

Changing Landscape of Religious Missionary Life

Governance/Leadership



I would like to congratulate SEDOS for organizing this residential seminar on a very important theme. I also thank you for

inviting me to share some ideas based on my experiences on the Changing Landscape of Religious Missionary Life: Governance/Leadership. Although my sharing refers to the situation of my congregation, the Society of the Divine Word, I hope that you will find some commonalities with yours. I want to divide my presentation into six parts, dealing with six changes.

1. Shift in the understanding religious life: towards the importance of community life

The provisions regarding the government of our Society in the revised version of our Constitutions (1968) start with the following statement: “Reverence for the personal dignity of each member is fundamental to all the administrative structures and procedures by which we seek to achieve the goals of our Society.” (601). Then it follows with the co-responsibility of every member emerging from such dignity, the principle of subsidiarity and solidarity etc. It seems that in the Spirit of Vatican II there was a need to stress on the respect of dignity of every member. In line with this, the General Chapter in 1968 decided to conduct for the whole Society a “Self-Study”, to get information about the theological and sociological climate of the confreres’ work, their qualifications and occupations, problems and possibilities, and alternatives for the future.¹

This emphasis on the personal dignity of every member was necessary to address the pre-Vatican II understanding of religious life where individuals were somehow lost in the community.

Almost 10 years later, there was a shift from the concentration on personal dignity to community life as the central point of leadership. The 1977 version of our Constitutions reads: “The whole meaning of authority in our Society lies in service to the community. Its task is: to inspire all confreres to live in such a way as befits their call to be missionaries of the Divine Word, to build up true community; to coordinate the varied undertakings in the provinces, local communities and individual confreres, and bring them into alignment with the goals of the Society; to represent the community and protect its interests, and to foster unity, peace and ready cooperation among all.” (601) After this statement, themes on personal dignity of every member, co-responsibility, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity etc. were mentioned. This formulation is kept until now, with a slight change which gives emphasis on Jesus as the model of leadership in the present constitutions (1983/2000/2006). It says: “In our Society the use of authority should be modeled on the words and deeds of the Lord who came to serve and not to be served (see Mk 10:45). Likewise, the meaning of authority lies in service to the community. Its task is:

- to inspire all confreres to live in a way befitting their call as missionaries of the Divine Word;
- to build up true community;
- to coordinate the varied undertakings of provinces, local communities and individual confreres and bring them into line with the goals of the Society;
- to represent the community and protect its interests;

¹ Andrzej Miotk, *The General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word (1884-2012)*, Analecta SVD 95, Rome: SVD, 2016, p. 80.

- to foster unity, peace, and ready cooperation among all” (601).

For a Congregation like ours, where there is a big number of members living and working alone in parishes all over the world, leaders must promote community life; especially now that individualism has been entering very fast into the fibers of world system, and our religious missionary life, is not exempted from it. In the time when community life was quite commonly accepted and lived out, the emphasis was given to the fostering of the dignity of every member, creating space that every individual member can develop his personality. When individual freedom has become part of common awareness, we need to give more attention to keep the community life.

Leadership is crucial in keeping the spirit of unity of a religious missionary community. Religious life would lose its meaning, if there will be no more community. Our special contribution to the Church is in fact this aspect of community life.² Of course, community does not mean uniformity. There is always a need to give space for personal realization of each member and to develop their God-given talents because only then they can fully contribute to the good of the whole Congregation.

As a mixed clerical congregation, the rights and duties of the Brothers are an important issue. Until 1967 there was a separation between priest and brothers in work and some other aspects of community life.³ This caused psychological separation that eventually blocked communication and made interpersonal relationships difficult to live out. The Chapter of 1968 finally made a breakthrough when it decided that the Brothers in perpetual vows can now be elected as one of the delegates for a General Chapter. It is a provision in the norms for the General Chapter, that provinces that have 30 or more Brothers in perpetual vows, will have at least one Brother in their delegation to a General Chapter.⁴ The General Chapter in 1972 finally elected one Brother as member of the General Council. Since then, it has been the

practice to have a Brother in the General Council. At the level of provinces, where there is a big number of Brothers, we also try to appoint at least one of them as Council members. The General Council is serious and consistent regarding implementation of such norm. Once a province who has more than 30 Brothers in perpetual vows was asked to redo its chapter, it was because no Brother was elected as one of the delegates for the General Chapter.

For the past years, the SVD leadership team has joined other mixed clerical congregations in asking the Holy See to review and revise its policy about the appointment of Brothers as leaders in a mixed clerical congregation. Finally, with the decision of Pope Francis in May 2022, Brothers are now given the possibility to be elected to the leadership service, even as a Superior General.⁵ Such breakthrough in the whole Church gave us chance to consequently implement what is written in our constitutions - all the leadership service is open to all confreres in perpetual vows. Being a Priest or a Brother is no longer the decisive criteria for a confrere to be appointed superior. Now, for the first time in history we have a Brother Provincial and four as vice provincial/regional superior. This new regulation of Pope Francis is a crucial contribution in fighting against clericalism in male congregations. For us, the presence, and now the service of Brothers in the leadership reminds us that first of all, before being priests or Brothers, we are religious, and as such, we are brothers to one another and to the people of God. I am convinced that having equality for all the members is an important role of the leadership in a mixed clerical congregation.

In order to face this shift from concentration of the individual dignity to community life, wisdom on how to harmonize the space of an individual and space of community living is necessary for those in the leadership service.

2. Shift in the understanding of mission: prophetic dialogue

Our 15th General Chapter in 2000 is a milestone for our understanding of mission after the Vatican II. The mission of the Triune God or

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, "Congregavit Nos in Unum Christi Amor" (1994).

³ Andrzej Miotk, op.cit., p. 74.

⁴ Handbook for the Superiors, *Statutes XI*, 216, 322

⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-allows-non-clerics-to-be-major-superiors-in-certain-cases.html>

mission of God (*missio Dei*) was the basic concept of mission in this Chapter. And from this basic concept the chapter evolved the understanding of mission as prophetic dialogue. This General Chapter dealt with the question: What is the mission of the SVD in the new millennium? In the whole preparation, the strongest answer to this question was: dialogue. We have to understand and practice the mission as dialogue. We understand that the word dialogue had already been strongly related with interreligious engagements. While acknowledging the importance of interreligious dialogue, we cannot limit ourselves to this area. We need to take into account our missionary commitments with and for the poor and marginalized in their struggles against the unjust political, economic and cultural systems. Therefore, during the chapter itself the idea was proposed to qualify the dialogue as prophetic, a powerful word that has also become very inspiring for many people in the Church over the years.⁶

Two important keywords about the mission of the Church had been combined: dialogue and prophecy. This combination offers new insights and meanings of dialogue. Dialogue needs to have prophetic action as its intention and prophetic action should be borne out of dialogue. "Dialogue is an attitude of "solidarity, respect, and love" (Gaudium et Spes [GS] 3) that is to permeate all of our activities. Limited as we are by our personal and cultural viewpoints, none of us has attained the whole truth contained in God and revealed fully in Christ. In dialogue we search together for this truth." (15th General Chapter #53). Our being missionary is expressed in our prophetic dialogue endeavors which is concretely manifested in our four characteristic dimensions – Mission Animation, Bible Apostolate, JPIC and Communication. These dimensions define our missionary charism. We read: "Our mission in today's world consists of witnessing to the universality of the Reign of God, our commitment to a fourfold prophetic dialogue in

frontier situations, and the characteristic dimensions of our charism" (#47). This Chapter identifies four groups as our principal dialogue partners: people who have no faith communities and faith seekers, the poor and marginalized, people of different cultures, people of different religious traditions and secular ideologies.

The 15th General Chapter did not give a definition of prophetic dialogue. It describes the term by saying: "It is in dialogue that we are able to recognize 'the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit' (RM 56) in all people, that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, and that we witness to God's love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not do dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic" (#54). The necessity of dialogue is based on the belief that the Spirit of the Lord is at work in all peoples.⁷ The purpose of this dialogue is not only to learn, acknowledge and accept this presence in all people, but also to listen together to the Spirit who constantly calls us to conversion, to announce God's plan for the world, and to denounce what is contrary to the Kingdom of God.⁸ The Chapter reflects the prophetic dialogue as our witness to the Kingdom of God that includes everyone hence, values human diversity.

For us, prophetic dialogue is our way of living and doing mission. It is not just a strategy, but a spirituality. Our confrere Stephen Bevans writes: "Through reflecting, praying, and discussing – even arguing – together, a community engages in real exercise of contextualizing theology, examining a particular situation or locality, connecting the situation with the theological tradition and missiological insights, and then coming to a decision for action. The goal of this dialogue is to discover what kind of prophetic action needs to be taken

⁶ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011; [José Antunes da Silva](#), *Prophetic Dialogue: Identity and Mission of the Divine Word Missionaries*, Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2021.

⁷ Heribert Bettscheider, 15. Generalkapitel der Gesellschaft des Gottlichen Wortes, In *Verbum SVD*, 41:3 (2000, pp. 515-517).

⁸ Roger Schroeder, Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue, in *Verbum SVD* 54:1 (2013), pp. 2-21.

in the light of what God is already doing or is calling to be done.”⁹ This understanding of mission as prophetic dialogue, combined with the suggestions of the four preferential dialogue partners, and the statement about the four characteristic dimensions, was helpful to give a certain identity to many apostolates we have in the congregation. Though still far from being successful, we are motivated to exert more efforts to promote these common characteristics to our mission. In a congregation who is committed to a variety of ministries, it is an important task of the leadership team, promote the new paradigm of mission and its features that should mark each of our commitments.

Our 16th General Chapter in 2006 dealt with the question of *ad intra* aspects of prophetic dialogue. The chapter identifies five principal elements:

spirituality,
community,
leadership, and
finances and
formation. It
dedicated a big
portion of its final
document for the
reflection on
leadership, sub
divided on the
themes of lights
and shadows, calls
for conversion,
and steps to



renewal. In the call for conversion, it mentions three points: Call to Prophetic Leadership: This is a leadership that is rooted in truth, love and caring. It animates and facilitates dialogue. Call to Creative Faithfulness to our Charism: a call to move beyond routine and the maintenance of the *status quo*. It should help us find new ways of missionary service, considering the new paradigm of mission and the challenges of the contemporary world. The third is the Call to Participative Leadership: rather than always finding fault with others, every member should heed the call to participate in the leadership and build community. This call to conversion is

followed by four steps for renewal: Improving Communication, Training Leaders, Forming New Leaders, Collaborating among Ourselves and with Others (#51-65).

Understanding mission as prophetic dialogue and promoting leadership that fosters this understanding, is closely related to the idea of co-responsibility of all members. In all the versions of our Constitutions after the Vatican II, this idea is mentioned. In the years after Vatican II, Bernhard Häring (1912-1998) was proposing a paradigm shift of involvement that is from an “*Ethics of Obedience*” to an “*Ethics of Responsibility*.” Applying an *Ethics of Responsibility* would slightly change the perspective and evoke some basic questions regarding the involvement of our members in the provinces and the Society as a whole. How

much
responsibility
does a member
have? Can he
contribute more?
Can the
Congregation do
more? In some
cases, members
can do more;
others have taken
on too much.
Others tend to fall
into mediocracy,
doing just the
minimal. Those in

leadership have a special responsibility for these members. It is also a phenomenon of the lack of openness to assume leadership roles on the part of some members who ask to have their names withdrawn from the list of potential candidates.¹⁰ The leaders should take it as their responsibility to convince others of the importance of this service for the whole congregation.

To emphasize this practical idea of co-responsibility of the members, our last General Chapter in 2018 speaks of *Servant Leadership and Responsible Membership*. It says: “Our SVD Constitutions and Handbook for Superiors,

⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Theological Evolution in Mission. A Theology of Mission*, in Peter Baekelmans and Marie-Hélène Robert (eds.), *New Trends in Mission: emerging future*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2022, p. 52 (41-53).

¹⁰ Heinz Kulüke and Leadership Team, “We view leadership as «a commitment to serve»”, Word from the Leadership Team, in *Arnoldus Nota*, June 2014, pp. 1-2.

among other materials, have offered us guidelines on the relations between *servant leaders* and *responsible members*... Inspired by these documents and being rooted in the Word, we become more supportive, sympathetic and understanding of those in leadership positions. ... Responsible membership is to have a positive and healthy appreciation of the work of our confreres in leadership positions. Those in leadership positions embrace and accept the will of God manifested through our religious community. They do so in loving obedience to the One who loves us first” (36).

Leadership in the spirit of prophetic dialogue requires the ability of attentive listening, and honest speaking. Oftentimes, the challenge is not the lack of dialogue, but the courage to take prophetic decision and action, which at times unpopular. But this is our responsibility. We are not called to be popular, but to serve the life and mission of the congregation. In exercising leadership as prophetic dialogue, we need the wisdom to keep these aspects in a creative harmony.

Prophetic dialogue also implies collaboration with others. In the last decades our collaboration with the two female congregations – SSpS and SSpSAP – founded by Saint Arnold Janssen and the founding generation has been improving. Especially at the Society level, the leadership team of our congregation has been enriched a lot by the collaboration and joined programs with the Congregational Leadership team of SSpS Sisters. Besides, we together with 10 other congregations promote JPIC through VIVAT International. Furthermore, we are sending our confreres to work with the Jesuits Refugee Services and are part of the inter-congregational initiative Solidarity with South Sudan. Joint initiatives of the congregation like these are an important shift in the leadership of religious congregations.

3. Shift from strict centralism to decentralism

Our congregation is quite centralized, especially regarding finances and personnel. For example, the first assignments of our confreres to a province or region after their final vows, and transfers of members between the provinces/regions/missions, in most cases, are within the competence of the general

administration. Likewise, the provinces are requested to send their annual financial statement and budget to the General Council, which has the right to intervene in the financial matters of the provinces. Certain policies such as home leave, are given to the competence of the province, but still subject to the approval of the General Council. In the past, there used to be more, such as the appointments of the rector and formators of the formation houses and confreres working in the universities, were reserved for the General administration. The General Chapter in 1994 made important decisions towards decentralization hence, it is known to be the decentralization chapter.

The main governance/leadership related decision in this chapter is the official creation of the zonal structure. This is the formalization of the collaboration between the provinces that started already years before. With the chapter decision the whole Society was divided into four zones: Africa-Madagascar, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Pan-America. The zones are not meant to be administrative entities; therefore, there is no additional level of administration. The idea is to promote a model of leadership that concentrates on animation and coordination.¹¹

In the beginning the zonal structure was accepted with enthusiasm. It is seen as a venue for more collaborations between the provinces in the same continents, who share more or less the same concerns and similar resources. Such structure has been part of our Congregation in the last 30 years, along with its ups and downs. At present, the four zones have already developed their own structures and mechanisms, and continuously in dialogue to discover together new ways of doing mission and share good practices that can be adapted by other provinces. This is made possible through the regular meeting at least once every three years. The zonal coordinators are part of what we call Caucus, a bi-annual meeting of the General Council and Generalate officials for evaluation and planning. In every program at the congregational level the importance is given to

¹¹ Andrzej Miotk, op.cit., pp. 155-156. There are critical views to the creation of the zonal structures. Dennis Newton, Zonal Government? Let's Proceed Cautiously Over the past two decades, in *Verbum SVD*, 4/35 (1994), pp. 359-364.

the zonal structure. The General Administration also has been making efforts to make it more effective. While there has been a better flow of communication between the General Administration and the zones, it remains a big challenge to foster communication between the zonal coordinator with the provinces/regions/missions within the same zone.

One of the many remarkable fruits of this zonal structure is found in the AFRAM zone, where we have common formation houses for theology and lately, for novitiates and brother formation. This common project binds the provinces together. In other zones, more fruits are to be seen in the subzones. The subzones are the unions of few provinces/region/mission either in the same countries or in direct neighborhood.

After almost 30 years, we are now in the process of evaluating this structure. The idea of having this structure for animation and coordination without administrative power is good, but a lot is still to be done for its realization. For us, animation and coordination are closely related to the administration. We have seen that in the past years that it has been a good venue for the provincials, the formation team, and the coordinators of the characteristic dimensions to share among themselves and to inspire each other in their ministry. However, the question is: is it enough, or do we need to have this structure as an administrative entity having competence to take certain binding decisions?

Promoting the idea of decentralization goes hand in hand with the capacity to form leaders within the provinces/regions/missions. Since 2002 we have already the practice of organizing a two-week workshop for the new provincials. Besides being the venue to introduce the new leaders to the different policies of the Society, it also serves an important occasion to keep the unity between the provincials/superiors and the generalate administration. In the same manner, the zonal assemblies also offer an opportunity to foster communication between the provincials and the Generalate. The challenge on the part of the provincials is how to overcome a kind of provincialism in which the concerns, resources, good practices, interests, difficulties, and challenges are just kept within the parameters of a province. On the part of the General

administration, it is a challenge how to respect and give due autonomy to provincial leaderships by not intervening too often but instead only if necessary - always having in mind the spirit of dialogue, encouragement, and motivation rather than an attitude of mistrust. Trust between different levels of administration is crucial in the governance of a religious missionary congregation. Our Founder, Saint Arnold Janssen already reminded us that true love and real trust form the basis of all good teamwork.¹² Centralization on personnel and finances brings the advance of a fair distribution of members of the congregations to the provinces and to ensure the financial solidarity in the Society. In the course of the time, we have been making some revision to the policy on personnel and finances. It remains a question: what more can and should we delegate to the provinces while ensuring the solidarity of personnel and finances in the Society.

4. Shift to developing policies and promoting related culture for the protection of minors and vulnerable adults

Another shift that is shaping significantly the governance and leadership of our congregation is related to the protection of minors and vulnerable adults. In the past, the main concern was the good name of the Society and the protection of the vocation of the confreres; this has led to the practice of resolving the cases of abuses of minors and of women, by transferring confreres from one to another place within the province, or to other province. Now, with the raising awareness of the wider society about the responsibility to protect minors and vulnerable adults, and the increasing care within the Church to these groups of people, our Congregation cannot remain indifferent. In 2010 we released our Society's Procedure on Paternal Charges to guide us in dealing with paternity cases of members.¹³ The focus is given to the right of the child to have a father and the right of the woman for a partner in raising the child. The involved confrere is advised to leave the

¹² Arnold Janssen to Anzer/China, Wien, 13. Mai 1888, in Josef Alt (ed), Arnold Janssen SVD. Briefe Nach China, Analecta SVD 82/I: 1879-1897, Rome: SVD, 2000, pp. 19-200.

¹³ Handbook for Superiors, F17, SOCIETY PROCEDURE ON CHARGES OF PATERNITY.

congregation for this purpose. However, if he decides to remain a member of the congregation, stricter procedures are to be followed.

Later on, different policies on dealing with the cases of minors and vulnerable adults were developed. Policies that resolve such cases are not enough. Thus, our Congregation gave as important focus the preventive aspect of such cases. We have stressed the importance of building awareness among the young members in formation. This is part of the integration program for young missionaries assigned to a new country. All the provinces/regions/missions have already made their own local policies giving consideration to the common policy of the congregation, the national context, and the official regulation of the country.¹⁴

Having written policies is one thing. Another thing is implementing them. With the rich cultural differences within our Congregation, and the misconception about preserving the good name of the whole Church and the Society, it remains a challenge within the leadership team on how the due process of responding to such cases is effectively carried out. Sometimes we have to make a series of serious efforts to convince the provincials to take the proper actions for the sake of the victim, without obviously forgetting the care of the involved members. Yes, without forgetting the care of the confrere involved. Our constitutions ask of us to “give special attention to the troubled, the suffering and the aged” (c. 305.2). The exhortation of our Founder remains for me a challenging ideal: “If you have to admonish, then do so with love and a cheerful face and do not forget to sweeten the bitter pill. In addition, perform services and show charity to them whenever you can: love them and serve them ...”¹⁵. For all in the leadership at all levels, we need to go through this difficult dilemma between justice and compassion. The closer we are to the victim or the perpetrator, the more difficult we go through in this dilemma.

Having members from different cultural backgrounds living and working in other countries, there is an increasing need for the leaders to ensure that the newcomers be introduced to different policies of the respective countries, especially regarding the professional standard. Besides organizing the introduction program for new missionaries when they arrive in a country, it is important to have regular ongoing formation and professional accompaniment for them at least in the first five years of their presence in a country.

In the recent documents we summarize the tasks of leadership in three keywords: administration, coordination and animation. Our 16th General Chapter in 2006 writes: “Effective leaders in our Society play three important roles: *animation*, *coordination* and *administration*. As *animators*, they inspire us with their vision, visit our communities regularly, and invite and challenge us to grow in our vocation. As *coordinators*, they help us plan and organize our missionary service by delegating some roles to confreres, according to their gifts and to the particular needs of our community in the context of the local church. As *administrators*, they act as “faithful and prudent servants” the Master has set over the household to serve the community and take care of our properties» (#52). In dealing with cases of abuses, and in making efforts to prevent them from happening, I deeply realized the importance of these three tasks. Clear guidelines are important to have a common reference. Coordination of the involved parties is crucial. The opinion of the Procurator General and the information from the provincial about the case and the decisions taken and the consequent follow up of the decisions are necessary. But as I mentioned above, here lies the challenge, because oftentimes, not because of bad will, but because of ignorance and special situation of the context, be it cultural or ecclesial, it sometimes costs a lot of headaches and demands lot of patience in bringing a case to an end. The shift to put the care of the victims at the center than the good name of the confrere, the Society and the Church, is a long process. Only with continuous work on animation we will be able to create that culture of protection that is so necessary.

¹⁴ In addition to the policies on the policy on protection of minors, we are working on the policy on financial abuse.

¹⁵ Arnold Janssen to Fr. Tollinger in Argentina, April 16, 1901, in Joseph Alt, Arnold Janssen Reader. Guidance in Challenging Times, Analecta 97, Rome: SVD, 2017, p. 57.

5. Shift towards interculturality

For us, interculturality is our heritage, commitment, and mission. It is a “a particular gift of God to us” (17th General Chapter #3). At present almost 6000 members are hailing from 78 countries. Internationality and interculturality are important features of our communities. Whenever the political regulations allow, we are living and working in intercultural communities.

Interculturality is also reflected in our leadership teams at different levels. In the first decades of our history, it is obvious that the members of the General Council were all Europeans. The first non-European was appointed member of the council in 1947 in the person of Francis Humel from USA. In 1972 the first Asian was elected council member, Raphael Cheenath from India. The council became more international when Gaspard Mudiso from D.R. Congo was elected to the council. The first Superior General from outside Europe was Fr. John Musinsky, elected in 1967. He was a descendant of Slovak migrants. The 15th General Chapter did not only present to the congregation a new understanding of mission, but also elected the first Asian Superior General, Fr. Antonio Pernia from the Philippines. At present our council is composed of seven members, from seven different countries, from four continents.

At the level of the provinces the leaders are also international confreres. In this year our new provincials are starting their office. In the AFRAM Zone, there are 8 Africans, 2 Asians, 2 Europeans. The ASPAC Zone that has 20 provinces, the leaders are from India, Indonesia, Philippines, Poland, Fiji. We have 11 provinces in Europe - 7 provincials are from Europe, 3 from Asia, and one from Africa. Yes, for the first time in history we have a non-European confrere as provincial in Germany, and he is from Ghana. Our new rector at the Collegio in Rome is a Togolese. The origins of the provincials in PANAM are as follows: 6 from the PANAM, 7 from ASPAC, 2 from EUROPA and one from AFRAM.

The faces of our leaders reflect the composition of members of the Society. Today, 65,2% of the members are from ASPAC, 16.7% from EUROPA, 10.7% from AFRAM and 7.4% from

PANAM. Though 2/3 of the members are from Asia, we are and continue to be an international congregation, not an Asian congregation. A challenge for such an international/intercultural congregation is how to animate members that cultural identity is not the main determining factor in electing the leaders. In some provinces this has been a big problem; it created a sort of division among members, and as a result the newly elected leaders have to spend a lot of time and energy in bringing back unity. The chapter in 2012 asks every province to design a “process for elections characterized by prayerful discernment for the choice of candidates that transcends ethnic or national loyalties and affinities” (17th General Chapter #35).

Oftentimes the cultural difference also falls together with the generational difference. Elderly members from the North are sharing life and mission with the younger members from the South. Generally, such are the crucial points a leader in an intercultural/intergenerational community or province is facing: power/authority, money, relationship and solidarity with the families of the members, hospitality, trust and cultural identity.¹⁶

Exercising leadership in an intercultural/international congregation has made clear for me the ideal, and at the same time I became aware of how far I and many of my confreres are from such an ideal. Thus, it is important for us to reflect on this ideal. Based on the reflections of my predecessors Henry Barlage, Antonio Pernia and Heinz Kulueke, I would like to share the following points as fundamental tasks of leadership in this intercultural context: the leader as (a) promoter of diversity, (b) mediator of conflicts, and (c) guardian of unity.¹⁷

(1) Promoter of diversity

This forms part of the task of the leaders in the international congregations today – the active promotion of cultural diversity at all levels. “And this requires making the province or

¹⁶ Maria Pilar Benavente Serrano, *Servant Leadership: Living Interculturality with a Sense of Purpose and Mission*, in Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing (eds), *Intercultural Living*, Vol 1, Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015, p. 161.

¹⁷ Antonio Pernia, *Leadership in Intercultural Communities*, A Word from Father General, in Arnoldus Nota, June 2011, pp.1-2

community conducive to diversity or attractive to the coming of young confreres from other cultures or countries. Thus, this first task entails the recognition and acceptance of diversity and of differences. This implies ensuring that those of the minority cultures feel they belong to the community or province/region. This requires making them feel that they are welcomed, acknowledged and appreciated, not just tolerated. While this task will need to involve the whole community, the leader will nevertheless have a special role to play. As a promoter of diversity, the leader is called not just to protect diversity where it already exists, but also to foster it where it does not yet exist. Indeed, many provincials/regionals write to the generalate to ask for confreres from other cultures or countries so as to “internationalize” their provinces/regions.”¹⁸

To give space to the diversity it is necessary for the leaders to be aware of different factors that put certain group of the Congregation as the dominant group. They can be the number, the financial power, the historical importance, the ability to speak and present oneself in the public etc.

At the level of the General Administration, we are trying to have the diversity of cultural backgrounds of the members, in the leadership teams of the provinces. And because it is the competence of the General Administration in appointing members to the provinces, we are aware of the importance of avoiding to many members from same nationality in a province. It is not always possible because the largest national groups of around 100 members who receive their first assignment are from four nationalities: Indonesia, India, Vietnam and Ghana.

(2) Mediator of conflicts

This task of mediation of conflicts emerges naturally from allowing diversity and differences. “It is essential for the leader to foster among the members the conviction about two elements of interculturality: *First*, that everyone needs to develop a genuine respect for cultural difference. Respect goes beyond simply the recognition or acknowledgement of cultural difference. Beyond noticing and accepting

cultural diversity, respect for cultural difference means coming to terms with the fact that diversity is not going to go away, but that it is here to stay; that diversity is not just a cause of problems and conflicts, but also a source of enrichment and growth. And *secondly*, that everyone in the community realizes that genuine interculturality will have an impact on community structures, religious lifestyle, ways of worship, methods of work, systems of government. Everyone should expect changes to occur in the community because of our cultural diversity.”¹⁹ This is can only done through ongoing formation of the members.

When there are tensions and conflicts, it is important for the leaders to be clear about their source or their nature – that is, whether they are due to personal differences or to cultural diversity, which is not always easy. “Often personal and cultural differences converge or combine to create tensions and conflicts. Sometimes, too, members intentionally disguise the nature of the conflict by presenting personal conflicts as cultural conflicts and vice-versa. Nevertheless, it is important, as far as possible, to distinguish between personal and cultural conflicts.”²⁰

Mediating conflicts will often demand that the leader act in a way that he is beyond all groups, “supra partes”. And yet, “trying to be objective and neutral does not have to mean that the leader acts as if he were “culture-less” or as if he were not influenced and “colored” by his own particular culture. Here, it is important that the leader acknowledges his own cultural limitation, and from there try to mediate between conflicting individuals or groups in the community. Because of his own cultural limitation, the leader will need to make an effort to understand the other or others. In this way, he needs not only to promote dialogue among the conflicting individuals or groups, but also to be part of the dialogue himself.”²¹ Open discussion with members of the council from the cultural groups who are involved in the conflicts could be of help in finding ways and solutions.

¹⁸ Antonio Pernia, *Leadership in Intercultural Communities*, Arnoldus Nota, June 2011, p. 1

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 2

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

(3) *Guardian of unity*

As said above, unity is the ultimate aim of genuine community living and the witness we give as religious to the Church and the world. The two other tasks mentioned above are ultimately to be directed toward this third task. “Here, of course, unity should not be understood as uniformity or as the dominant culture subsuming the minority cultures in the community. Rather, unity should be understood in terms of “unity in diversity” or, in other words, a unity that is the fruit of the true interaction of the different cultures of the members hence, genuine “interculturality”. This task entails the creation of a climate whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other. In this way, each individual member, as well as the entire community, is enriched by the interaction of their different cultures.”²² The unity in intercultural communities is not a “static” but a “dynamic” kind of unity; “not some pre-conceived idea of unity to which everyone needs to conform, but a reality that is constantly in the process of being built through the interaction.”²³

It is an important task of the leaders in an intercultural community to foster the mentality among the members that each one is a gift to the other, “despite – or precisely because of – their differences.” “The leaders need to promote the conviction that there is something to receive from everyone, and that everyone has a gift to offer. But this vision of everyone being a gift to the other flourishes only in the context of friendship and love. In the end, then, the third task of the leader as guardian of unity is really the task of fostering love and friendship among the members of the community.”²⁴ To be able to foster unity, special efforts are required from leaders who are from a dominant group.

6. Shift brought about by COVID-19

The last shift I want to discuss is the one brought about by COVID-19. The period of the lock down has brought a lot of changes, triggered new ways of doing things which seemed to be very difficult before. It was a time

that provoked a lot of imaginations about different religious and missionary life would be. Now it seems that not much is left over from this time. And yet, there are some new factors that remain important for the leadership of our congregations.

First, the importance of closeness. In the time of isolation and helplessness it is a real need to find and show closeness to members. The platforms of collaboration such as UISG and USG were very helpful and gained a new energy. A lot of programs were organized by these two unions to help the leaders of the Congregation to have a broader view of the situation. At the same time, different reflections through webinars were instrumental in widening up the horizon and putting ourselves in communication and connection with others. For me, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped increase the importance and the meaning of such platform of collaboration.

Second, keeping the orientation and transmitting happiness. In the period of lockdown, I realized how simple words of solidarity and hope strengthen the bond of unity and give orientation and happiness to the members. I was very inspired by the talk given by Professor Tonino Cantelmi on a zoom-meeting on 2nd December 2020 on leadership in the religious Congregation in the time of and post COVID.²⁵ He defines the leader as “the one who enables the group to achieve the group's purpose and goals with the least amount of anxiety and the greatest amount of happiness. I tie to the theme of the leader the theme of happiness. A leadership of our times cannot be disconnected from reflection on happiness.” Happiness is of course related to the awareness of sense. COVID-19 brings a new the awareness of the importance of the reflection on happiness as an important task of the leadership in religious missionary congregations.

Third, the importance of finding gestures, symbols and words such as the gesture and words of Pope Francis on March 25, 2020. His prayerful submission at St. Peter's Square was a powerful gesture. This event is a clear reminder for the leaders of the importance in finding ways of expressing the thoughts and feelings (fears and hope) of the members. In a time like

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <https://www.usgroma.org/1/commissione-salute-usg-uisg-essere-superiori-in-tempo-di-pandemia2/>

ours where images are so important. One of the main tasks of leadership is to keep and nurture unity, the identification of the members, the awareness and the feeling that we belong to the same family, we are in the same boat.

Fourth, the sensitivity to deal with vulnerability. Another learning for the leadership from the experience of COVID-19 is how to be sensitive to the vulnerability and how to deal with it. The pandemic reveals how vulnerable we, our systems and traditions are. To inculcate this sensitivity among the male religious is not easy, and yet necessary.

Fifth, the importance and urgency of communal discernment. COVID-19 makes clear how unclear and uncertain the future is. We, who are experts in making plan and we are always asked about our plan for future, suddenly were

just to administer the change; we need to shape the change. Leaders are called to be protagonists of changes, and not just the victims of changes. To respond to changes we need to review and revise guidelines, redesign systems, and create new structures. But leadership is not just about having all these, it is also about leaders who with their personality coordinate, administer, and animate members to live and do the mission God has entrusted to us. Stepping into the role of a leader, we change and grow with the responsibilities we assume. But we should not forget that leaders also shape the role they assume. It is true what is said about Pope Francis, that he attracts so many people, because he is not that kind of leader who is only changed by the role he assumes, but who changes the role he assumes. Leader do not only need to clarify guidelines, but also to give their



confronted with the experience of not knowing the future. This has brought us to be humble and to listen better to others, to animate the communal discernment process. It is a providence, that at the same time we are called by Pope Francis to practice of synodality as the way of being Church. The future of leadership can only a walking listening and learning together.

Conclusion

The times have changed and is changing. And for us Christians, every time is the time of God, *Kairos*. As leaders, we need to see the opportunities given and to respond to them creatively. Peter Zulehner, a former professor of Pastoral Theology of the University of Vienna, once said: We have to overcome the temptation

own flavor. Leaders cannot avoid being persons with certain characteristics, and with this, willing or unwilling, they shape the organization. And the organization should also be ready for this.