individuals to be filled with wisdom. In this comment, the sister recognises the agency and value of young entrants.

*The people we have in our formation houses are not people who are empty. We should give them room to kind of assert themselves and be able to tell what they need more than we can invite them to do because when they establish themselves within their own understanding, within their own cycles, they are able to hold...to have a grip on something ... so we as formators, we as people who are finally professed are just in a way standing there to help the other person, to point them to something great in their own lives. So, we need to appreciate their own initiative, their own creativity, their own little ways of contributing to things and that way they will also be more responsible and tap on their best gifts (ZF 542 – 553).*

There were nine comments arguing that formation should also include proper catechesis that families or schools do not teach young girls. A sister from Zambia for example complains that some of them do not even know something as basic for a Catholic as a 'Hail Mary' (ZG 429 – 433). Additionally, sisters believe that new members not only lack religious education and values but also practical skills and, sometimes, these need to be covered in initial formation. These skills could be as basic as reading and writing, or skills such as sewing and cooking that could be used for earning money for the congregation.

## Strategies for initial formation

From the number of comments, we can say that sisters consider initial formation to be important for the young novices that are joining the congregation as well as for the community as a whole. Initial formation will ensure that new candidates make an informed decision whether they are in the right place or not and will better prepare them for religious life. The sisters propose two parallel strategies for initial formation. The first one is to understand formation as a common goal of the community and so, all sisters should help and be involved. The second suggestion is to identify potential formators among the sisters and train them to undertake this task.

In 23 comments, sisters recognise that formation is not only the responsibility of the formators. Sisters agree that the community has a role and the most important is that older or fully professed sisters

should be role models for newcomers. It means that all sisters are formators to an extent and they are all responsible for the formation of new members. Being good role models means first of all a deep understanding of what religious life entails, the vows, living in community and the time they dedicate to prayer. It means embodying or incarnating the charism, being examples of good behaviour and a mentor to new generations.

*So, the senior sisters have to live these values which the younger sisters have to see and learn. The way the finally professed sisters look at God, at themselves, at others, at life in general, and particular, at their life of consecration and mission, will have a direct influence on the younger sisters who need living examples to inspire them. So, ongoing formation is very, very... necessary (TB 1003 – 1008).*

## Formators

In relation to the strategy of having specific formators, the sisters agree in 14 comments that is essential to have good formators, and that formators should love what they do and understand the needs and way of thinking of young people. '[I]t is very important to have ... [a] formator who really loves the work, who really wants to teach, who wants to direct ... towards God' ... (KQ1 1310 – 1315). However, it seems that some congregations do not have enough trained sisters to take on the task of formation. This can mean that those who take on the task end up in this role for too long and as a sister from Uganda argues, there is a risk of getting too tired and doing the job mechanically (UL 765 – 775).

One of the main reasons why congregations do not have enough sisters prepared for this role is that there are not many professed sisters willing to take on this role (seven comments). Sisters argue that being a formator is a difficult job and does not have the high status attached to some other roles. Furthermore, often congregations cannot afford to invest in the formation house and conditions can be basic and so can be challenging, and few sisters want to do it. In fact, many look for excuses not to do it as this sister in Uganda argues.

*First of all, formation is not easy therefore the sisters don't want to involve themselves in the formation. So, getting the formators is becoming very hard really because they know there is total poverty there and you have to struggle you become a man, you become a woman so you find out that really the whole world that you are carrying it on your head. So, sisters try their level best and give the possible excuses to make sure that she does not enter there (UF 1247 – 1252).*

There are two comments from sisters in Uganda who acknowledge that being a formator is not easy. Young women can be difficult to deal with ('...the formators are getting it hard and even the candidates they are rough some, now even some can beat the formators because they have not felt that love from home' UE 1140 – 1148). Thus, the role of formator, even though considered essential for the continuity of the congregation, is not a task that many sisters volunteer to take on, due to a perceived low status and a lack of resources for training and little support from the congregation.

The need to train formators was explained in 15 comments. The main reason is that many of those currently working in formation have not themselves received training and formation for this role. Sisters know that the better prepared a formator is, the better quality formation she can offer to new members. Training needs to include several topics. Formators need to understand and live the charism and patrimony of the congregation. In addition, they need to be up to date with what is happening in society. Formators should also know how to educate and deal with young people and, finally, they should have basic knowledge of theology, spirituality and even psychology. Therefore, the training needed is not insubstantial, and even though the need is great, a major hurdle to this preparation is lack of funds. This comment below is from a congregation in Uganda who have enough sisters prepared to undertake formation ministry, but lack of funding means they cannot be trained.

47. This is the research question proposed by the group in Kasisi: What are sisters saying is the essence of Religious Life for women in Africa today and into the future? What are the key challenges that hinder the development of this essence? What are the best ways of ensuring the understanding and living of it, and the communication of this to sisters in formation?

*We really lack enough trained formators. We have a few, but basing on the formation houses we have, and the candidates that we do have in those formations, we still need more formators. So, it is a challenge and sometimes it is due to lack of funds. I don't think it is due to lack of personnel. We have people who could be very good formators but because we may not have enough funds to, to, to, to take them for training. There are some programmes being prepared every year. For the sisters, 30-day retreats, for novices, for jubilarians, for, for, whatever, they are many and of course very many people have gone through all this but we need money for these very programmes also (UK 1078 – 1091).*



## Summary

In this section we have looked at recruitment, the nature and quality of new members and discernment and formation of young sisters. With regards to recruitment, most sisters agree that accepting new members is vital for their congregations' future. Some of the reasons to accept new members or not, especially regarding recruitment for sustainability or continuation of apostolates, may be contradictory and may depend on the congregations' priorities and needs.

Regarding the nature and quality of new members, it is difficult to know for sure if young entrants are more difficult to manage than previous entrants or if they are a product of a completely different education and upbringing. It could be that these are sisters' perceptions, a product of a nostalgia for times past when things were different and seemed simpler. However, what it is different is that new technologies are accelerating the pace of change; younger sisters are better informed and are influenced by outside ideas in a way that older sisters weren't when they were young, and this may cause intergenerational problems.

Formation was one of the three original concerns of the sisters present in the 2016 consultation meeting in Kasisi, identified as one of the three main challenges to religious life. Sisters were especially concerned about how to communicate the essence of religious life to sisters in formation and this concern became part of the research question<sup>47</sup>. The topic of formation also came up repeatedly during the five feedback meetings and many alternatives were mentioned, such as collaboration between congregations and developing a single formation programme in each country through the national association of sisters although none of these alternatives was discussed in a detailed way.

Initial formation is definitely a priority for congregations, yet they often appear not to have the resources, whether human or material, to implement the kind of formation programmes they would wish. Having willing sisters to undergo training to become formators is still a necessity and something that congregations need to address. Therefore, this is a pending task for the sisters: to think about formation strategies that take into account the many needs that sisters in formation have, the lack of sisters willing to train as formators, a shortage of financial resources for formation and finally, the possibilities of collaboration between congregations that are on offer through the national associations of sisters, ACWECA and UISG.

## Chapter 12 Sustainability of the spiritual life and integrity of the congregations

### Introduction

In Chapter 10 of the report, we explored sisters' concerns about the financial self-reliance and sustainability of the congregations. However, another and arguably more important aspect of sustainability of religious life for women in these countries is the continuing spiritual integrity and flourishing of each congregation, lived and expressed in line with the patrimony and apostolic charism and identity of each one. As we have seen earlier in the report, sisters' ability to be effective preachers, ministers and witnesses, is directly related to their ability to incarnate the Gospel message and the love of God, through the congregational charism and the reality of their personal continuing conversion. In this chapter, we will explore this from two perspectives. The first addresses the so-called distractions to religious life, which sisters feel divert their attention away from focusing on the core purpose and mission of their religious lives. In the second, we will explore sisters' own self-criticism and reflections on how they are living their religious lives, as individuals, and as congregations, as they ask themselves challenging questions. We then explore suggested ways of addressing these expressed concerns, through congregational renewal and ongoing formation.

### Distractions to religious life

This section of the Chapter explores the everyday distractions that sisters identify as preventing them from living religious life as they and their congregations believe it should be lived. These distractions include new communications technology and pressures from family members or friends. They are also an outcome of sisters' desire for material things or the attraction to power, wealth and popularity. In this section, we will describe these distractions and analyse how sisters think they affect them and the effectiveness of their coping strategies.

### Main distractions

#### The use of new forms of information technologies and social media

The influence of social media was mentioned 74 times in the discussion groups. Apart from seven positive comments, these were mostly about the destructive nature of new communication technologies and their impact on community cohesion. Technology is seen as changing the world in general and religious life in particular. It is also seen as inevitable, something you cannot escape from. '[Y]ou cannot avoid because if you avoid you are out' (UB 735 – 743). 'Being out' for this sister means not being part of a wider community of users and, as a sister from Zambia remarks everyone else is connected through social media. '...[E]ven in the village people are on Facebook, people are on WhatsApp' (ZA 476 – 483).

When sisters refer to social media, they are mainly referring to WhatsApp, as opposed to other forms of social media. Sisters use this application widely, as we established in Stage 1 of the project.<sup>48</sup> There were 15 comments about how WhatsApp affects religious life in general. Sisters argue that it occupies their time and it interferes mainly with prayer and their apostolates, as interacting with others through WhatsApp seems more attractive. 'I think technology is with us, for sure.... You might fail to get an hour of prayer but can't fail to be on WhatsApp for more than 2 hours' (UP 546 – 548).

There were a further 19 comments about how social media destroys community and sisters' closeness to each other. This may seem paradoxical as sisters agree that social media is a tool for sharing and communicating with others. However, having their own phone isolates sisters from those around them: they can be in the same room, but they are not talking to each other, not sharing their problems, not helping each other. The use of phones interferes with community life especially at meal times and recreation. The sister in the following extract regrets how interactions via phones replace the relationship, interaction, communion of community life.



*The current trend of media that has come, it also in a sense destructs community living for instance, all sisters bear gadgets, phones and you find that this one is on the phone, the other one on the phone and communication becomes very limited and yet our fraternal life calls for that togetherness and not that sisters start living as individualised...lives which is eh not in order because that not our Franciscan way of life but we have just found ourselves in this era where we have these gadgets and our sisters most of the time are very busy, sometimes the phones are not probably well used...they use at the expense of community life (ZB 527 – 534).*

Even though sisters see the presence of social media as inevitable, they believe not all of them are affected in the same way. According to some, the attraction of social media is stronger for sisters whose faith is not deep enough as this sister from Uganda states.

*What do you say about social media? That is also another thing. New technologies. People spend 24 hours on phones, TVs watching movies eeeh. Maybe if your faith is deep, then you balance your life, but if you have shallow faith then you are finished (UL 1120 – 1124).*

There were 12 comments about young novices and technology. Sisters think that young people have a different relationship with technology as they have grown up with it and, generally, are more technologically minded. This difference causes tensions within communities and chasms between the so-called P.O. Box generation (older sisters) and the dot.com one (younger sisters). Sisters also talked about how novices and young people in general are more prone to being affected by technology because they use it more often. Older sisters believe that the problem is that young novices do not understand that the use of these technologies can be detrimental to them. 'They will want their WhatsApp; this WhatsApp is a source of destruction to them - they don't, they don't know it' (UE 1084 – 1091). Furthermore, sisters feel that young people should be protected from all the harmful information found on the internet or shared on WhatsApp. Therefore, sisters think it is crucial that this is addressed in formation for new members so they learn from the beginning how to

control the use of technology. They don't specify what this formation should include or when exactly it should be imparted. What they do say is that by the time they enter the congregation it may already be too late as the young women are already too used to social media and don't want to let go of it or they may disregard older sisters' advice anyway. '... [T]hey are sort of being convinced about certain life style which becomes so difficult you cannot stop now these people using WhatsApp' (UE 1084 – 1091).

As mentioned before, there were only seven positive comments about social media which is surprising given how widespread its use is among sisters. Most of these comments were about how social media is valuable in specific situations. For one, it keeps them connected to other sisters; prayers, news, images are being shared among them. 'At times the WhatsApp messages are good and inspiring ... the social media we have, it has its positives and the negatives' (UK 850 – 860). It is also useful to 'please the young people and to stay relevant' (KM 867 – 877). Finally, modern technology can help sisters with their evangelisation by reaching more people (TM 699 – 706).



48. In Stage 1 we asked sisters to answer one question and send the responses to us either by email or WhatsApp. Around 20 per cent of sisters used WhatsApp to send their answers.

## Attracted to the material world

In these comments, sisters feel that they and other sisters are very distracted or tempted by worldly attractions such as wealth and status. The main issues in this section concern materialism and greed, individualism, selfishness and dishonesty. In total there were 77 comments.

The first set of 21 comments explore materialism and greed and how sisters are moved by the desire to own objects and/or are overly concerned with appearance and material goods. The habit is one of the most discussed topics, mainly because the majority of the sisters wear it daily. Sisters report that members of their congregation want habits that are made of better-quality material and are more fashionable. This shows that some sisters seem to place too much importance on their appearance and this sister warns that religious life and their charism in particular, demands simplicity in the way they look.

*If we are not simple, if we are not humble some of us would not accept this habit ... we would like to have another fashion like maybe short sleeved or a bit short not long as it is but because of our charism we have to live a simple life (UD 1375 – 1382).*

In addition, there are complaints about sisters wanting to accumulate personal belongings and asking for more than what they need. Clothes, shoes and phones are mentioned in the comments, especially the influence of advertising that tells sisters that they need more and better things. Other issues include the use of community assets, such as cars, as if they were their own personal property. Sisters report that, for some, wealth and material objects imply a higher status within the community and, therefore, that some sisters are in constant competition as to who owns what (better quality material for habits, for example). According to sisters, there is a desire to occupy higher status positions such as becoming head teachers so they can justify better shoes or the use of the car. The following comment from a sister in Uganda express sisters' preoccupation with materialism and how it affects the lives of religious and how it compromises the integrity of their vow of poverty.

*We are taken up by the world. What the world is doing, it is affecting our vows because we want good things. If I want a good thing the community did not budget that, but I have to look for ways how I can get it. And another challenge for vows it is the competition. I see you with a good dress, driving a car; I have to make sure that I get a rich man to give me that money. In some congregations maybe they allow but we have not yet reached there to bring a car and maybe but other things maybe those small things. That can be the beginning. I can begin to buy a radio which I did not budget and then I bring to my room. It is my radio, but I have gone to ask for it somewhere else (UJ 771 – 779).*

Furthermore, there are 11 comments, all from sisters in Uganda, alluding to the fact that the desire for more and better objects may lead not only to breaking the vow of poverty but also of the two other vows, chastity and obedience. There are comments about sisters looking for rich men to provide phones for example, or sisters lying to their superiors in order to get more resources. In the following quote the sister is aware that religious should be good role models and that their disobedience and bad behaviour devalues religious life in the eyes of those that trust them.

*That challenge at times is brought about by, by longing for materialism. Because if I want many material things with this modern technology, I want things which are sophisticated, but I don't have the money. I want unique things I have to look for ways of getting them. That means I may end up outside there with somebody who can give me the money and then I mess up my chaste life. That becomes a very, very big challenge and also it becomes a scandal to the, to the people around us. To the Christians and even the children. They will know (UD 769 – 777).*

## Individualism

Sisters use the term 'individualism' fairly frequently, and by this they seem to mean an attitude or behaviour which is the opposite of sharing life in common in community. We found 16 comments where sisters mention examples of other sisters preferring to go to their rooms rather than participating in recreation and of sisters not being present at prayer times or meal times. Individualism is also not thinking of others, not sharing gifts and talents or material things such as presents from home. It also means that sisters do not take care of common belongings and in some cases, the perception that some sisters treat their communities as hotels.

*You find that we come in the evening sometimes we have less time to pray together with the community (laughs), sometimes some people are not available at recreation so that they can share with the sisters, listen to each other where we have been and you find that sometimes there is a sense of individualism, creeping in. People just go into their room and you fail to listen to the problem of the sister that she has encountered during the day (UC 453 – 461).*

Individualism is a big threat to community life, as understood by the sisters. It results in some putting their own needs ahead of those of the community and some sisters worry that this will eventually destroy community life if sisters don't change their behaviour. 'But now the challenge we have in communities is each one for self, God for all. That individualism is killing us. Each one for self, God for all' (UJ 566 – 567).

## Professionalism

There were 23 comments about what sisters refer to as professionalism or careerism.<sup>49</sup> These are terms used by sisters to denote an excessive interest in achieving success in the professional arena. Sisters complain of other sisters' interest in academic qualifications; sisters choosing careers that bring money and prestige such as accountancy, instead of serving others as catechists or social workers. Young sisters especially are reportedly interested in obtaining scholarships to continue their studies.

This concern in pursuing a successful career poses two problems. The first one is that it creates distance and inequalities not only between sisters but also between sisters and the people they serve. According to eight comments, this happens especially when sisters are not humble. And some become 'proud' and selective in the type of apostolates they do. As one sister from Zambia thinks, sisters shouldn't be 'pursuing these degrees or whatever for my personal interest but for service' (ZB 566 – 575). There is also a comment from a Ugandan sister where she describes 'classes' within the community.

*...[A]nother challenge am seeing also is nowadays sisters have a way of, I do not know how to put it like classes of people in a community now. There are some sisters now they are not doing professional work but they work in the garden or they work in the plantation or they work in the compound or they work in some project that cannot give much money like our own projects then there are those who are working in government institutions it is bringing really a bit of friction in the communities. Those who earn highly tend to overlook those who are doing small, small works in the community and yet the one who works in the garden brings that vegetable and cooks, it is cooked and brought in the dining and the one who is teaching brings salary and it is sent to the common pool ... and food is also bought with that money and yet at the end of it all of them share it together but they have that friction of seeing that these other ones are, it is like they are of low levels and yet in religious life in the community we are all equal. Are we all not equal? (UF 442 – 459).*

Different educational achievements lead to two tiers of apostolates within communities: those that are paid and those that are not. This seems to create differences in how sisters are treated and expected to be treated. The sister above believes that all of them contribute to the community, albeit in different ways, and no one is more important than the others. She affirms that all sisters are equal and should be treated and expect to be treated equally.

49. In this section we use words such as 'work' and 'career' to refer to their apostolates or ministries, as this is the vocabulary the sisters use.

The second challenge posed by 'professionalism' is that it blurs the lines between apostolates and 'work'. In eight comments, sisters say that choice of apostolates should not be dictated by earning potential or the prestige it brings the individual sister but should rather be motivated by, and oriented towards, serving others within/through the charism of the congregation. If ministry is about serving others, then sisters ask why so few of them choose to be catechists or formators, for example. The following quote is an example of a sister questioning the nature and purpose of their apostolates.

*Sometimes we see our communities not so much interested about apostolic life.... one priest he was talking about another sister, he said, do you want to become a catechist? ... she said 'A catechist? To work under you Priests?' So, he told us, 'in my mind already I understood that this sister has not understood her vocation. Because the first thing to do is to proclaim the word of God...' ...If we are here to be teachers, to be professors, to be that which makes us to be known by other people, it is for fame, it is for hindrance of our mission and our call. The last day, when we were in this workshop of 'new wine and new wineskins', they say many religious women at this time they are just trying to, to study, no theology, not which pertains to the church which is evangelisation, but to professionalism. So already from the beginning we are making our service away from the true objectives of religious life (KJ 881 – 894).*

## Apostolates prioritised over other elements of religious life

In total there were 66 comments where sisters describe how prioritising work over other elements of religious life affects community relations, the time they dedicate to prayer and their wellbeing in general. These comments include their worries about why work has become central in their lives and what to do about it. Sisters in Uganda use the term 'activism' to refer to the condition/phenomenon of being constantly busy with apostolates and prioritising this over all else.

In one set of seven comments sisters justify why some dedicate excessive time to apostolates. For them, sometimes it is a necessity as they are under external pressures to perform well in what they do. Sisters may need to spend long hours working alongside lay people in order to remain competitive in the workplace or because they are in demanding positions or even because of the financial needs of the congregation. Sisters recognise that working hard to stay competitive means that they are missing what is essential to religious life. However, they do not question why they need to be competitive when it affects their religious life.

There were 14 comments stating that sisters have less time to pray because of their workload so they miss community prayer or are too tired for their own individual prayers. In addition, working too hard means less time to participate in community life. Some of these comments suggest that some sisters do not want to take part in community life and 'work' becomes an excuse to avoid it.

*...[T]hat pretence is there that am busy because at my place of work I need to do this and this. This has become as a way of avoiding community life. I know that this time I am supposed to go and be with my community, have my prayers, but I will remain at the office pretending as if am doing something, while in the actual sense am avoiding to go for prayers or to go for meals. I know that this time, they are about to finish having the meal, that is when I will go. So ...so we need just to help each other to really have that value of oneness... we need to help each other maybe we go... we come back in the right track (ZG 572 – 584).*



Thinking about the time they dedicate to their apostolates made some sisters question their motivations and priorities. There were seven comments where sisters asked themselves whether they were called to a different form of life where paid work is at its heart or if their apostolates are the right ones for them or their congregation. However, they say they are trapped in a vicious circle. If they don't have time to pray because of their apostolates, how can they encounter God and understand what he is calling them for? Moreover, these dilemmas take the sisters back to the question of recruitment: what is the real purpose of recruiting new members, as this sister from Zambia asks.

*As religious we need to be people of prayer even as we work. And so, I was just wondering as we are doing vocation promotion, what is in our vocabulary. Is it about prayer or about the concern for our mission, the charism and the works? (ZG 336 – 338).*

Sisters admit in 13 comments that too much emphasis on 'work' fails to put God at the centre of their lives. Under the guise of achieving financial sustainability sisters are failing to prioritise their relationship with God. They are seen to be failing to focus on God 'as the source of our life, the source of our vocation, the source of our religious life' (KO 148 – 154). A sister in Uganda describes how this pursuit for financial sustainability leads them to forget about the presence of God in their lives.

*You find that most of the time you are running up and down, doing some other activities you know we have to get activities in order to get finance to sustain ourselves, to sustain our institute. And this one makes us not to have enough time to feel or to be aware of the presence of God. Because I am running up and down, so I tend even to forget the presence of God so that if I am with God then he gives me the strength to go out and meet people. But due to the challenge of lacking time, then I find sometimes I forget. I do things on my own to support myself then I forget the presence of God (UC 295 – 306).*

## Advice on how to deal with distractions

There were 22 comments on how to deal with distractions in general and 16 of them were specifically about social media which may mean that this is the distraction that the sisters consider the most damaging to their religious life. Due to the widespread use of social media and technology, sisters think it is necessary to learn how to control it instead of being controlled by it. Some of the solutions suggested include: prudence (limiting the time and contents watched), personal supervision of the time use and especially, limiting the use of phones during recreation / community time, adding topics on the correct use of social media and technology to formation programmes. In the following quote the sister suggests having clear rules for the use of technology and even banning its use for the sake of better communication practices within the community.

*Maybe as a province, we also need to come up with, I don't know if it is a policy or a rule to say that when we are together at recreation let's leave our phones in the rooms. ... I remember in the province where the Provincial felt that, you know, recreation was at stake. She just asked all the superiors to pack the TVs and they did that. ... But at a certain point, all the TVs were packed because they realised this was bringing confusion in the community that some people were just too glued to the TV... somebody comes to talk to you, because there is something very important, something I like am watching, I would not even pay attention to say sister has come. ... So maybe there are certain things that we need to put in place, of course not forgetting the individual responsibility that I know and I take care of the others in the community to say when we are together, let me be present to the sisters and not to somebody who is very far (ZG 614 – 626).*

There were six comments on how to deal with other distractions that interfered with prayer and community life. Advice ranges from adhering more faithfully to the community timetable, so that they don't skip prayers to returning to living community life as founders originally intended. This return would involve caring for others, helping and serving each other and strengthening religious

education in schools and families so that new members have strong Catholic values. Finally, they propose being wary of the outside world in general.

*This calls us to be more cautious not to be part of, to be in the world but not to be part of the world and to help those who are in the world to be more religious or to come back to Christ and to be followers of Christ in our own world KQ1 1133 – 1137).*

## Family bonds and expectations

Family is extremely important for sisters and, as discussed in the sections on Community Life and Identity and it is the dominant image used for community life in these five countries. However, family bonds and the expectations of family members can be problematic if families do not understand that religious life implies that sisters have a new set of loyalties and obligations towards their communities. We had 56 comments where sisters talked about their families and the effect they had on their religious life.

It is not easy for sisters to disregard family problems because culturally family bonds are important for the sisters. They describe themselves as '... family people' (ZF 487 – 493) or as a Ugandan sister argues when talking about family ties: 'blood is thicker than water' (UH GD 357 – 372). Sisters express that they are connected, rooted to their families or even tied together. '[S]ometimes we're like, we've left home, we've surrendered everything, but actually...we're still bonded, we still have that African bond, African values' (TK 717 – 738). Therefore, these bonds are considered to be an integral part of what sisters consider being 'African' and thus, detaching themselves from their biological families and developing a primary loyalty to their congregation is a struggle.

Because of the importance they give to family, sisters cannot avoid being affected by family problems, especially when there are orphaned nieces and nephews to take care of. They are torn between their commitment to their families and their commitment to their congregations who are now their new family.

*How do we handle this? Shall we leave the nieces to die?... It is a dilemma which is against poverty and obedience. Because I do it without permission and charity because availability of these things would be resources would be used in our communities and then we take them home. That is really a dilemma (UK 827 – 840).*

Sr Margaret Kubanze LSOSF, one of our theological commentators, agrees that sisters' families can become problematic and affect their apostolates. She believes that this is particular to African sisters because many of them come from families in need. Sr Margaret asks how they can help the poor when they need to help their families? She believes this creates a dilemma for them. Some of them may be tempted to divert congregational funds to help their own families and we had 12 comments in which sisters noted precisely that assisting their families may lead to breaking their vows of poverty and obedience. The following quote sums up these issues, the importance of family bonds and the problems these bonds pose for sisters.

*I want to believe that in the African context ... we cannot just pretend ... that we're not connected; we are so much connected, so much rooted; what I believe in is that we can be set free, we don't need to carry all the problems from home, we don't need to feel like the providers of our biological homes... but I believe that we're connected; that's why I see, when the, a mother's sister is sick, sister is affected, the apostolate is affected ... So, for me ... let's face the reality because sometimes we're like, we've left home, we've surrendered everything, but actually, practically... we're still bonded, we still have that African bond ... So, how do we live that positively? So, I would like to see us acknowledging the practical, influence of our biological homes to our religious life. And, clearly knowing that we have left them but while, while we're still connected with them, how do we live a healthy religious life, without getting negative influences from our own homes; yah! (TK 717 – 738).*

There are eight comments where sisters argue that loosening their ties with their biological family is part of the process of becoming available to all. Sisters have made a decision not to have children and form a family of their own. Instead, they have pledged their loyalty and commitment to their new family in Christ. Thus, sisters have to make an effort to put limits to the expectations of their birth families, otherwise, sisters become entrapped by

them. A sister from Uganda expresses the weight of family expectations in the following quote. ‘... [T] his blood of ours...really pulls us down. It is a very big challenge’ (UH GD 357 – 372).

When considering family bonds, sisters also think of their own family perspective and there are four main issues to consider. The first one is that losing a daughter is not easy for parents, especially in families with one or two children. This is mainly because a religious sister will not bear them grandchildren, something difficult to accept for parents. Also, daughters are expected to help parents in their old age and a religious sister will not be able to do so and for families that depend on a daughter’s salary, the loss of income will be hard to accept. Thus, families exert pressure over sisters but there is also external pressure from the larger community to which the family belong. This sister from an international congregation in Kenya summarises the difficulties sisters experience when choosing religious life over married life.

*...some people believe that once you enter religious life, the loss that the family has suffered is actually double. Why is it double? Because one, you are a woman meant to be married and you are not going to marry. Two, you are not going to get kids and that’s a double loss ... and another issue that makes it more challenging is that if within your family people practice different things, they go to different churches, ... the people who are not Catholics will try by all means to influence your parents not to let you choose this life and so it is a challenge where the culture and also other religion, the non-Catholics put such a heavy burden that it takes a lot of courage for a lady to eventually let themselves free to join the community (KB 371 – 382).*

The second issue to consider regarding family ties and expectations is that is that families see congregations as rich and expect to be helped. However, sisters are not able to do it, the congregation’s resources are for the use of the congregation, rather than for families, unless specific arrangements have been made. The third issue is that sometimes there are misunderstandings regarding religious life and families expect compensation from the congregation. A sister in Kenya explains this.

*...[F]or them they know that their daughter is getting married to the church and what is the church is giving us? So, it starts with the first stage when girls want to come in. The family needs to understand that it’s not like they are getting married to the church (KB 504 – 509).*

Fourth, families are also proud of the sisters and capitalise on their fame. Sisters’ families are considered ‘blessed and lucky’ and families themselves think a sister is a person ‘who needs to be consulted on important issues; a religious can solve all problems; a religious person knows everything’ (KB 383 – 393). These families may expect to be treated better than other families. ‘When they have gatherings they sit together, they want to be served special food, they want to be like recognised like my daughter is a sister, my son is a priest ... so that you may know that she has been lifted higher” (KB 446 – 455). Being proud of them may mean that sisters are treated better from other family members and in a way put into a different sphere which can be problematic as this sister explains.

*They see us as making a sacrifice of something we could well do and have a choice to do but we choose to serve the Lord in a different way. So people tend to put us in a special place as it were and to treat us that way and sometimes you can actually be divorced or distanced from what’s going on in your culture because they want to discuss certain things with you or they keep that mystique around you and it appears very annoying and with my family I tried to ensure that doesn’t happen , it can be very annoying to be pushed in a kind of category that distanced you from ordinary life and all the people and perhaps in the past things we did, what we did, the institutions we had. The fact that we didn’t go home sometimes not at all, sometimes very irregularly and the habits we wore at the past. Lots of things distanced us from even our friends that we went to school with; you become a sister you are on a different page. (KB 400 – 409).*

Family is, therefore, a very complex issue and sisters feel strongly about it. On the one hand, they still feel part of it and are troubled by what happens to them and yet, there is little that they can do for them. On the other hand, they have chosen to be part of a congregation that becomes a new family in Christ. Families may react in different ways to this choice. They may resent it because of the opportunities that they lose by

losing a daughter from the family or they may capitalise on it. Sr Margaret Kubanze LSOSF argues that congregations deal with family problems in different ways but that there is no perfect solution yet.

---

## Accepting the limitations of being human

In this section, we have looked at how sisters deal with distractions and challenges to their religious life. By talking about them, sisters admit that living the life of a religious is not always easy and that there are hurdles in the way. We have analysed how sisters recognise their humanity and as humans, they know they are tempted by new technologies, goods and commodities, wealth and success, just like the rest of us. The problem is that these temptations distract them from what they consider as essential components of their religious life: community life, prayer and service. In spite of the difficulties, sisters show that they are aware of the threats to religious life and that they are reflecting on, and discerning, ways to overcome them.

---

## Sustainability of the congregations through renewal and ongoing formation

In the previous section we explored the topic of distractions to religious life. These are largely identified as external factors which limit or affect the ability of individual sisters to focus on their relationship with God, their communal prayer life, their availability to their community and to others. These also appear to be factors which indulge or feed on their own needs, wants and interests. In this final section we consider the widespread reflections, self-critique and questioning from sisters in relation to the internal, spiritual aspects of religious life. They reflect on the quality of their own spiritual lives and on the spiritual health of their congregations. We explore how sisters believe this can be addressed and achieved through evaluation, re-evangelisation and renewal, and through ongoing formation of fully professed sisters.

---

## The extent and nature of the self-critique and introspection

In a considerable number of comments (144), sisters ask themselves and each other whether they are living religious life with deep faithfulness to their own call to follow Christ through service to others, and to the charism, mission and spirituality of their congregation. In these comments, sisters appear to be genuinely challenging themselves and each other to pause, reflect, discern and evaluate how each is living out her vocation.

### Questioning their commitment to God

Within these comments, by far the largest group of over 60 comments concern sisters' questioning their relationship with God, prayer and their following of Christ and whether they are really putting these at the centre of their lives.

*That is why we are called to go back to pray to live this meaningful life of our prayer life. When we attach ourselves to Christ, we will be able to know our call is not this, and then we are able to come back to our original (KJ 301 – 303).*

Through deep and genuine soul-searching sisters observe that both individual and community prayer are not being prioritised and that commitment to God and community are not at the centre of religious life, as they should be. Furthermore, it is clear that the process of participating in this research itself has provided sisters with permission to take time from other duties to engage in this reflection. Here a sister from Kenya reflects on what emerged from Stage 1 for her congregation.

*We see there in this [word] cloud the centre is 'religious' and we commented that Christ is just at the corner. And here in our answers also we see, it's, we look at religious life as really 'self-gift' so it is the centre there the 'centrality' rather than here the centrality of our relationship with God, openness to transformation "sequela Christi" which has only five responses, is the same as community. Ah, and it is very surprising because you see we as [Congregation KE] we always emphasise on prayer, relationship with God (KE 157 – 162).*



We see sisters really questioning their motives: do I love God enough? Do I give enough to my sisters? Put others first? They also ask that, if their prayer life is so strong, why are they having problems in living community life, noting the link between prayer and their behaviour in other areas of their lives. Another asks if they are praying as they are 'supposed' to, why do they have problems in their relationships, going days without speaking to each other. She continues by saying the following.

*I think... that is a wakeup call somehow for us... Maybe we have taken it for granted... and we fail to look at the way we are praying. Are our prayers life giving, do we really draw something from them, that if am from praying, when people look at me, they will definitely say at once "oh, she looks like that she's from praying? Or just from the chapel, I will just go outside and start sulking? What has prayer done for me? So, I think it's something that we really need to consider (ZG 258 - 267).*

### **Personal and communal or congregational renewal**

In a set of 52 comments from sisters in 19 congregations, largely in Kenya and Tanzania, sisters call for a return to their roots and re-engagement with the patrimony of their congregation. This seems to be in response to many of the issues identified in this section, and in the earlier section on distractions. They fear that individual sisters are going astray, and that their congregations are losing direction and their sense of identity. Most seriously, they fear that their life is becoming indistinguishable in substance/content from those of lay people.

Sisters also express concerns related vows, asking why the vows were not sufficiently prominent enough in the Stage 1 responses and whether this reflects that sisters are not living in accordance with their vows. They also ask, therefore, about the quality of their witnessing; whether their lives are too comfortable and question the continuing relevance of religious life to contemporary society.

*We have lost that sense of directionality in our apostolates whereby we are no longer role models. People we serve look at us like any other person because of may be the behaviours we exhibit before them. So that*

*small authority we have we used to have to the people we serve is no longer there. They can take you like any other person they don't see us as religious. So it is a big challenge to us that we have to go back to our roots and put ourselves in the right position as religious whereby when we move out, people should see the image of Christ in us other than seeing just a local woman or any other woman in a habit and a veil (KO 212 - 218).*

Sisters from 23 congregations raise specific concerns about how well they are really living their charism, as a group or on an individual level. Some 20 comments from 10 congregations result from sisters discussing the Stage 1 reports and the word clouds and expressing concerns that elements of their charism such as key words and values either do not feature at all, or very rarely. Of these congregations, some conclude, therefore, that they have lost their way. They need to go back to their roots. It is common for sisters to recall the gift of their charism passed on to them by their foundresses and founders and to understand this original or founding vision as an ever-relevant source of inspiration. We have already seen in the chapter on financial sustainability that some sisters perceive the integrity of their charism and of their patrimony as under threat, particularly in relation to financial self-reliance and sustainability.

Others feel their charism needs to be 'updated' to reflect current reality and context or that they should be continually evaluating the quality of their life and their mission against their charism. A small number are concerned with the continuing relevance of their charism and interpret new requests for their presence and service as an indicator of this living relevance to the needs and wants of this age.

*Other bishops from other dioceses are requesting if we are able to open new communities, other communities far from where we are; it is only that we cannot accommodate all we cannot answer to all but we still feel that through their asking, through their request it means that we are still relevant our charism is still relevant (KN 420 - 422).*

Others express the need for a strengthened understanding of, and engagement with, the charism and for their sisters and their community life to be 're-evangelised' by their charism. Sisters engage in this reflection on both an institutional and personal basis and show an openness to questioning themselves.

*We are the embodiment of the charism now and it challenges us - how do I live? How do I express this? Am I encouraging my sister to live those evangelical counsels and am participating in the growth of charism the strengthening of this charism in our today's world or I am the one who is really weighing it down on my sisters making it impossible to see the way out? (UP 212 - 214).*

Sisters are worried that as they stray away from, or become unfamiliar with, their own charism, their individual congregation will lose its unique identity and sense of purpose. The majority of the congregations expressing concern about familiarity with and fidelity to their charism are international congregations, with a smaller number of eight indigenous groups also reflecting in this way. Of the two congregations who seem most concerned, with the largest number of comments, one is diocesan and one of pontifical right, but all nationals of one country.



## Responses to these concerns: Renewal

In response to this situation, the sisters suggest two ways forward. The first is through some form of *ressourcement*.<sup>50</sup> They talk of returning to the patrimony and sources of their congregations – to their Constitutions, directory, the writings of their founders and to their charism, mission and spirituality. They describe the task now needed with the following verbs: to strengthen, to deepen our connection and familiarity with, to create awareness, to remind ourselves, to reawaken, to go back to our roots, to recall and even to go back to the drawing board, suggesting something more radical. They also speak of sensitising each other to this patrimony, and to catechising and re-evangelising their sisters not in the faith, but in their congregation.

*These aspects are like a fountain that enables us to stand firm, to remain in the congregation, as the members of the life of dedication or religious life inside the church. They will make us express the real image of the congregation, that people should not doubt this kind of religious life, asking themselves what kind of religious life is this, or why are the changes affecting them? (TO 790 - 794).*

Sisters speak of a response in terms of communal discernment, review and evaluation; it is something they know they need to undertake together. A small number of congregations seemed to respond very seriously to the opportunity offered by the project to review how they are living their charism and their Constitutions and called for renewed engagement with both of these as a result and were already discussing taking this forward into their Chapter processes.

The second way of addressing the situation in which many sisters say they find themselves and their congregations is through some form of continuing or ongoing formation. It is to that we now turn.

50. *Ressourcement*: a return to the earlier sources, symbols and traditions of the Catholic Church, or in this case, the original charism received by the founder of the religious order itself.

## Ongoing formation

The first point in relation to ongoing formation is to recognise that much is happening already. There were 48 comments from sisters in 13 congregations acknowledging that their congregations already offer a range of formal opportunities and resources to professed sisters for their continuing formation in spirituality, the vows, aspects of religious life, and express much appreciation for this.

Although many of the current opportunities available are formal and may involve sabbaticals, academic study or inter congregational courses, as time spent away from the congregation, it is clear from sisters' comments that this need not be the case. Their comments also highlight the opportunities for ongoing spiritual formation already built into the life. These may be simply undertaking and reflecting on spiritual reading, attending daily mass and reflecting on or discussing the readings or homily. They may also include annual visitations from the Superior and spiritual accompaniment, where available. Sisters from some congregations, almost all of pontifical right, noted that they have a formal programme of events and opportunities.

Other issues raised in these comments include that of the difficulty of developing a uniform approach to formation balanced with meeting the needs of individuals. There are also comments referring to the need for transparency in the selection of which sisters are chosen to take up formation opportunities as some seem to feel this is not always the case, and that it is always the same sisters who are offered courses.

Within these 48 comments, 26 express the view that each individual sister must take responsibility for her own formation – for taking up opportunities offered, for seeking new opportunities.

*I have deep personal responsibility of, my growth as a religious.... Also, mm, ongoing formation, making available all the opportunities that are provided by the, congregation and the community (TB 1136 – 1137).*

As part of this, sisters speak of the need to 'internalise' readings, reflections, lectures, workshops, again taking responsibility for the actual learning process and integrating new input into her own spiritual formation. It is

rightly recognised that some form of spiritual accompaniment and direction is hugely beneficial in this process.

*...[I]t is about commitment to being accompanied for those of us who are no longer in the initial formation and thinking how probably now, maybe in this day and age, the whole...the importance of, of me being committed to being accompanied spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and because that's what the community provides, isn't it, then there is the provision of the...of spiritual directors of, of counsellors...counselling... you know that... it's all something that is trying to help me so that I can actually live in a right relationship (ZC 690 – 693).*

The very small group of 13 comments from sisters who mention having access to spiritual direction reflects that this is both an issue of financial resources, but also the limited number of trained spiritual directors available to sisters, especially those who are also sisters.

A second substantial group of comments come from sisters urging their congregations to provide or develop the opportunities for ongoing formation to address the individual and congregational issues identified. Some 68 comments from sisters in 22 congregations express a desire or need for some form of ongoing formation or ask that more should be done to support them, with most comments coming from sisters in Uganda and Tanzania. Sisters name a widespread assumption that formation ends with final profession and say that this attitude needs to be challenged, as it leads to spiritual and congregational stagnation. A sister from Tanzania expressed the need for formation in terms of quenching a thirst.

*I would also love to see that for the continuing formation we get sustainable training which will consolidate us in the vocation, and our pastoral works because even a plant needs water to grow. If an animal stays without drinking water, it dies. Likewise, if you do not water your plant it will dry out. Therefore, we too need continuing formation in addition to the prayers we do daily. The continuing formation will revive our spiritual life, will revive our religious life, will revive our life of evangelization wherever we are (TI 843 – 846).*

Other sisters have ideas about content, and there is much enthusiasm, as would be expected given



the number of concerns expressed, with continuing to learn about the mission, charism, spirituality and Constitutions of the congregation, and building on the foundation offered through initial formation. Within that, there is great concern with support in learning to pray, with one sister saying there is a real need to emphasise prayer and contemplation in ongoing formation, as it is where you find God yourself.

*[I]n our formation both initial and ongoing formation especially on part of prayer we can also emphasise on contemplation because it is in contemplation that one comes down to herself and be with God and relate herself with God. And we gain knowledge, we gain strength, gain courage from that contemplation to come out of ourselves to reach others. And this helps us in our charism, in, in living in keeping our charism especially living our charism by helping other people by saving other people after saving my soul (UC 1065 – 1073).*

Some sisters have specific suggestions as to what form ongoing formation opportunities could take, such as working in peer groups and age sets within congregations or working together in groups across congregations to read and discuss key texts and documents. Outreach programme for sisters in more isolated communities, and simply coming together are also suggested.

---

## Conclusion

We have considered the sustainability of congregations from the point of view of financial self-reliance and sustainability. However, the sisters' discussions contained many, many more comments reflecting their concerns about distractions and threats to the quality of their religious lives. They are concerned about the way they live their spiritual lives, their commitment and faithfulness to putting God and the needs and service to others at the heart of their lives, and their commitment to their congregations' charism and patrimony.





## Chapter 13 Summary and conclusions

**Over the period 2016 – 2019, this research project set out to answer three questions.**

- *What do sisters say is the essence of religious life for women in Africa today and into the future?*
- *What are the key challenges that hinder the living of this essence?*
- *What are the best ways of ensuring the understanding and living of it, and the ways of communicating this to sisters in formation?*

In addressing these questions, we have gained insight into a number of significant issues which we wish now to present in this final chapter. These issues cover the sustainability of apostolic religious life for women in terms of finance and new membership, the metaphorical wineskins and in terms of the wine itself: spiritual and apostolic sustainability. These issues in turn lead us to ask a final question: are we seeing the need for continuing renewal of the wine, which would then shape the renewal of the wineskins?<sup>51</sup> Is this a call for further, deep renewal, or are we witnessing the emergence of a form of apostolic religious life which is appropriate to the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which it is being lived?

Of the three questions contained within the research question, the issues explored in these final questions provide answers to both parts one and two. In relation to question three, although a question posed by the group of sisters who came together in Zambia to discuss the project, we feel we have not been able to provide a sufficiently clear answer. This is largely because the sisters participating in the project did not provide us with the data to do so. It may be that these questions, related to the 'new wineskins' element of the 'new wine, new wineskins' paradigm are better answered through quantitative methods.

In our analysis of the data, we noted over 700 comments on community life, only slightly fewer on prayer, several hundred on apostolates and over 300 on charism. Yet on aspects of recruitment, new membership and initial formation, which speak to the 'new wineskins' element of the 'new wine, new wineskins' paradigm the number of responses were sometimes even in single figures. This makes it difficult for us to provide substantial or substantive analysis. It may also be a reflection either of the importance sisters give to these issues or that, actually, the important issue at stake is the renewal of the wine and its expression in charism, authentic apostolic spirituality and vocations, community life and styles of life. Perhaps in addressing these, the ways of understanding, living and communicating this apostolic essence to new members will clarify themselves or become immeasurably easier to clarify. We know that it does no one any service to renew wineskins independently of the wine.

51. *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*. 2017. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

## Sustainability of the wineskins: financial sustainability and new membership

### Financial sustainability

Despite different contexts, all the congregations in some measure acknowledged that financial security or self-reliance is a struggle, and some say not even feasible. Sisters say they can feel overwhelmed by the pressures to generate income to cover their own costs and support all the sisters. From the discussions, it is difficult to know for certain if the financial situation of the sisters is deteriorating but some do refer to changing circumstances that affect their financial situation. Some congregations that are reliant on financial support from abroad, such as from donors, no longer receive as much financial support from these sources as before. It seems that international congregations now receive less money from their sisters abroad, as a result of declining membership and demographic changes in Europe and North America. Indeed, some sisters comment that they may offer financial support to their sisters in Europe in the coming years.

As well as trying to provide for the needs of their own sisters, congregations also need money for ministries, and to help others. Despite their own lack of security, they are still more secure economically than the communities which surround them. Many sisters are honest about the difficulty of this equation and the reality for some congregations is that the 'balance' has not been achieved nor is it likely to be: it is likely the poor will always get a smaller share of the congregation's resources. This leaves many sisters feeling frustrated.

It is difficult to draw conclusions on the prospects for financial sustainability as individual congregations face different challenges. However, all seem to be trying to strengthen their financial security. The most frequently mentioned measures sisters take to improve the congregation's financial security are developing new forms of income-generating activities, investing in sisters' education and training so that they can earn better salaries, fundraising from donors and individuals and, inspired by their first sisters, simply working harder and making a living through manual work.

These sit alongside an oft expressed fear that the congregation will become distracted, away from its charism, by the need to raise funds. However, this leads many sisters to conclude that they must trust in God's providence, stop worrying about money and do the work they were called to do. The overriding position for many sisters is that the search for financial stability should not threaten their way of life nor divert them from their core purposes.

### New membership

One of the concerns of the sisters in the original consultation meeting held in Kasisi, Zambia in 2016 was that congregations were not examining why they want to attract new members and for what role in Church and society. therefore, they did not know how best to form them. We found, unsurprisingly, that sisters think that continuing recruitment is vital and that they should always encourage and attract new vocations, which are seen as a gift from God. The primary reason to continue to recruit is to ensure the future and the continuity of the congregation. Second, new members are needed to continue Christ's mission and new sisters keep both the congregation and the Church alive. Third, congregations need new members to staff existing institutions and apostolates and increase the congregations' reach. With more sisters they can meet more needs. Finally, sisters want to pass on to others their love of God, of the charism of the congregation, of the congregation itself and more generally, the love of religious life to young women who are being called. Conversely, others express concern at some of the reasons for recruiting given above, such as to staff existing institutions, to ensure the congregation's sustainability and to revive a dying congregation. Continuity for continuity's sake is not seen as a valid reason to continue to attract new members, putting the onus firmly back on the congregation needing clarity as to their sisters' role and purpose in the Church and society.

52. This concern was also heard from congregations during a research trip to Zambia in 2016 and we have heard many anecdotal and conversational comments about this but, as far as we are aware, there are no statistics which might reveal a trend in certain places/countries or among certain congregations.

## Challenges to recruitment and formation

Of the challenges experienced by congregations during the process of recruitment and initial formation, the most frequently expressed is the perception that the number of new vocations is falling. These comments mostly originate from Zambia and although it is difficult to know for sure, it may be that recruiting new sisters is becoming more difficult in this country.<sup>52</sup> However, if this is being felt, it is unlikely to be happening only in Zambia. Sisters attribute the possible decline in vocations to smaller families, resulting in fewer girls available to enter religious life and the introduction and influence of 'Western' values which are seen to be more materialistic and promote individualism.

The second concern for sisters is the young women who they believe come into religious life for the wrong reasons or have unrealistic expectations. They seem concerned that the true motive for some new members is the possibility of gaining an education, of financial security or a higher social status as a result of becoming a sister. They fear that many young women are now ill prepared to enter religious life with its challenging life style. The third concern is how the above issues affect what sisters refer to as the 'quality' of new vocations, which can be affected by factors such as the lack of a good Catholic education and troubled family backgrounds, so that girls increasingly coming to congregations without the basic foundation in Catholic catechesis needed for formation.

Sisters clearly understand new members to be the future of the congregation, but there are very few comments expressing the value they place on them, or acknowledgement of how they benefit their congregations, other than continuity. The one exception is the recognition of the technological skills and awareness these young women bring, but even that is sometimes feared as sisters themselves

feel out of date. Furthermore, sisters believe these young women to be more prone to being adversely affected by technology because they use it more often but do not understand that the use of these technologies can be detrimental to them.

It is clear that sisters consider initial formation to be vital – both for the novices and the congregation and two prominent approaches to this emerged. The first is to view formation as the work of all fully professed sisters in the congregation so that all sisters become formators to an extent and all are co-responsible for the formation of new members. This means embodying and incarnating the charism, being examples of good behaviour and a mentor to new generations. It places great importance, therefore, on continuous formation for finally professed sisters.

The second strategy lies in the identification of the best sisters to work in formation and the provision of an adequate, tailored formation and training to enable them to undertake this important ministry. Most comments on the associated challenges mention the difficulty of attracting sisters to take on this role and also the limited financial resources available for both the formation communities and to support formation for formators. The contents and range of the training needed is not insubstantial, and even though the need is great, a major hurdle to this preparation is lack of funds. So, whilst Initial formation is definitely a priority for congregations, they often appear not to have the resources to implement the kind of formation programmes they would wish. Addressing these issues is a significant priority for the sisters. We are aware, as we write this, however, of the opportunities for ongoing formation and the possibilities of collaboration between congregations that are on offer through the national associations of sisters, ACWECA and UISG.



## Sustainability of the congregations in terms of spiritual, charismatic and apostolic integrity

### The right place of apostolic activity

Reflecting on sisters' responses in our feedback meetings, and their comments in the areas of apostolates, community life and 'source' in religious life has led us to focus on how the active form of life is being lived among the congregations participating in our research. Apostolates and ministry should rightly be at the heart of, and a key expression of, the call and the way and form of life, but we see many sisters struggling with this for a variety of reasons, as explored below.

#### First reason: apostolates and prayer

Our first reason for asking the question about how the active form of life is being lived is because of sisters' concerns about the place and role of prayer in apostolic life. In the Stage 2 results, we have seen sisters themselves concerned to live a more 'balanced' form of religious life, balancing time spent in, and commitment to, prayer and with the demands of their apostolates. Often sisters seem to view these two aspects as separate spheres. This compartmentalisation creates a tension between them and puts stress on sisters which does not seem healthy in apostolic life and may damage both the individual sister and her apostolate.

As a result, we have heard many sisters who seem to feel they are failing in at least one aspect of their religious lives – either their community, their prayer life or their apostolates, and this must be an indication of some stress lines forming. Although many factors contributed to the radical changes in apostolic religious life for women in Europe and North America in the two decades following the Second Vatican Council, one of these factors was undoubtedly the realisation that an apostolic sister cannot, and indeed is not, called to live formal community, prayer and apostolates in balance and in equal measures; the demands of the active apostolate will and must take primacy. It seems to us that a 'balance' between prayer and ministry is not only not achievable in apostolic religious life but is not desirable as such. An apostolic charism and spirituality will always seek an integration of

prayer into the apostolate, and of the apostolate into prayer. The compartmentalisation and the desire for balance are characteristics of a more monastic charism and spirituality. As such this may cause confusion of identity in the sister and the congregation as to the true nature of their charism and spirituality: apostolic, monastic or an in-between form of 'mixed life' which may not be sustainable.

Another commonly heard concern is that the demands of their apostolates are so great that sisters' prayer life is suffering. In prioritising the needs of the apostolate, they often miss formal community prayer, set according to a timetable. In addition, they say that their personal prayer time is also affected. Although we would say that prayer in apostolic life is integrated into the apostolate, so that the sister finds and meets God in the apostolate and in the people she serves, this does not mean that the role of prayer is any less important, or that prayer time ought not to be fully protected. A deep, personal relationship with God, developed and experienced through an active prayer life is at the heart of apostolic religious life and fuels that life. Without this rootedness in contemplative prayer, faith becomes weaker, fails to mature, and the lifetime journey towards conversion is undermined, so that a sister does indeed have less to take to others.

We have also seen a strong articulation of 'apostolic' through bearing witness, being sign and simple presence. These are indeed welcome signs as they are indicators of a much more integrated apostolic spirituality and of sisters becoming that prayerful presence in all that they do, and with all they encounter. We have also seen how attractive this is to sisters, and some ask for support to explore and develop this integration. It cannot be achieved with a commitment to individual contemplative prayer and conversion of self, as it is this converted self upon which the apostolic identity and dynamic draw.



## Our second reason: the form of community life

The second area that has given us cause to explore the apostolic form of life being lived by participant congregations is the emphasis on physical togetherness in community life. In Stage 2, community life was discussed more than any other theme, and is characterised as the heart and source of religious life, which gives it meaning and joy. It appears to constitute perhaps the key structure and characteristic of religious life in these five countries and seems to offer sisters a richer experience of communion and being Church than in ministry, or in the actual local Church, than in any other area of their lives.

The data emphasises the primacy of community in religious life, of physical togetherness, sharing and doing everything together. It is a form of life characterised by a common timetable, with formal prayer times, set meal times, and sometimes even recreation and shared work. This is much more characteristic of monastic spirituality and life forms than of the active, apostolic lifestyle. A clear apostolic charism will give primacy to the needs of the apostolate and the form of community and prayer will be shaped around the apostolate, where possible.

Interestingly, the form of community life lived by participant congregations appears very uniform. This leads us to ask several questions. First, we note that these congregations represent a very wide range of founding stories, patrimony, charisms and constitutions. The form that community and prayer life take and their place within the pattern of life overall ought rightly to vary from congregation to congregation, but also ought to be firmly rooted in the individual charism and Constitutions of each congregation. Our question is whether this is the case in reality and, if not, what other factors are shaping the way and style of the life? The one example of sisters<sup>53</sup> discussing whether other forms of community life are appropriate and possible poses a very important question. They ask themselves in the situation where their apostolates demand their presence, and conversely their absence from formal community structure, what do they share in common, and on which they can draw, which unites them and helps them be community, in communion with one another, when they cannot be physically present altogether? Their answer is a common faith, a common apostolic vocation and a common

love of God and others as expressed through and in one charism. This seems an important and appropriate question to explore, and yet is only asked this one time.

Second, let us move the focus away from the actual data collected for a moment and reflect on all the discussions held with sisters around the project, on our visits to individual communities, and on how sisters live in those communities. We know from these conversations and experiences that although it is extremely rare – for us unheard of – for a sister to live singly, it is increasingly common for sisters to live in smaller, more informal communities, with less emphasis on actual physical togetherness because it does not fit the reality of the demands of their apostolates. Nevertheless, it seems that this is what sisters either actually experience or want to experience; so that much of what they say to us about living in close physical presence, in togetherness, in communion, is as much an ideal as a reality. Even if the reality has changed since the Second Vatican Council, it is still sisters' ideal. It is likely that this ideal has been formed by a complex interplay of several factors: their initial formation in an earlier semi-conventual form of life, cultural formation in extended families, the high value placed on physical togetherness, and particularly so on the togetherness of women.

Finally, we reflect on the connection between the form of community life being lived, and how apostolic religious life is being lived more generally, as we ask what is preventing the kind of questioning taking place in the one exceptional conversation mentioned above (congregation KM). We wonder, therefore, to what extent the ideal or actual form of community life, which is distinguished by physical presence and togetherness, is an essential and defining feature of apostolic religious life for women in East and Central Africa, as lived by the majority of the congregations participating in this research?

Furthermore, this leads us to ask that, if this is the case for most of these apostolic congregations, then what is the basis for this line of development? Is this model rooted in the conventual, semi-monastic form of religious life which would have been prevalent at the time of founding of many of the diocesan and indigenous congregations participating in this study? If so, then this may point to a need for a deep examination of this form of life to discern if it is the most appropriate expression of the charism for this time and these

circumstances. On the other hand, it may be that we are already seeing the interplay of the reading of the signs of the times and each congregation's 'deep story',<sup>54</sup> leading to an evolving a form of religious life for women which has adapted to the socio-cultural context where extended families, community and even tribe are still the predominant forms of living and values influencing the way religious life is lived.

### The third reason: source in religious life

In the findings presented in this report we hear strong articulations of both prayer and community life as 'source' for sisters – source of love, of energy, of renewal – to enable them to go out and give what they have received to others, in their apostolates, evangelisation and witnessing. However, we have rarely heard sisters describe their apostolates as the source which feeds and revitalises them and, most of all, brings them into the presence of God. We have claimed above that at the heart of the apostolic life there is an integration of the dynamic between the movement of prayer as source for apostolates and apostolates as source for prayer. We have found the articulation of this two-way dynamic strangely absent. The nourishment seems to be largely one way – from prayer and sisters to others, but we hear little articulation of the experience of finding God in the apostolates and others and bringing that back into community and prayer, as a source of love and life. There is a strange quietness around this, in contrast to the great emphasis on both prayer and community as source. Unless ministry and apostolates are understood as a source of encounter with God and with others, leading to ever greater communion, then sisters are missing a great source of nourishment, replenishment and enrichment in their spiritual lives. This situation also offers great potential for exhaustion.

In the preceding paragraphs we have looked at what sisters have said to us about struggling with the balance between prayer and apostolates; what they've said about community life, and the source of their nourishment and that this leads us to reflect on the form of apostolic life that sisters in these congregations are living. We feel that the key to understanding the apostolic identity of each congregation lies partly – not exclusively – in the shared understanding and living of the charism, and we now turn to what sisters' comments showed us about this.

## Shared understanding of charism

We found that many individual sisters and groups shared an understanding of charism as multi-faceted, complex and related to – and shaping all – areas of religious life. However, alongside this, and indeed in some of those same congregations, we also saw a significant number of very simplified and generalised expressions of charism and evidence of over reliance on mottos. Furthermore, many sisters appear to confuse charism and apostolates, and also spirituality in some cases, with sisters seemingly unable to distinguish between their congregational charism and the apostolic activities undertaken by way of incarnating the charism. However, the high level of concern and self-examination expressed in the data demonstrates that sisters are not unaware of these issues. These issues seem to find expression more frequently among the indigenous congregations taking part in the research than in the international congregations.

Finally, and in contrast to work we have undertaken with sisters in the UK and Ireland, we saw a much more limited concern with sharing of the charism beyond the individual congregation. Where this was mentioned, it was primarily in connection with making the congregation more widely known in order to attract new vocations. A smaller number of sisters also thought it a good idea to explain and frame their parish activities and contribution in the light of their charism, and that sharing their charism at parish and diocesan level might increase awareness and understanding of religious life, and its place in the Church. This contrast reflects the differing context of religious life in the UK and Ireland, and these five African countries. In the UK, with rapidly diminishing membership, the concern is to seek to ensure the charism continues. In these contexts, sisters are also concerned with the sustainability of their congregations, but charism is seen as a possible key to ensuring that they way of life is more widely appreciated in a Church and societal context where religious life is still relatively young and misunderstood among both laity and clergy. A question to be posed to sisters is whether they know how they wish to be seen, spoken of and understood in the local Church? If so, what would that be?

54. Lee, B. 2004. *The Beating of Great Wings*. Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications; Maher, M. 2015. *Our Living Charism*. [https://gerhardinger.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/EN-The\\_Living\\_Charism.pdf](https://gerhardinger.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/EN-The_Living_Charism.pdf)

## Sisters and the local Church

### Sisters and the laity

Bearing in mind again sisters' question about the role of religious sisters in both society and Church, it has been interesting to hear that sisters' relationships with their local Church, through the parish, dioceses and members of the Church locally, seems at times contradictory. They say they are at home in the Church, seeing themselves as present for, and among, the grassroots. They feel much loved and appreciated for their presence and for the wide range of apostolates and services they offer. Many say that they have much to give the Church, that it would be much weaker without them and even that it would not flourish in these countries without them.

On the other hand, sisters also say that many lay people do not understand their role or function in the Church and think their main or only apostolate is prayer. Sisters say they co-operate with laity, but we heard little specific evidence of what being co-workers with the laity means. Furthermore, we heard that sisters often have to compete for roles within the parish, such as being eucharistic ministers. Some say that priests appear to prefer lay people, and that lay people ministering in the parish are often better remunerated than sisters, which makes them feel undervalued. Although many sisters are present in parish groups and choirs, it can be hard to understand whether they are always there in order to serve others or whether they feel they can be present as parishioners in their own right. And so, we ask whether sisters are always the 'other' in the parish context. Do they receive and share as parishioners, or only as those who give and are always there with a purpose, to help the laity? Are they always the givers and rarely the receivers?

### Sisters and the clergy

When analysing what sisters say about their relationships with clergy in the parishes and dioceses, we find the same conflicted viewpoints. On the one hand they say they fit everywhere in the Church, and there is a strong articulation of the ecclesial nature of their vocation. There is an unambiguous sense that they do or ought to belong, and yet on the other hand, they experience exclusion and mistreatment. Although some sisters have good

working relationships with clergy and feel welcomed in, and part of, the parish, many more refer to difficult relationships and even conflict with clergy at parish or diocesan level. This situation is further complicated by the fact that it seems to depend on the attitude of each individual priest.

Sisters identify several causes of the apparent experience of conflict. First, they see it as being rooted in and reflecting the power relations and gender inequalities inherent in their own socio-cultural contexts and cultures. Second, many clergy simply do not take the time to understand religious life and the way congregations function and manage their own apostolates. Third, is the issue of competition between sisters and clergy. There may be jealousy and resentment on the part of clergy, as they see that sisters are appreciated and respected by the people and also that sisters have access to funding and resources. Fourth, sisters report feeling a lack of respect from, and being openly criticised and undermined by, clergy. Priests often do not recognise what sisters can bring to the Church as a result of their formation, education and commitment. Sisters are criticised for being both under and over qualified for pastoral and other roles and instead assigned domestic tasks in the parish, often cooking and cleaning for the priest, instead of being able to be effective evangelisers in the Church's mission. A final and very damaging source of conflict is that concerning management and ownership of institutions and the challenges religious congregations of sisters can face in establishing land ownership with the diocese. The seizure by the diocese of land or institutions which become profitable, as properly 'diocesan' assets, with no recompense for sisters, is a tale sadly too often heard.

These conflicts contribute to, and reinforce, the sense of exclusion that many sisters feel of not being tolerated but instead chased away by clergy. They both create, and point to, a lack of trust and transparency in relationships between the parish or diocese and the individual congregations. These divisions can contribute to the perception among ordinary Catholics that apostolates and institutions belonging to religious congregations are not part of the Church's mission and to consolidate the already widespread misunderstanding of the true nature and place of religious sisters. Sisters are also only too aware of the external impact of these disputes and the reputational damage to the Church.

The above reflections and analysis leave us with several final questions in relation to the Church. Although very few sisters speak of themselves as Church, this is not a widespread perception in the material we collected. Therefore, we ask what ecclesiology is most commonly held by sisters participating in this research. We would have expected to hear a widespread understanding of Church as communion. On the other hand, given the many experiences we have heard of sisters being excluded and marginalised within the institutional Church, we wonder whether it is a realistic proposition to expect sisters to feel a true sense of communion within the Church, where they both give and receive, love and are loved, and can truly say, of the institution anyway, 'we are Church'?

### **Sisters speaking out on sexual abuse in the Church**

We offer a final comment in relation to the issue of Church, which is on the matter of sexual abuse in the Church broadly, and specifically in relation to sisters. We are aware that, as European-based researchers, there may be an expectation in our own context, that we offer a perspective or finding on this issue, and that there will be interest in this. However, we are acutely aware of the sensitivity of this issue and feel we can only comment on the data presented to us during the project. We, therefore, cannot represent anything other than the fact that sisters simply did not bring this issue into the data. They currently choose not to write or speak out publicly on the issue, despite some identifying this as an opportunity to speak prophetically to this particular situation.

However, during the process of the research, there was a lot of discussion on the issue in feedback meetings, always instigated by a sister from outside that particular country. We have witnessed much emotion, anger and frustration expressed, but also much misunderstanding of what constitutes sexual abuse and a not insubstantial level of denial. At this point, we can only say that sisters tell us they are not yet ready to speak out on this issue and to denounce what they see. The oft-mentioned 'culture of silence' comes into play and sisters silence each other. They may yet come to speak out in their own time, but we were told that this is still likely to be some years away.

---

## **Conclusion**

We see great potential for the sustainability of religious life for women in terms of the strongly incarnational and implicitly sacramental theology we have heard of mission, ministry, consecration and living of the charism. Sisters express and live great love for God; they go to extraordinary lengths to share and communicate that love to, and for, others. They often live a depth, joy and richness of community life, characterised by an authentic desire for communion, lived mutuality and common reconciliation before God. Their lives are characterised by simplicity and a love for the gift of their vocation and commitment to the Church and its mission. This is an inspiration to behold, for other religious and lay people alike. They do this in situations of great complexity, of economic poverty and injustice, and sacrifice much to meet the needs of those around them. We have heard sisters' true seeking of holiness and deep and authentic grappling with very difficult issues and honest questioning of how they and their sisters live their religious lives. It is this grappling and honest questioning which has drawn our attention and led us to focus on the question of how these apostolic charisms and spiritualities are being lived in practice. The essence of religious life for sisters in this study is clearly to be seen in their apostolic response to God's love, made real in their selfless giving and service to others.

We end then, with reference back to the central issue which has emerged for us in the course of this research, and which needs addressing, for the sake of the sustainability of the life: that the research has uncovered the need for continuing renewal of the wine, and only then can the wineskins be renewed. The research leads us to ask whether we have heard from the 620 sisters from 80 congregations, across five countries, a call for further, deep renewal, or are we witnessing the emergence of a form of apostolic religious life which is appropriate to the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which it is being lived? Or indeed, are both these factors shaping and influencing the other so that the renewal becomes context-specific?



## Bibliography

- Astley, J. 2013. *Ordinary Theology*, Routledge: London.
- Baawobr, R. 2017. *Consecrated Life in Africa: Chances and Challenges*. <https://mafrsaprovince.com/tag/solwezi/> [Accessed February 8th 2017 but no longer available at this link]
- Burke, J. 2001. *Towards the Inculturation of Religious Life in Africa*, Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
- Cameron, H., Bhatti, D., Duce, C., Sweeney, J. and Watkins C. 2010. *Talking about God in Practice*. London: SCM.
- Consecrated Life in Africa: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Papers from a symposium on the consecrated life. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.
- Cruz, R. 2016. 'Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa'. In: *Consecrated Life in Africa: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Papers from a symposium on the consecrated life. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. Ch.2.
- Della Cava, R. 2001. Transnational Religions: The Roman Catholic Church in Brazil and the Orthodox Church in Russia. *Sociology of Religion*, 62 (4) pp. 535-550.
- Dwyer, S.C. and Buckle, J. 2009. The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8 (1) pp. 54-63
- Ebaugh, H., 2010. Transnationality and Religion in Immigrant Congregations: The Global Impact. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 23(2), pp. 105-119.
- Gifford, P. 2015. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Greenwood, D.J. and Levin, M. 2007. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. Thousand Oaks CA.: Sage Publications.
- Humphrey, C. 2007. Insider-outsider: Activating the Hyphen. *Action Research*, 5 (1) pp. 11-26.
- Johnson, M., Gautier, M., Wittberg, P. and Thu T.Do. 2017. *International Sisters in the US*. Study for Trinity Washington University and Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. [online] Available at: <<http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/international-sisters-study.pdf>>
- Kerstetter, K. 2012. Insider, Outsider, or Somewhere in Between: The Impact of Researchers' Identities on the Community-based Research Process. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 27 (2) pp. 99-117.
- Lee, B. 2004. *The Beating of Great Wings*. Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Maher, M. 2015. *Our Living Charism*. Available at: [https://gerhardinger.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/EN-The\\_Living\\_Charism.pdf](https://gerhardinger.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/EN-The_Living_Charism.pdf)
- Ngundo, B. 2015. 'Indigenous African Women's Religious Congregations'. In: Wakahiu, J., Gichure, P and Njageh, A.K. eds., 2015. *Voices of Courage*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa. Pp.66 - 99.
- Orobator, A.E. (ed.) 2016. *The Church we Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. New York: Orbis books, Maryknoll.
- Pope Francis, 2014. *Letter to all Consecrated People on Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_lettera-ap\\_20141121\\_lettera-consacraati.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html)>
- Pope Francis, 2018. The Apostolic Exhortation: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World. *Gaudete et Exsultate*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html)>
- Pope John Paul II, 1996. *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata*. [online] Available at: <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html)> [Accessed 23 November 2015].
- Pope Paul VI, 1964. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Lumen Gentium*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)>

Pope Paul VI, 1965(a). Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life. *Perfectae caritatis*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html)>

Pope Paul VI, 1965(b). Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et spes*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)>

Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (CICLSAL), 1978. Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church. *Mutuae Relaciones*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_14051978\\_mutuae-relaciones\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relaciones_en.html)> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (CICLSAL), 1994. Fraternal Life in Community. *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*. [online] Available at: <[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_02021994\\_fraternal-life-in-community\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_02021994_fraternal-life-in-community_en.html)>

Sexton, C. 2013. *Still Life in us Yet: In Search of a Narrative of Diminishment*. Paper 2 in partial fulfilment of the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology. Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University.

Sexton, C. and Simmonds, G. 2015. *Religious Life Vitality Project: Key Findings*. Report for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. London: Heythrop College.

Simmonds, G. (ed.) 2012. *A Future Full of Hope?* Dublin: Columba Press.

Tuohy, D., Sexton, C. and Mwale, C. May 2016. *Sowing Bountifully*. UISG/The GHR Foundation.

Wakahiu, J., Gichure, P. and Njageh, A.R. 2015. *Voices of Courage*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.

Weber, Max. 1958. *From Max Weber: Essays on Sociology*. Translated and edited by H.H. Garth and C.W. Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wittberg, P. 1994. *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Wuthnow, R. and Offutt, S. 2008. Transnational Religious Connections. *Sociology of Religion*, 69 (2), pp. 209-232.



# Appendix 1



## Research Participant Consent Form

*This is a pro-forma consent form. Please add the relevant information and ensure that a copy is submitted with your Ethics Approval Form.*

Researcher details:	
Name of investigator:	Catherine Sexton
Contact Details:	catherine@catherinesexton.co.uk
Project details:	
Project title:	Religious Life Vitality Project Phase Two: Religious Life for Women in East/Central Africa: a Sustainable Future
Data collection start date:	June 2017
Expected project completion date:	May 2019

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet for the study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed of the steps being taken to anonymise my contribution to this research.
4. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be respected.
5. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
6. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

**Data Protection:** I agree to the Cambridge Theological Federation processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Name of participant (CAPITALS) .....

Signed .....

Date: .....

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP**

### WITHDRAWAL OF CONSENT

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the investigator named above.

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed .....

Date: .....

## Appendix 2

### Participant information sheet

#### Information about the Research Project

The Project “Religious Life for Women in East and Central Africa: A Sustainable Future” is funded by the Conrad N Hilton Foundation and is being carried out by the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University and the Religious Life Institute, Heythrop College. The Project began in June 2016 and will run until May 2019. The Project hopes to enrich local theological reflection on Religious Life for women in Africa and contribute to the growing discourse on the global sisterhood, by combining the expertise of the sisters and researchers from the region and the experience and international perspective of the UK team.

During the 1st year of the Project we consulted with sisters in and from various countries in Africa to see if the Project was needed, and to check that it would be relevant to the lives of Catholic sisters involved. As part of this process Catholic sisters from five countries (Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Malawi) met in Kasisi, Zambia in September 2016 to discuss how the Project could be implemented. They also formulated the following research question: *What are sisters saying is the essence of women’s Religious Life in Africa today and into the future? What are the key challenges that hinder this essence? What are the best practices for ensuring the understanding & living of it, and the communication of this to sisters in formation?*

We are now inviting congregations from the above 5 countries to take part in the Project and each congregation will, in turn, invite their sisters to participate.

There are three stages to the whole research project:

In **Stage 1** we will ask each sister one question about her understanding of religious life for women in her own context. We will collect the responses together, analyse them and return them to each congregation. All congregations who enrol for the Project will take part in this stage. Sisters are free to write what they wish, and answers will be anonymised.

In **Stage 2** a small number of congregations will hold discussion groups exploring the themes emerging from Stage 1. Not all congregations and sisters who took part in Stage 1 will take part in Stage 2.

Only those sisters who are taking part in the Project will participate in the discussion groups. No project staff will be present. We will ask sisters to record

their own group discussions digitally and send the recording to a member of the research team, who will be the only person in the project team to know the identity of the congregation. The recordings will be saved, identified by code/number only and written up. We will then analyse them for emerging theological themes, incorporate them into the Project report and report back to sisters. Then all the responses will be destroyed.

In **Stage 3**, a group of theologians (Sisters from the five project country locations) will reflect on these themes. The final analysis will be shared with the wider group of sisters in these 5 countries and to ACWECA and UISG.

#### Contact for further information

Catherine Sexton (catherine@catherinesexton.co.uk)  
Maria Calderón Muñoz (mc2051@cam.ac.uk)

### Information for you about taking part in the Research Project

Your congregation has agreed to take part in the Project and has given us your name as a participant. However, you do not have to participate, and you can withdraw from the Project at any time by contacting us via the above email addresses.

If you agree to take part in the Project, we are asking you to do two things. The first is to give us a few details about yourself: your age and number of years in religious life. Secondly, we ask you to answer one simple question about your understanding of religious life and send your answer to us via email. We think the process should not take longer than one hour.

There are no incentives apart from helping a research project that we believe is of benefit to the development of Religious Life for women in East and Central Africa.

All information you send us will be kept confidential. No one in your congregation will know if you decide or not to take part as you will email<sup>155</sup> the answers directly to the research team.

We will not keep records of any personal information about you as an individual, but only compiling all the information so that we have an overview of the age groups and numbers of years in religious life. This statistical information will be collated anonymously and analysed in strict accordance with ethics procedures.



## What to do next:

If you agree to take part in the Project:

1. Please sign or type your name on the Consent Form and return it to us by email.  
If you have problems doing this, please let us know
2. Answer the questions we ask you below

---

## The questions we want to ask you

Thank you for taking part in Stage 1 of the project. Before asking you the question, we would like to know a little more about you:

How old are you? Between

- |                                  |                                  |                              |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20 – 30 | <input type="checkbox"/> 40 – 50 | <input type="checkbox"/> 60+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 30 – 40 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 – 60 |                              |

How many years have you been a member of your congregation i.e. since you took first vows?

Are you now a Junior sister (temporarily professed) or fully professed?

What is your highest level of qualification and / or professional training?

What is your nationality?

Now please answer the following question:

**In your opinion what is the essence of religious life for women where you live? We want to know what makes your way of life unique and different. Please give us 5 phrases or sentences as examples of what you mean.**

- |    |    |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. |    |

Please send your answers to this email: mc2051@cam.ac.uk. If you are using Whatsapp, upload a photo of your answers to this number: +44 7547 415119. **Thank you very much for your help.**

## Appendix 3

### Invitation letter to and guidance notes for Stage 2 group discussions

Dear Sr X

Our warmest thanks to you and your sisters for making the time and effort to respond to the Religious Life Africa Project's questions. The response we have received from you all has been remarkable and contains many real indications that the Spirit is at work in women's apostolic religious life in across Africa. We can only express our appreciation both for the numbers who have chosen to participate to date, and for the depth of insight into the richness of religious life and the way it is being lived that your responses contain.

Your responses will help the project gain an insight both into the understanding of the essence of religious life for women in your own congregation and into the emphasis overall across all the participating congregations. This in turn will lead to some small insight into how the life is understood and can be communicated across women's apostolic congregations more broadly.

Enclosed/attached is a document which gathers together all of the responses received from you and your sisters. It shows the total number of sisters who responded, together with the total number of individual responses identified. This shows something of what we are hearing from you. Now we would like both to check with you your reactions to what we think we are hearing and to invite you into a deeper dialogue about some aspects of what appears to be emerging.

As you will see, we have collected all of the individual responses received from your congregation's members and arranged them by themes. We have then arranged the themes in order of the numbers of responses which we felt were best covered in that category or theme. We have not attempted to prioritise them in any other way.

We also recognise that these themes or categories may not necessarily capture your own thinking or responses collected, and that you may have a different approach to organising the responses. If you wish to re-order them, or draw up completely new categories, then you may do this in your discussion group. You may wish to speak to your PSA about this.

#### What we are now asking you to do:

Arrange a small reflection group of sisters from among the X number of sisters who responded to the Project's questions. It may be helpful for one of the sisters to chair and guide the discussion. We would expect the discussion to take between 2 – 3 hours at most.

We are asking you to record it using the small electronic recorder which your PSA will bring to you nearer the time of your discussion. It may be worth reminding participants that they signed a consent form agreeing to being recorded in this way and which guaranteed that the data will be treated anonymously by the Project.

It may also be helpful for one of the sisters to take notes of the main points of the discussion.

We now ask you to consider the top three themes, with the most responses, from your congregation's responses to stage one. The top 3 for your congregation are: **Centrality of relationship with God; vows and self-gift (for example)**

---

## Before the group meets:

Please circulate a copy of the report and the word cloud to each sister who participated in the Project. We ask that each sister to please read through the report and the word cloud **before** the discussion group, and to reflect prayerfully on the themes.

---

## During the reflection group:

Within the reflection group, we would ask you to use the following questions to guide your conversation:

1. Firstly – as a group – decide if you agree on the top 3 themes. If you do, please prioritise one example of sisters' responses from each one of these three themes.
2. Then explain why these top 3 themes are important to you as a group / why do think sisters chose these?
3. How do these 3 themes a) reflect and b) challenge your charism?
4. In the original consultation for the Project in Kasisi, Zambia (September 2016), sisters identified these three challenges to the way sisters are living religious life in Africa today and into the future:
  - a. Formation: Why are we recruiting? What for?
  - b. Sustainability of congregations: how to balance the need for financial sustainability with our commitment to serve the poorest through our mission?
  - c. The role of women religious in the Church: where do we fit in the local Church? What can we offer? How can we ensure our gifts are used to make an effective contribution to the mission of the Church?
5. Do you agree with these challenges? Are there others that are hindering the living out of the essence of religious life as your group has identified (number 1 above).

6. What would you like to see your congregation do to ensure that sisters in initial and ongoing formation understand and are able to live the essence of religious life as your group has identified (number 1 above)?

For some congregations participating in the Project, sisters may have responded with challenges or what look like problems. We would encourage you not to ignore or overlook these more challenging yet also hope-filled signs in the work you have done so far but to try to identify where you see God in these.

Your PSA will contact you shortly after you receive this letter, to arrange a phone call or a meeting so that we can talk through this next stage in more detail and answer any questions or concerns you or your sisters may have.

Once again, in gratitude for your participation and cooperation in this work with us.

With warmest wishes and blessings

The research team



FOUNDATION

---

Visit [centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk](http://centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk)

 @CCSDham

OSP/03/20/011