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Vatican religious prefect: 'New attitude' needed with nuns

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A "new attitude" of cooperation and equality must govern relations between the Vatican and Catholic sisters around the world, a key Vatican cardinal said in May.

That attitude, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz said, must be grounded in the understanding that both the church hierarchy and the sisters "are two dimensions essential in the church."

"Neither is greater than the other," Braz de Aviz said. "Both the prophetic and the governing dimensions form the church."

Braz de Aviz, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, made his comments in May in Rome during a talk at the triennial meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a membership group for approximately 2,000 leaders of Catholic sisters around the world.

While the cardinal's remarks to the sisters, first reported by *NCR* [1], garnered wide attention at the time, the full text of Braz de Aviz's talk was never made public. *NCR* will publish the cardinal's full 80-minute talk in three parts on Thursday, Friday and Monday.

Among other points addressed by the cardinal in the first part:

- How religious orders facing a lack of vocations should respond: "One should prepare oneself for death only when God wants us to die, not when we think we should."
- The difficulty of continuing ministries with reduced numbers of sisters: "Between charisms and works, we must choose charisms and let go of works."
- A class system in the church that separates ordained men from sisters and laypeople: "When we become Christians at baptism, we acquire a dignity, a unique dignity as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters of one another. This is our dignity. There is no other dignity."
- His understanding of the basic Christian ethic: "Christian life is essentially this: love first, love all, love unending."

Braz de Aviz has been at the congregation, officially known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, since 2011. He oversees the work of an estimated 1.5 million sisters, brothers and priests around the world in religious orders.

The cardinal took questions May 5 during a meeting with some 800 UISG members, each leaders of sisters' communities around the world, who had gathered in Rome from May 3-7 to focus on the theme of servant leadership.

Speaking in the afternoon after celebrating Mass with the sisters earlier in the day, Braz de Aviz frequently paused during his answers to laugh and to accept several sustained bouts of applause.

Following is the first part of Braz de Aviz's May talk to women religious in Rome, with minor edits for context. Braz de Aviz, a native Brazilian, spoke in Italian. Biagio Mazza, a native Italian who serves as a pastoral associate at a Kansas City, Mo.-area parish, provided translation for *NCR*.

A UISG representative asked Braz de Aviz questions on behalf of the sisters, who created the questions in group discussions the day before. She asked several questions at once and let the cardinal respond at length.

Part two of the cardinal's talk, which will be published Friday, focuses on relations between the Vatican and the main membership group of U.S. sisters, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

***UISG questioner*: Let?s begin with a question with which we are all very familiar. How do you see religious life today? How do you see its future? What are your experience and your perspective of the religious life?**

Braz de Aviz: Before I begin, I want to thank you for this opportunity you have given me to dialogue with you with the coordination of UISG. We have seen this coordination happening, working together and showing interest on your part and not only on mine. This is a good thing --a very good thing.

It pleases me that no limits were set on what your hearts desired to say to me -- what you are really thinking -- to truly engage those things that are of interest to us and not just to pass the time together.

My responses and remarks come from me both as a human being, a person like you, and as a bishop of the church, one who collaborates closely with Pope Francis for the good of the whole world.

From what we know, there are 1,500,000 consecrated men and women in the world -- at least from what we know. The Holy Spirit, however, knows more than we do. There are, more or less, 2,000 congregations that are pontifical institutes. Care for all of them is the special concern of all of us. They are of our house, of our competence, and we care for them as we would our life.

We are in a moment in time when many things are coming to birth, giving life and are growing. But there are many things that are dying. For example, this week, we received notice from our apostolic nuncio in Holland that within a decade, there will no longer exist any consecrated life whatsoever in Holland.

I am greatly saddened by this loss of consecrated life -- excuse me, I meant contemplative consecrated life, contemplative. Thank God. We just saved numerous congregations from extinction. The focus on the report was on contemplative consecrated life.

Consecrated life has a future. I think God brings about charisms in the church not to let them die for enabling them to be of service and love to God's people. If charisms come from God, then they are the words of God gifted throughout history.

Charisms great and small must surely live. They live through our lives of testimony through the ages and in time. Herein lies the difficulty. After each charism has achieved a great number of followers -- 3,000; 2,000; 5,000; 9,000 people -- they later become small in number, and they almost disappear. We think that if there is only one person who sincerely lives that charism, the charism exists.

The question of *ars moriendi* -- the art of dying -- is true, but it must be well understood. One should prepare oneself for death only when God wants us to die, not when we think we should. This is important to know, for

we are not the owners of the charism. Charisms are given to us by God. They are not ours. None of us invented a charism. Is this not true?

Our founders suffered greatly when they began their work, even though they did not realize that they were beginning something new. In this way, the same dynamism or attunement should direct us today with regard to our charisms. It is essential that we do not fear to turn to the central fundamental intuition of our charism, having no fear to return to that intuition, looking clearly upon and opening your heart to what our founders wanted to say and do. Let us return to this intuition without fear.

Today, this is so necessary, and there is a good deal of help available to you: the magisterium, the Holy Father, the council, so many things. But we must pay attention to our founder and not move away from or lose our charisms. Moving away from our charism, we declare the death of that charism. We decree that death, not God.

Also, it is necessary to look at the path already taken by the order at those most important points of reference: the Word of God, the intuition of the founders, the moments or times of greatest fidelity to the charisms. All these help us to see things more clearly. In times of crisis, look at what happened and look upon those times as a learning opportunity, of rebirth for today as we travel on our journey.

Between charisms and works, we must choose charisms and let go of works. Not all works, but only those we can't carry on any longer because we are small in number. Therefore, let go of them. Let go of them. To whom do we let them go? To the church community, to other charisms, so as not to lose these good works that have been going on.

The works came after the founders, but not the charisms. Charisms came with the founder. If one maintains the works and flees from the charisms, in a few years they will no longer be in existence. We see this every day.

We see something very significant in the spirit of communion. It is a fundamental principle we must acquire. We lack some clear points of understanding the true meaning of this spirituality of communion. I hope to clarify this today in this dialogue that we are having. We have to think and look at this up close. This is the road we must take together.

UISG is fully modern, active and real. You must continue like this and even more, if possible, because it is a journey of communion. This is extraordinary.

You must learn the wisdom of weakness/vulnerability. Our spouse is a crucified spouse. The wisdom of weakness/vulnerability is the wisdom of the cross, scandal to some, foolishness to others. But for us, it is the wisdom of God. It is necessary to enter this strange path that we do not understand fully or clearly. But this is the path to wisdom. We will return to this later.

In the midst of our problems, we are to provide an extraordinary example: We are to be prophets of hope. There are many difficulties and problems. We know in our hearts the many difficulties and problems that you have as mother generals. We know this thanks to the contacts we have with you. It is necessary to maintain hope.

In our offices we issue at least 3,000 to 4,000 documents of departure from the communities each year. Our heart is very hurt and saddened by this. The reasons for the departure are always similar: "I am leaving because I am no longer happy."

They do not say: "I no longer have a vocation." Rather: "I am not happy." I know there are many other reasons besides this, but this is a sign.

This is my response to the first question. Was that OK? Was it too long?

In our questions, there was much on the relationship between religious life and the bishops. Some were asking, ?What could be the causes of the fact that these relationships between our shepherds and our religious life would be so difficult?? What can be the cause?

And second: Some people think there seems to be more trust in the new lay movements than in religious life. And the tension between the episcopal conferences and the conferences of religious is very well known.

Do you have suggestions on how to resolve these questions, to reach communion? Sometimes we think that building communion implies submission. Can the dicastery do something to stress a theology of religious life in seminary training?

The first thing necessary is to return to the [Second Vatican Council] in order to return to the Gospel. The council is not merely a suggestion, a good intention. It is something very significant that we have yet to realize fully.

The church is the people of God gathered and assembled in the unity of Father, Son and Spirit.

1. First, if we look at the church, it often appears as a class structure. Well-organized, but nevertheless, a class structure.
2. We speak well of the Trinity, but it is something that is far from us. It is essential to understand what this Trinitarian mystery means.

When we become Christians at baptism, we acquire a dignity, a unique dignity as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters of one another. This is our dignity. There is no other dignity. The pope, the cardinals, the religious do not have more dignity or worth than a mother or father of a family, than those who work in offices or on our farms.

This is a serious problem for us because we have transformed the church, and even our congregations, into something that is not according to God. Many times, I am greeted by others but others with me are not greeted simply because they are not cardinals. This should not be so.

When I come to visit your congregations and you as mother generals, I also like to go to the kitchen, to see who is working there, to hug them, to take a picture with them. There are those who are very timid and might choose to flee from me, but I go after them to see them, to hug them. Some see these actions on my part as villainous, destructive, as doing harm and not good.

It happens at times that some people show up to see us in our offices but because they are not the superior, they are sent away. This should not be. This should not be at all. Maybe she was the one who really needed the help.

Maybe at that particular time you cannot see them, but maybe in 30 minutes you can. There is always a manner of addressing the situation with a smile instead of a top-down attitude. You can explain to them what you need to do after you listen, not before.

We need to create this sense of care and concern for our fellow brothers and sisters. It is an effort that we must make. Never say that you do not have time. The problem exists there in the moment. One has to be there for the person. These are things that we need to change among ourselves.

Rich orders and congregations devoted to poverty must become congregations that distribute more of their

goods. This forms communities who do good not just in their own congregations, but with others, with the church. Where there is abundance, why not circulate that?

If we put all our money together, we would form the central bank of a country. There is that much money among us.

We have members of our congregations that come from other countries because we need them to carry on the needed work. We put them to work, yet we do not allow them to take part in setting the direction for the order because they have to take care of the kitchen, the office, the laundry, but not the direction of the order because we say that they are not mature enough.

We often act this way. It this right or is it prejudice? There is much that we need to change. This applies to myself as well. I need to change also.

Regarding the building up of community among us: This is most important. In this area, there exists a great difficulty between congregations and bishops. It is getting better. Things would become even better if we had two things in place:

1. Having an episcopal vicar for religious in every diocese. This greatly helps maintain stability in the diocese because that person becomes a point of reference, since bishops normally do not succeed in doing this very well.
2. A commission [where] all problems are brought there and are dealt with together. This would help greatly and would be very concrete.

As problems surface, it is essential to listen to the viewpoints of others in order to arrive at a good decision. There are often very complicated things. There are other things that we are attached to. In these situations, I prefer the words of Jesus: "If one asks for your coat, give them even more."

We need to have a heart more open. All has to be done with justice. We must always infuse this journey with the spirit of communion because we serve the church.

To understand this, we have to reflect on the fact that both charism and hierarchy are two dimensions essential in the church. Neither is greater than the other. Both the prophetic and the governing dimensions form the church.

But a new attitude must govern us -- not competition but an attitude of welcoming. This is one thing we can learn from Pope Francis: the capacity to listen and to make gestures of welcoming.

Babies are now very happy, and Vatican guards have never carried or held so many babies as they do now. His attentive gaze is an extraordinary thing. He makes sure that people are not overlooked. This way of acting must be the way we comport ourselves as well, whether it is the bishop or anyone else. This must be done with all those we interact with, no matter the difference or the diversity.

Sometimes, in our congregations' effort to resolve a problem, we receive a strong letter from someone. I request that the letter be returned and be rewritten in a more fraternal manner -- the same issue but expressed in a more fraternal language. One can say the same thing smiling that you often say yelling. Why not choose the smiling? You will live longer if you choose to smile since it makes you more relaxed and more at peace.

Fraternal nature and relationships among us must be recaptured. But you say, "That person won't act that way." Know that the one who loves is the first to act. Christian life is essentially this: love first, love all, love unending.

It is not easy, but it will succeed. Love, love, love. Put hands burning with love on the head of others and eventually, they will be burned and touched by love.

Read part two of Braz de Aviz's talk. [2]

Read part three of Braz de Aviz's talk. [3]

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