

## **Joys and Challenges of Changing Landscape**

PANEL SHARING of our experiences from the point of view of leadership of a congregation - the joys and the challenges we face particularly relating to the changing landscape (demography etc.) of our congregation.

My Congregation is called “The Tertiary sisters of St. Francis (TSSF)”. We were founded in North Tyrol, Italy in 1700, by Venerable Maria



Hueber, for the purpose of educating young girls from poor families.

Our Congregation is international and is composed of

4 Provinces. We have a membership of over 400, 3/4 of who are in the African Province. We minister in 8 countries (Italy, Hall in Austria, Bolivia, Cameroon, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa Republic and Morocco) Like most congregations ours is experiencing a change in its demography.

I am the first non-European Superior General and this has both joys and challenges.

### **JOYS**

In my congregation, there are some joys in the changing demography. I live in an intercultural community in which we come from 3 continents. It is a gift and a beautiful experience. The gift is the beauty of sharing our cultural giftedness and being in touch with the issues that arise in the different parts of the congregation.

The energy and vitality of a large youthful population is a sign of hope of continuity. The elders are our pride. They do not only encourage and support us with their prayers but also connect us to our roots. They inspire us with their faith and their perseverance.

In our Generalate community, we come from 3 continents. The joy of an intercultural/ cross-

cultural experience cannot be underestimated. It is a gift and a beautiful experience. The beauty of sharing the richness of our different cultures and learning from one another's culture is wonderful. It helps us to be in touch and connect with the issues that arise in the different parts of the congregation and to understand the

context in our discernment processes. We integrate our various cultures when we are celebrating a sister's name day or birthday. This is also a witness to our society that it is possible for people from different cultures to live together happily, respectfully and peacefully.

We cannot underestimate the contribution of technology to the development of our world today and in a special way during the Covid 19 lockdown period. During this time, we developed other ways of connecting with one another and with our members. I participated in many educative and empowering webinars organized by UISG and other organizations. Also, since we could not travel to meet our sisters in presence we connected with provincial leadership teams, groups and individuals through online meetings. We even carried out canonical visitation in one of our Provinces online. It was better than postponing the visitation to another time that we were not sure when it would be possible.

### **CHALLENGES**

While there is growth in membership in the African Province, there is a sharp decline in membership in the Provinces of Europe and Bolivia. The challenge is an increasing number of sisters who need health care and long-term care. This ageing challenge extends to the harsh reality of frequent deaths of members where you sometimes face the demise of more than one around the same time or at very close intervals. Additionally, the decrease of members through ageing and deaths leads to lack of personnel in some institutions etc., resulting to either the closure of some of them or the

drawing of contracts with organizations to run them.

The African Province which has many vocations and consequently many young and vibrant sisters is at the same time having a high number of sisters aging and in need of health care which are sometimes long term.

The Changing demographics has brought forth the need to restructure the large Province of Africa for effective mission and to see how to help the diminishing Provinces to merge so they can have the personnel for leadership in the Province. It is not easy to do this especially when people are afraid of the unknown and prefer to maintain the status quo.

A notable challenge of intercultural community like mine is language since there is none of the languages that we come from which everyone speaks. To reduce the conflicts that were arising we decided to adopt Italian as our community language.

The challenge for young religious who come to live in an intercultural community for the first time is the expectation that they find themselves in the new culture immediately. Some of them become overwhelmed and get discouraged when the expectation is too high. Some start to see this as a kind of assimilating. If we want our young ones to commit themselves to Religious life, there must be a change in this direction. This calls for exchange and mutuality and to integrate them gradually into our community culture. The Pope is calling us to integrate migrants, and this includes members of our communities.

We are seven (7) in number in our Generalate community. Many of us come from one culture, there could easily be a dominance over the others. This could gradually create tensions and lead to a toxic work environment. In our case we realized this early enough and sought ways of doing what Madsen J., Mabokela R. refers to as, "Creating positive workplace relationships and preventing intergroup differences." We did this by integrating all the official languages of our Provinces into our liturgy and bringing aspects of our different cultures in community celebrations. We also sought ways to integrate our cultural foods/cuisines in our meals.

Although technology has brought much development in our world, technology and globalization today also make leadership more

challenging. The mindset of the people we lead, especially the young is different from those past generation, this imposes greater demands on leadership. The current landscape therefore calls for more attentiveness and sensitivity from the leader. Thus, instead of multiplying rules, and facilitating exit of members, we need to seek ways to be more supportive, leverage on programs that can help members cope with today's challenges of Religious life. This may include ongoing formative programmes to help members cope with the current reality.

Today both the church and the secular community promote Safeguarding, respect for human rights and dignity. Contrary to the past when the practice of the vows especially the vow of obedience was that people were made to obey leadership without asking to understand. Today, the reality is different, members deserve to be involved in decisions made about them and their ministries. This constitutes respect for the dignity of the human person. When this is not done, there is resistance resulting to leaders feeling not supported, antagonized, and attacked. By members. It is important that leaders adopt positive and humane ways to relate with members in these matters.

Safeguarding today is not only limited to children and vulnerable adults. It has broadened to include creating enabling, healthy and lifegiving environment that promotes human flourishing. Thus, leaders have the responsibility to create, foster and facilitate a landscape where children and all who encounter us, our employers and our members feel safe and esteemed. Safeguarding means creating safe environment in the community where we live as well as our workplaces.

I would like to conclude by saying that leadership today calls for self-formation to help the leader to be in touch with her humanness, see her role as that of accompanying her sisters to embrace their vocation with joy and enthusiasm. Leaders today need to inculcate the attitude of listening, of presence and of building positive energy within and around them. These are qualities I have personally found enabling in this role and my sisters have constantly affirmed it as facilitating their trust in me and supporting me in my role.