



INTERNATIONAL UNION
SUPERIORS GENERAL

Go and Witness Synodality as Graced Companions
2022 UISG Programme for the Preparation of Formators
Concluding Ceremony

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Introduction

It is a joy and privilege to be here with everyone today for the concluding ceremony of this five-month program preparing formators for our congregations. Thank you to all who have made this possible and have been part of this program—our sister-participants, our UISG coordinators and team, presenters and mentors. I believe that this has been a rich experience for all involved and that everyone would have a great deal to share on our theme today: *Go and Witness Synodality as Graced Companions*.

The synodal process and a spirituality of synodality invite and challenge all of us to reflect upon who we are and how we live, walk the path, journey together with others. We experience a call to be something more in our encounters and in our listening, dialogue, and discernment for living a deeper communion for greater participation in God's mission.

Graced Companions

Two words of the theme today particularly capture my attention and resonate strongly within me: “graced companions.” First of all, these words suggest the kind of companions you and all of us, I believe, are to be, want to be going forth and serving as formators in our congregations. What and how you and we are for our congregations will impact our entire church and world.

Further pondering these words, “graced companions,” one can perceive that they express a dynamic mutuality, that is, y/our being an instrument of God's presence—God's grace for the ones you/we will companion and their being that for you/us—an instrument of God's presence and grace. If there is an authentic living and witnessing synodality, there will be mutuality in the accompaniment and a transforming experience for all involved, for you and the ones you companion. Yes, in the relationship, the roles and responsibilities are different, but grace is present and offered to all on the journey, a Spirit-led journey.

This mutual gracing of one another reminds me of my experience as a formator, as well as the years in ministry with refugees in Africa, particularly when with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The JRS mission is “to accompany, to serve, to advocate the cause of refugees and other forcibly displaced people...” It was understood that there always would be a service offered; however, the conviction was that accompaniment, ‘journeying with’ was most important—a way to express and live solidarity and concern for their wellbeing. Of utmost importance was how we carried out the service—the quality of our presence, the walking with and sharing of experiences, even the struggle and suffering, and discovering together a way into the future. Very demanding, yet very enriching with countless graced moments.

We readily think of formation as a ministry, a service in the congregation; and it is a very essential one. The way of accompaniment, of being companion, a “graced companion” in the journeying and discerning together is vital for the formation ministry. Much can be said about such accompaniment, and I trust you have learned, reflected upon, and shared extensively about this. Here I wish to reflect further on one essential dimension, listening.

Listening in Openness

How we listen will influence everything else. Being sent to witness synodality as graced companions will engage us in a life of active and inclusive listening that will open the space for dialogue and for discerning God’s intent and desire for the individual and the congregation for a life in mission.

Such listening requires a depth of openness. I have found a simple description of four levels of listening helpful in understanding different spaces or levels of openness in listening that we may find ourselves in at various times. If we desire to be graced companions, it is important to be aware of and attentive to our listening space and level of openness, at any given moment.

The first level of listening is what can be described as listening from habit, which is listening from and with our usual opinions, perceptions, and judgements. In this space, we will think we know what the other is about to say or what she means. There is no real listening, because there is little or no openness to anyone or anything beyond ourselves and our own personal perspectives and views.

The second level of listening calls for an open mind so that we can notice and receive new facts and information and consider differing views from our own. In this listening space, conversation, discussion, and debate can begin. However, if this is the ultimate place from which we listen and respond, we can easily be misled to believe that the insights we have gained are complete or sufficient. At this level, we are likely to miss a deeper reality and a greater truth.

The third level of listening needs an open heart, that is, an empathy to hear, see, and understand from and through the experiences of the other. It would be as St. Benedict urged, “listen with the ear of your heart,”¹ or as St. Augustine cautioned: “Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart.”² The true center of listening is the heart, from where one is moved

¹ Opening words of the Rule of St. Benedict.

² “Nolite habere cor in auribus, sed aures in corde” (Sermo 380, 1: *Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana* 34, 568).

and affected by the person who speaks, even in what may be silence. From this space, dialogue becomes possible, and we can come to know and understand more holistically.

The fourth level of listening requires an open spirit. Here, I believe, discernment can begin with the necessary openness to the Spirit, to the invigorating action of the Spirit that is within us, within each person, and within the community. This level of “listening is (or becomes) an act of communion when our hearts (and our spirits) are open to God’s word in others.”³ Then we begin to discern from a place of communion, of being one in and with God, self, and others. In this space, transformation becomes possible and the new can emerge for a future that God desires for us and of us.

Authentic listening, listening with a real depth of openness must always be preceded by silence that enables us to get in touch with ourselves, others, and the source of life itself. Then there comes the moment to empty ourselves of all that prevents us from being available and open to listen.

The discipline of becoming and remaining open to listen—to listen with the heart, to listen for God’s voice in oneself and in another, is very demanding. We need to be mentally, spiritually, and psychologically ready, for it is so much more than a mere process, strategy, or technique. The level and space of listening in discernment is an intentional, communal faith journey of encounters that call for an open mind, heart, spirit, and will in the search for a greater consciousness of truth—of God’s truth, God’s desire for us and for others.

With such openness, we begin to see, to hear, and to love as God does. With such openness, we can call forth the gifts, the potential, and the grace of what God is already doing in our lives and the lives of others and to discern the more to which each of us is being called.

To be so open takes courage, for it is not easy to face our issues and confront and move through our fears. It is costly to let go of our usual ways of thinking, being, and doing to open ourselves for more authentic listening, dialogue, and discernment, which are essential for a life and witness of synodality that seeks to know what God desires. Then there is the courage to act—to be and do what God asks. Being together and listening in such openness on the journey, courage is shared, and grace abounds.

Conclusion

May each of us commit to an openness in listening to the intimate whispers of God in our prayer and silence, in our conversations and dialogue, and in our accompanying one another on the journey. May we listen as if listening for the first time, attuning ourselves to God’s voice, giving special attention to the urgings toward new life and to the “yes” that radiates from within us and all whom we companion. Grace will be ours through the encounters, the listening, the deepening of communion. So with confidence and hope, *go and witness synodality as graced companions.*

³ Bishop Frank T. Griswold, Episcopal Church of the US.