NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Global sisters leader: Pope calls us to move, make a difference

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 30, 2013
Rome

Pope Francis is calling on Catholics "not to remain static" and to choose how they can make a difference for others, the leader of a group of 600,000 Catholic sisters and nuns around the world said.

The pope, Sr. Carmen Sammut said recently, is giving the world "great hope."

"It's like a window opening toward something new, where the church is more seen as people of God, not just the hierarchy," Sammut said. "It's fascinating. You want to know what's going to happen next."

Sammut, who as the president of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) represents about 1,800 leaders of the world's congregations of Catholic sisters and nuns, spoke to *NCR* Sept. 30.

A native of Malta, Sammut is also the leader of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, an international congregation of women religious founded in Algiers but that now has its headquarters in Rome. She was elected to the UISG post in May after the group's triennial assembly.

She spent 28 years in Africa before joining her order's leadership team, serving as a teacher during those years in Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania. She speaks fluent Maltese, English, French and Arabic.

Speaking from her office at the UISG headquarters across the Tiber from Castel Sant'Angelo, Sammut spoke of what she hopes to focus on during her three-year term with the global sisters' group.

She also spoke of the wider role of women religious and the status of the relationship between sisters around the world and the Vatican.

Part of the role of religious life, she said, is "to meet those we would not by nature meet."

"I cannot help but think of that because I have been most of my life living with Muslims, different from us because of religion," she said. "By nature we try to meet those who are like us. By vocation, I think, we are to go towards those who are not like us, who are other."

Sammut also mentioned relations between her group and Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, the head of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, who spoke at the UISG assembly in May. She said her group had met with the cardinal recently and had a "very frank" discussion.

Following is *NCR*'s interview with Sammut. It has been edited for length.

***NCR*: What was your feeling when you were elected UISG president? What was your immediate hope or desire?**

Sammut: I don't know if I had any hope or desire. My first thing was I went blank -- it was like I was put in a

freezer.

I think I started having hopes and desires when we met for the first time -- the 10 of us, the executive committee -- to see that we were coming from the five continents, that we were very different, that we had very different backgrounds and experiences of religious life.

Kind of together, we started hoping that we could do something new, that we could help in some ways the other religious to implement what had been said during the assembly, to move forward.

So some of our hopes are that we might set up better communication with the constellations. The UISG is divided into constellations according to different countries. So we hope that there can be more communication between us so that we can see how to move forward the idea of religious life for today.

I know that after the assembly, your group also came up with a guiding document, called a mission orientation. Was there something in that that inspired you the most or that you most want to work on as president?

The orientations all came out from what we had discussed. And the discussion was about "It shall not be so among you," a type of leadership that is more service. For me, what I have seen in reading over and over these orientations is that they concentrate on what is very important: that religious life is like what the pope told us, that it is an "exodus."

I felt that he was summarizing somehow those orientations. It's an exodus: Always going out of one's self, out of the ego, toward God and the other. And those two cannot be separated.

I felt, yes, we are all on this religious meeting to listen to what the spirit is telling us today, not continuing always to think that we are yesterday. The spirit is always asking us to adapt, to change, transform ourselves so as to answer the calls of today, the calls of those who suffer today.

I see that in different angles. I see those who are the poor, those who are excluded, the migrants, but also culturally, those who are different than us culturally.

I cannot help but think of that because I have been most of my life living with Muslims, different from us because of religion. It's always to go to those who we would not normally go.

That is one of the things that religious life is about: to meet those we would not by nature meet. By nature, we try to meet those who are like us. By vocation, I think, we are to go towards those who are not like us, who are other.

You mentioned the meeting with the pope and how he talked about that exodus. As the president of this group of sisters, how are you seeing what the pope has been talking about?

I feel that, for most of what he says, it's energizing because it is telling us to go ahead in this way, to go ahead toward those who are in the periphery, as he calls them. Those who are in need today.

Another point that Pope Francis has come back on a couple of times has been the necessity for the church to reflect on the position of women and the theology of women and her place in the decision-making of the church. This is what he has been saying.

I do hope that, as UISG one day, we will be able to take this challenge also of deepening with other women's groups and even with men to answer this call from Pope Francis to deepen what will be the role, the position of women in the church, and what way she can play her part in the decision-making of the church.

I know that in past years there's been some discussion of women's orders that are not international, those who are of diocesan rite and technically report to their bishop. Is that also something you would want to think about with the pope, how that's set up?

Actually, I don't know much about diocesan congregations except in Africa because my experience is mostly with Africa congregations because that's more or less our field of work.

I know that in some places, diocesan congregations have some difficulties.

Is that something UISG is still looking at and exploring?

The UISG executive group meets, but this hasn't started yet. We also have two meetings a year with the dicastery [the Vatican's Congregation for Religious], and I know that mutual relations in the church are one of the things they're concerned about, just as we are concerned about.

One thing that really surprised me at the UISG meeting was how long and how frankly Cardinal Braz de Aviz spoke[1]. Have you talked to him at all since?

We had a meeting just a couple of days ago. He's a very open man, very frank and very deep. His ideas come from a very deep spirituality. This is what I found out at the last meeting.

The discussions were about what the meetings we have with the dicastery could be about. There are a few things that we considered, like the theme of mutual relationships within the church -- the bishops and the religious and the laity. It's a big theme that has already been studied a bit but needs all the time to be brought into the reality of today.

One of the things we're talking about is also the number of men and women religious who leave the congregations every year. To examine a bit why ... does one decide to leave. To try to find out what are the motivations and what might be done by us and by the church in order to help.

I think what we need to see, first of all, is what is necessary, and maybe we will find out there needs to be more discernment so that people do not join and don't have really a vocation and after a few years, they discover this.

But, of course, a vocation is God's gift. And it's a very mysterious kind of thing. We don't really know -- but sometimes, maybe, the discernment is not done well, so the person takes a long time to discover this is not their way.

Or sometimes, it could be also that the person is not getting enough support in community.

I know there was also a presentation at the assembly from Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon about the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. I know it's been a couple of years and, at least from the U.S., it looks like the process is still ongoing. Is there still discussion about that in terms of a global effect or what it means from women religious in places other than the U.S.?

I don't know, to tell you the truth. The vice president of the UISG, St. Joseph Sr. Sally Hodgdon, was at the last LCWR meeting. She said that it looks like things are going on, yes, but I think they were happy with the last meeting, that it looked like it was more or less going in the right direction now.

As to having a global effect, each continent has its own particular problems -- like what I could get from people who were at my table during the meeting from India or from some parts of Africa, the big problem is formation or discernment of vocation because they have so many people -- what to do with that, how to give them university education, and all this.

And in some other places, it's the dying out.

In some ways, everybody is affected by what happened in the States. But at the same time, everybody is immersed in their own problems, I would say, also.

Is there a sense for you with Pope Francis of dialogue? In the U.S., a lot of people seem to have a hope that something has changed or different. Is that similar in the world?

For me, I have hope. I have hope when I hear him speak of synodality, for example; when I hear him speak of having to make decisions not only by himself; when I hear him say also about women having to have their place for decision-making.

All of this gives me hope. But I'm waiting to see how it is going to develop because I do not know. I don't know how he will develop all of this now. It is still very new and gives us great hope and an opening.

It's like a window opening toward something new, where the church is more seen as people of God, not just the hierarchy. It's fascinating. You want to know what's going to happen next.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org [2]. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac [3].]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/18/2015 - 05:04*): http://ncronline.org/news/sisters-stories/global-sisters-leader-pope-calls-us-move-make-difference

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/51246
[2] mailto:jmcelwee@ncronline.org
[3] http://www.twitter.com/joshjmac