

# Religious face identity challenges, say speakers at Rome assembly

ROME - Unprecedented social and cultural changes around the world are challenging the church's religious orders to re-examine their identity and their prophetic role, speakers at a Rome conference said.

The changes have accelerated the process of secularization, but they have also highlighted the religious vocation as an increasingly visible alternative to the "globally indifferent society," said participants at a May 25-27 assembly in Rome that brought together 180 leaders of men's and women's religious orders.

"We are living in a time of epochal change, impacted by the effects of globalization, secularization, consumerism and technology. These factors pose many challenges to religious life, calling for a search for a new identity and a new consciousness in the midst of this rapidly changing world," Sister Mary Lou Wirtz, president of the International Union of Superiors General and superior general of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, told the assembly May 25.

She said religious orders should consider, for example, how to give stronger "intercultural witness" in a pluralistic world, how to collaborate more effectively with other religious congregations and how to better involve lay people in their mission.

Sister Mary Maher, superior general of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, said it was clear that "pluralism of religions and cultures has challenged the church's understanding of its relationship to the world and its peoples," particularly in how the church evangelizes.

For religious orders, she said, part of the problem was in understanding their apostolic dimension: how they are not only "called" but also "sent" into the world.

"We have not arrived at a level of comfort recognizing a truly apostolic, and not monastic, religious life, especially for women. We do not seem to be able to grasp a consecrated life in the world - the very definition of apostolic religious life," she

said.

Father Mauro Johri, minister general of the Capuchins, said witnessing communion was the key to religious life and the “prophetic sign” the world needs most.

“In order to represent this sign it is necessary that our communities take on a simpler lifestyle and live closer to the people. Only in this manner can their witness become pure and comprehensible,” he said.

The meeting was the 77th assembly of the men’s Union of Superiors General. They were joined on the first day by leaders of the women’s International Union of Superiors General.

Father Joseph M. Abella, Claretian superior general, said the declining numbers experienced by many orders required a new and creative response. For one thing, he said, orders need to question whether managing pastoral structures established in past decades is the best use of their more limited resources today.

He said globalization is imposing synergy and greater collaboration between religious orders, and new organizational models may also be needed.

Salvatore Abbruzzese, a sociology professor at the University of Trent in northern Italy, told the assembly that in a post-modern society marked by relativism, men and women with a firm religious vocation tend to stand out “as the authors of a radical protest, as persons of another world.” Religious life thus becomes an increasingly visible sign and a “valuable provocation” in proposing truths that do not change, he said.