



Ministry by Women Religious and the U.S. Apostolic Visitation

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The concurrent investigations of women religious in the United States, begun in 2009, mark a turning point in defining women's apostolic religious life and ecclesial ministry. Further, the investigations raise interesting questions in ecclesiology and interpretations of the Second Vatican Council. Each is directed by curial offices directly to the institutes and organization involved, rather than via diocesan bishops or, even, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.¹

The January 2009 announcement of an Apostolic Visitation of US woman religious was quickly followed by announcement of a doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the membership group for leadership of 95% of women's religious institutes in the country. Some commentators implied the combined events were a coordinated attempt by conservative forces in the Church, following a conference held at Stonehill College, Massachusetts at which the speakers presented a single view of apostolic religious life.²

As some women's leadership struggled to be positive in the face of the Apostolic Visitation, even as others welcomed it, passive aggressive patterns emerged on both sides. The Apostolic Visitation "office"—really one part-time secretary and some volunteer help in addition to the appointed Visitor, Mother Mary Clare Millea, Rome-based superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—was mostly unresponsive to media as a critical mass of the 325 institutes under scrutiny reportedly refused to complete sections of the Visitation questionnaire, returning only copies of their approved constitutions. Separately, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith assigned Toledo, Ohio Bishop Leonard P. Blair "to review

¹ "The visitation of women's religious communities is enmeshed in the unsettled questions about the interpretation of the council." Francine Cardman, *America*, Vol. 202: 1 (January 4, 2010), pp. 10–14.

² "Stonehill symposium helped lead to women religious investigation." Thomas C. Fox, *National Catholic Reporter*, 46:2 (November 13, 2009) pp. 10–11. Speakers included Ann Cary, author of *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor) 1997 and Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, CM (b. 1934), then-Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

the work of the LCWR in supporting its membership as communities of faith and witness to Christ in today's Church . . ."³ The Apostolic Visitation is scheduled to provide confidential reports to the Vatican at the end of 2011; the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's assessment may or may not result in a public statement regarding LCWR.

What seems central is the question of vocations to religious life for women. In 1983, Pope John Paul II asked for an evaluation of US religious life in the United States concurrent with release of "Essential Elements on Church Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate" (May 31, 1983) by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCRIS). Then, as now, the precipitous drop in vocations combined with significant departures of women from religious life concerned local bishops, who were losing a reliable (and, not incidentally, low-cost) source of workers.

Not all US women's institutes are fading. A recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports that newer and more conservative institutes are gaining younger members, while older, established institutes are not.⁴ The pre-determined conclusion, and perhaps cause, of the recent investigations seems to be that some individual institutes (under scrutiny by Mother Millea) and their larger leadership organization (questioned by Bishop Blair) have departed from traditional religious life and are near extinction.

While more traditional institutes represented by the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (CMSWR) are gaining newer, younger members, overall proportionately fewer women are entering institutes of apostolic religious life as compared to other available vocations to Christian ministry. Hence, a closer examination of how the Church might better respond to women who wish to minister might present another answer to the precipitous post-Vatican II drop in religious vocations.⁵

Dual forces have led to marked change in older and more established institutes. Historically the ordinary lifespan of a newly-founded religious institute is approximately 150 years, as it moves in a Bell curve from the excitement of initial charism through building

³ "Doctrinal Assessment of LCWR by Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" <http://www.lcwr.org/what'snew/assessment.htm> (accessed 7 November 2010).

⁴ ". . .there is a ten-year gap in average and median entrance age between women in LCWR institutes and women in CMSWR institutes. According to the survey of religious institutes, more than half of the women in initial formation in LCWR institutes (56 percent) are age 40 and older, compared to 15 percent in CMSWR institutes." Mary E. Bendyna and Mary L. Gautier "Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference" Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2009.

⁵ CARA reports 173,865 US women religious in 1965, and 79,876 in 2000.

traditions and institutions, to a dying off. Second, contemporary women religious who belong to these now-older institutes have adapted to their changing circumstances and the changing needs of the ecclesia they serve to live more “in the world.”

The service of women “in the world” is counter to traditional understandings of religious life. Yet the “modern” ways of many contemporary religious in the United States may be rebirth of an ancient way adapted to contemporary society. I posit that many apostolic women religious, as well as secular women lay ecclesial ministers, are mirroring the deacons of antiquity and of perhaps of today.

The newer religious institutes representing the most growth follow more traditional models of religious life. They live common horaria, wear common habits, and appear, for the most part, to be involved in traditional works taken up by women religious since the mid-19th century: maintaining and providing housekeeping for residences for priests and bishops, working as catechists in local parishes, running educational institutions connected to their mother houses, and generally working in direct support of diocesan or parochial enterprises. Their leadership belongs to the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), and they offer new members common purpose and common life within a highly structured setting.

But what about the other institutes, those top-heavy with aging members, whose newer and younger members don’t fit the mold presented (and perhaps looked for) by the Apostolic Visitors?

The Questionnaire for Major Superiors has six major areas of inquiry: 1) Identity; 2) Governance; 3) Vocation Promotion; 4) Spiritual and Common Life; 5) Mission and Ministry; 6) Financial Administration.⁶ Each section has several subsections, but the overall questionnaire presents a particular vision of religious life that leans distinctly to the right. Certain viewpoints are presupposed, including what drives or motivates individuals and institutes to consecrated life. In some cases questions are redundant or reach across categories. Not answers, but observations that may shed light on what seems to be an impasse here follow.

Identity

The first section, “Identity,” asks about founding charisms, vows, reconfigurations and mergers and, tellingly, whether the institute is “moving toward a new form of religious life.” I believe that many apostolic institutes are not moving toward a “new form” of religious life, but, rather are reclaiming an older vocation of women, that

⁶ The three-part questionnaire can be accessed at <http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/index.html>.

of the diaconate. Throughout history, this traditional vocation has burst the seams of official restraints on women, first emerging as a vocation verified in the letters of Paul, who calls Phoebe not only a woman of some authority and stature, but a deacon (not deaconess). In fact, Phoebe is the only person in Scripture who is titled “deacon.” (*Rom.* 16:1)⁷

While the diaconate of men and of women effectively died out and remained moribund as a distinct vocation for centuries, women’s ministry did not. From the first inklings of organized religious life for women in monasteries, through the Rule for Virgins of Caesarius of Arles and later iterations of monastic rules, to the Beguines and medieval Third Order women (such as Catherine of Siena) who sought consecrated life with direct service to the people of God, to the emergence of apostolic (*i.e.* non-cloistered) religious life for women through the genius of Mary Ward and others, women have found ways to minister. Because they were—and are—barred from clerical sinecure, their ministry was—and is—self-supporting.

The identities of women’s apostolic institutes in the United States were well-studied in the years following Vatican II. Most chose to “update” in one way or another: to release members from common horaria and habits, to allow diverse ministries, and to develop creative alternatives to institutional housing. The focus was on growth—spiritual, human, intellectual and professional—within the context of their common charisms.⁸

Concurrently, these same institutes began to lose both members and institutions. What was the “identity” of the woman religious? How did the individual woman maintain active membership when so much around her appeared to be crumbling?

Also concurrently, the so-called “woman’s movement” opened new doors in secular society for the highly-educated women religious whose institutional employment had ended. Some women religious left their communities as they entered the world of secular employment. Many, however, remained, employed in disparate organizations—in educational institutions not connected to their institutes, or, even, to the church, and in multiple secular situations. Many retrained, becoming social workers and attorneys, statisticians and nurses. More often than not, they increasingly saw their religious commitment as who they were rather than what they did.

Others chose alternative paths to a broadened notion of ministry as liturgists, pastoral associates, directors of religious education,

⁷ Paul writes to the bishops and deacons at Philippi (*Phil.* 1:1), and diaconal characteristics and requirements are mentioned (*1 Tim* 3:8 and *1 Tim* 3:10) twice.

⁸ Later studies came forth from LCWR, including Anne Munley et al., *Women and Jurisdiction: An Unfolding Reality* (2001), and Anne Munley, *Study of the Ministries of US Women Religious* (2002).

chaplains, and spiritual directors. While these sisters often undertook additional studies in preparation for new positions outside the classroom, their religious commitment often became a certification for their work. Here marked the beginnings of mistaking vows for orders, of relying on novitiate training and religious life as a substitute for seminary training and ordination.

As these two ways of living post-Vatican II religious life mirrored each other, a startlingly new-old way of understanding women's vocations began to emerge. In the first case, where women vowed in community undertook secular employment, membership was divorced from mission even while it remained inserted into charism.⁹ Consecrated life was personal consecration to God in celibacy, lived with more flexible understandings of poverty and obedience. Poverty became much more connected with simplicity—of dress, of living arrangements, of lifestyle in general. Obedience widened to include obedience to the mission of the church viewed through the lens of the founders' charism. Without institutions in their control, superiors were often happy to simply approve of the fact that a sister found a job and reasonable simple housing.

Consequently, in this first case, identity was much more rooted in the individual commitment to work and communal life as explicated in the founding charisms of their institutes. As externals continued to fade, the interior commitment to Gospel values and founding charisms overtook the externals. Sisters were still Josephites and Mercys, Dominicans and Franciscans, but in a new iteration of the older theme. They were now recognized in the specifically "Josephite" or "Franciscan" way they responded to communal discernment and to external questions regarding the public secular communities in which they lived and, now, worked.

In the second case, women vowed in community who undertook employment more directly in direct parish or diocesan service often found their founding charisms subsumed to a more general understanding of "nun." That is, the persons with whom they worked and they whom they served saw these apostolic sisters as distaff priests. Against the backdrop of advancing feminism, especially in the United States and in Europe, seculars saw nothing strange or odd about a woman minister. Sisters in this second cadre of women, interested in direct ministerial service of the people of God, chafed under restrictions necessarily placed on them as women and as lay persons. They were not, and would not be, ordained, and they were now appearing daily without identifying religious habits and veils.

⁹ Sandra Schneiders, *Selling All: Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (Religious Life in a New Millennium, V. 2), (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), p. 380.

With this second cadre of women, the phenomenon of what has been termed “ministerial apostolic religious” grew,¹⁰ but the sisters who so ministered often did so with different education and training from that of ordained clerics. Specifically, while some women managed to train alongside priest-candidates, few had studied philosophy beyond introductory college courses. That is, while priest-candidates in the United States were required to have a minimum of 18 credits of graduate philosophy in order to advance to theological studies, few women—religious or secular—had the time or funds to support such preparation. Hence the underpinnings of their theological educations were often bereft of the philosophy necessary to fully deal with systematic theology. While some managed to receive the M.Div., many more attended graduate schools of religious education, which offered certifications and degrees sufficient to obtain parish and diocesan employment. Their theological training, however, suffered without the underpinnings of philosophy. Consequently, the new-found voices of women religious were sometimes raised in support of causes outside the confines of the Magisterium.

Governance

The Apostolic Visitor’s questionnaire’s detailed look at governance asks about the matter and form of governance, perhaps in response to complaints that some sisters have been disenfranchised. It also asks about what may be the heart of the other shoe dropped from Rome: how does the institute deal with “sisters who dissent publicly from Church teaching and discipline”?

Here the hand of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) can be seen stretching from the investigation of LCWR into the Apostolic Visitation. The three specific areas focused on by CDF, homosexuality, women priests, and questions of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, are the most likely topics (along with abortion and birth control) for dissent, and, consequently, scrutiny. Since the explosion of public debate on abortion in the early 1980s, some women religious took sides on this and other issues diametrically opposed to the positions of the church, in effect denying the teaching authority of the diocesan bishop. Since the diocesan bishop effectively authorized their church employment, whether at the diocesan or the parish level, and in fact authorized their very presence as religious in his

¹⁰ The term probably originated with Sandra Schneiders, whose two volumes on religious life for women examine the concept in great detail. Schneiders recommends a religious have a master of divinity degree, “the degree required for ordained ministry in virtually all mainstream Christian denominations in the United States today” before profession. Schneiders, *Selling All*, 58. The M.Div. is ordinary for priest-candidates, but not for deacons.

diocese, it was left to him to communicate his displeasure via the local or general superior, who in turn must respond to complaints from competent authority.¹¹

The issues directly on the CDF's LCWR agenda, homosexuality, women priests and the centrality of Jesus in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, are specific areas addressed by many US theologians, some of them women, some of these women religious. Their analyses have reached wide audiences, often outside the academy. The Vatican II Decree on the Media of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica* (4 December 1963) begins to recognize, but in no way predicts, the climate of world-wide instantaneous communication in which we live. The Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, *Communio et progressio* (29 January 1971), delineates the application of the Decree under the general rubric of "mass communication," and states "experts enjoy the freedom required by their work and are free to communicate to others, in books and commentaries, the fruits of their research," while warning that only Magisterial doctrines may be attributed to the Church, and warns of the possibility of opinions being confused with teachings.¹² While e-mail, Twitter, Google and YouTube are well in the future of these Vatican documents, their principles can be applied to include the allowance of respectful (if dissenting) theological discourse among peers. One must fairly distinguish between investigation and advocacy, even as the former is often mistaken for the latter.

As media access for both consumers and creators grew in the wake of the documents on mass communication, economic and social barriers to public speech began to fall. A leveling of methodology allowed

¹¹ See for example, the case of Sinsinawa Dominican Sister Donna Quinn, whose superiors stated publicly: "After investigating the allegation, Congregation leaders have informed Sr. Donna that her actions are in violation of her profession as a Dominican religious. They regret that her actions have created controversy and resulted in public scandal." *ChicagoCatholicNews.com*, 4 November 2009. <http://www.chicagocatholicnews.com/2009/11/new-religious-order-acts-on-nun-who.html> (accessed 7 November 2010).

¹² 118. For this reason, distinction must be born in mind between, on the one hand, the area that is devoted to scientific investigation and on the other the area that concerns the teaching of the faithful. In the first, experts enjoy the freedom required by their work and are free to communicate to others in books and commentaries the fruits of their research. In the second, only those doctrines may be attributed to the Church which are declared to be such by her authentic Magisterium. These last, obviously, can be aired in public without fear of giving scandal. It sometimes happens, however, because of the very nature of social communication that new opinions circulating among theologians, at times, circulate too soon and in the wrong places. Such opinions, which must not be confused with the authentic doctrine of the Church, should be examined critically. It must also be remembered that the real significance of such theories is often badly distorted by popularization and by the style of presentation used in the media. Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, *Communio et progressio* (29 January 1971), Austin Flannery, OP, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975, 1996), pp. 331–2.

non-clerics (including women religious) access to the faithful, mostly through secular media, but increasingly through lay-owned and operated Catholic media. Concurrently the concept of “we are the church” spread throughout Europe and the United States, and leapt over convent walls. Not only did women religious find increased voice for themselves in non-clerically controlled avenues of communication, secular media were noticing the brewing of dissent.

Additionally, some women religious who might otherwise be teaching multiple sections of undergraduates at small, out-of-the-way colleges of their institutes took their Sorbonne and Yale degrees to free-standing theologates and major universities, published widely in secular journals, and trained many members of the current generation of Catholic theologians. These relatively few finely-trained women also provided intellectual capital to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which increasingly took up serious discussion not only about religious life, but about other current theological issues as well.

Some incidents, such as the October 7, 1984 New York Times ad entitled “A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion” contending “there is a mistaken belief in American society that [abortion is always morally wrong] is the only legitimate Catholic position,” and stating some Catholic theologians believed abortion could be a moral choice, exploded into major incidents. Among the 97 signers were 26 women religious.¹³ The majority recanted when confronted by their superiors, who in turn had been directed by Rome to require public renunciation by their members. Most religious institutes refused, but eventually a compromise was worked out, except in the case of two sisters later singled out by Cardinal Jean Jérôme Hamer, O.P., then-prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCRIS), the predecessor curial office of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) that initiated the Apostolic Visitation and coordinated with CDF on the investigation of LCWR. These two sisters eventually left their institute.¹⁴

The Apostolic Visitation questionnaire correctly intuits that individual members might disagree with corporate stances of their institutes, especially those made by its Justice and Peace Committee or United Nations Non-Governmental Organization representative. As with the infamous abortion ad, the problem is dual: 1) is the statement in question representative of the entire institute or of the individual member (or group) making it? And, 2) if the statement is considered

¹³ *The New York Times*, 7 October 1984, E-7. Sister Donna Quinn, OP, noted above, was one signer.

¹⁴ See Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey, *No Turning Back*, (NY: Ivy Books, 1992).

representative of the entire institute, how can members distance themselves from it if they disagree?

Vocation Promotion

As noted above, it is clear that the largest influx of new members is to the most conservative of institutes, especially those that have gained a reasonable cohort of younger members. While the questionnaire asks *pro-forma* questions regarding vocation promotion and formation, the vocations section remains the second longest of the questionnaire (after Spiritual and Common Life). In it, the focus seems to be as well on inter-institute formation, that is, on general formation to apostolic religious life informed by other than internal influences. Of course, the movement toward conducting at least some formation—especially intellectual formation—in common locations (often organized according to LCWR Regions, which in turn mirror regions of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops) made and makes continuing sense where the numbers of new members is low. What comes to the crux of the matter, especially in light of the CDF investigation of LCWR, are the questions regarding human and psychosexual development and, especially, regarding how “the vows and the Church’s understanding of religious life” are taught. The Apostolic Visitation questionnaire asks, specifically, whether Vatican II documents, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and other post-Conciliar documents are taught.¹⁵ The questionnaire emphasizes “knowledge of and fidelity to the Church’s understanding of religious life,” and asks the names of presenters at workshops (in individual institutes) since 2004.¹⁶

Again, the presumed influence and leanings of LCWR are a consideration in this section. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) 2009 “Study of Recent Vocations to Religious

¹⁵ The Apostolic Visitation website lists the following documents: Paul VI, Apostolic exhortation, *Evangelica testificatio*: on the renewal of the religious life according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (29 June 1971); John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Redemptiois donum*: on their consecration in the light of the mystery of redemption (25 March 1984); John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic exhortation, *Vita consecrata*: on the consecrated life and its mission in the church and in the world (25 March 1996) and selected quotations from Pope Benedict XVI on consecrated life.

¹⁶ The total list compiled by the Apostolic Visitation is quite probably long and varied, and includes some women and men religious who have attracted curial attention through their work, including Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, Margaret Farley, RSM, and Michael Crosby, OFM. By way of contrast, keynote speakers at LCWR annual assemblies since 2004 were: M. Shawn Copeland and Richard Gaillardetz (2010); Cokie Roberts (2009); Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ (2008); Laurie Brink, OP (2007); Joan Chittester, OSB (2006); Margaret Brennan, IHM and Maria Cimperman, OSU (2005); Dr. Mary Robinson (2004).

Life” tracked the interests of those attracted to defined religious life. It did not (nor could it) track the interests of women not attracted to religious life as defined by the Vatican, especially those who find the institutes receiving the bulk of new vocations too constraining. But, too constraining of what? And, too constraining for what?

The CARA survey fairly tracks a defined group, but undefined groups deserve attention as well. How many young Catholic people are attending universities for study in theology and ministry? How many of these are in non-Catholic institutions? How many are choosing non-Catholic ordained Christian ministry? For 2008, the Association of Theological Schools (ATA) reports 3,465 Roman Catholic students in theological and ministerial studies in 149 schools (including non-Catholic schools)—roughly the same number of persons identified in the CARA report. This is the largest number by denomination except for Southern Baptist (4,383) and “Other” (6,432). Even discounting for Catholic seminarians at ATA schools (CARA counts 3,357 US Catholic seminarians at ATA and non-ATA schools), that leaves a significant number of women—including many young women—training for ministry outside convent walls. Anecdotally, at least, these women say they are called to a ministry that does not have a proper name, except perhaps “lay ecclesial ministry” and that does not imply celibate commitment.

The redundancy in the Apostolic Visitation’s questionnaire may unwittingly be attempting to uncover an unarticulated reality: proportionately, there are probably no fewer women seeking to serve the church, but they are seeking to serve in a manner free of the constraints of traditional religious life for women. The largest proportion of young Catholic women interested in ministry whom I have taught are seeking spiritual, human, intellectual and professional formation,¹⁷ but they are not interested in traditional religious life. These would best be classed as lay ecclesial ministers.

The Apostolic Visitation seems intent on tracking whether candidates and sisters are indoctrinated to the hierarchical church’s vision of religious life, and as such will prove itself a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those institutes that supply traditional formation will form persons interested in traditional religious life.¹⁸ Those institutes that do not supply traditional formation are forming persons not interested in traditional religious life. The two missing parts of the syllogism

¹⁷ At Boston University, Yale Divinity School, St. Michael’s College, VT, and St. Leo University, FL.

¹⁸ A recent study conducted in Poland concludes “Religious habit makes a nun in the sense that it both embodies and represents the abstract basis for her religious identity.” Marta Trzebiatowska, “Habit Does Not a Nun Make? Religious Dress in the Everyday Lives of Polish Catholic Nuns” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25:1 (January 2010), pp. 51–65. The European notion of “nun” appears pervasive in the documentation and application of the principals of the Apostolic Visitation.

are, first, there are several other places women—especially young women—can obtain qualifications for ministry, and, second, some young women simply move to other Christian denominations so as to be able to serve as fully certified ministers. A more telling survey than the Apostolic Visitation questionnaire or even the CARA survey would count the numbers of former Catholics in formation in other denominations over the past ten years. Unfortunately, these numbers are not readily available.

Further, as the US population of deacons has increased exponentially, from virtually none in 1968 to approximately 16,000 today, a new-old vocation has come into view.¹⁹ Since this new-old vocation is one that both scripture and tradition attest to as being open to women, one can only speculate as to whether the dearth of vocations to religious institutes that appear at first glance to be secularizing is in itself an indication of the Church calling forth a renewed permanent order of the diaconate both for men and for women. The complicating factor is that since the permanent order of deacon is presently only open to men, and since it is in its initial stages of reformation, in the United States it is rapidly becoming understood as a clerical vocation for older married men.²⁰ Even so, if only the non-liturgical ministerial life of the deacon is considered, the vocation to the diaconate is clearly possible for women. That ministerial life looks considerably like the ministerial life of many apostolic women religious now living in institutes without habits, horaria, and common institutional ministries.

Spiritual Life and Common Life

Considering the less “traditional” institutes of religious life in light of increasing numbers of young secular women training in programs that would otherwise lead to ordination, one might conclude that diaconal life for women is being reintroduced to the church in two directions: sisters are living and ministering more as secular deacons;

¹⁹ For example, from 1971 to 1999 the number of US deacons rose from 7 to 12,862. See “A Research Report by the Bishop’s Committee on the Diaconate and by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate” (June 2000). <http://cara.georgetown.edu/pdfs/PermanentDiaconate.PDF>. The most recent CARA statistics cite *The Official Catholic Directory* for 2008, which counts 15,396 deacons in the 195 diocese and eparchies whose bishops belong to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

²⁰ William T. Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007); Alfred Hughes, Frederick F. Campbell, William T. Ditewig, Michael Kennedy, Owen F. Cummings, Marti R. Jewell, *Today’s Deacon: Contemporary Issues and Cross-Currents*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006); Owen F. Cummings, William T. Ditewig, Richard F. Gaillardetz, *Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005).

young secular women are seeking living and ministerial arrangements equivalent to those of secular deacons.

Before it addresses the questions of ministry, the Apostolic Visitation's questionnaire asks about specific practices of spiritual and liturgical life, in conjunction with common life. Scattered throughout the section are questions regarding liturgical law: do sisters participate in Eucharistic liturgy "according to approved liturgical norms;" "do rituals replace celebration of the Church's liturgy;" do sisters pray the Liturgy of the Hours—and what date, publisher, text? However, there are no questions regarding personal prayer, nor about the quality of community life.²¹

To play the Apostolic Visitation's advocate, some of the questions are very important. If just one disenfranchised sister is discovered—and rescued—by questions about spiritual and physical care for the elderly and infirm, then the entire exercise will have been worth it. However, any discovery of a disenfranchised sister would also be an indictment of the diocesan bishop and his vicar for religious.

Even so, questions about common life and housing strike to the heart of the post-Vatican II renewal of religious life and the concurrent implosion of Catholic institutions. Did the parish school close for financial reasons, perhaps attributed to the need to pay professional salaries to secular lay teachers? Perhaps, but when the parish school closes, the pastor often puts resident sisters out of the parish convent. When the institute-owned high school closes, the sisters must sell it—along with the high school convent. Common life becomes bound to the effort to find employment within a reasonable commuting distance of wherever sisters of the institute have been able to find affordable housing. Often the split averred to above occurs. Sisters may be able to live in common, even traditional settings, but work in diverse ministries (with consequently disparate time schedules). Or, sisters may be able to work in parish or diocesan institutions, but must live alone, or in very small groups, in secular settings—neighborhood houses or apartments.

Questions relative to spiritual and personal life really revolve around these two concerns: housing and ministry. Can a sister living alone and ministering in a parochial or diocesan institution find daily mass? Yes, assuming she lives close enough, and her hours allow it. Can a sister living in community and ministering in secular employment find daily mass? Perhaps not, again, given constraints of time and distance. The questionnaire itself, biased toward a pre-Vatican II Church and a pre-Vatican II notion of women's ministry, predicts its own conclusions. But, rather than see the evolution of some institutes of women religious as moving "away" from an ideal,

²¹ This is pointed out by Kathleen Hughes, "The Apostolic Visitation: An Invitation to Intercultural Dialogue" *Review for Religious*, 69:1 (2010), pp. 16–30, at 29.

perhaps the notion that these very institutes are moving toward a new ideal can be considered. The problem—if it is a problem—is that few young women seem to be joining the institutes upholding the new ideal. Why? Perhaps, as the Apostolic Visitation itself may appear to demonstrate, they do not find reason to trust the men of the Church.

Mission & Ministry

The questionnaire asks for “the specific apostolic purpose” of the institutes surveyed and for current apostolic projects that evidence their charisms. Again, the questionnaire seems to presume both numbers and institutions, and moves in the direction of the financial implications of a given institute’s diminished influence in an institute affiliated organization.

Some questions, however, seem to appreciate the fact of independent ministries of women religious, although perhaps not without reservations, echoing the concerns noted above: “How do you, as Major Superior, ensure that the ministries of your unit and the ministerial works of your sisters are in accord with Church teaching and discipline?” The analogy of diaconal ministry as presently lived in the United States is of value here. The minority of ordained deacons support themselves through direct Church employment. Recent studies report only 13% of deacons in full-time ministry, with 47% working in part-time ministry. Most ordained deacons support themselves in secular employment (30%) or by retirement funds from secular employment. Their occupations were and are as varied as they are—some are professionals, some own businesses, some are retired and volunteer or work part-time in non-for-profit institutions, including those church owned-and-operated. Hence, only a few are directly and fully employed in “religious” employment, for dioceses, parishes, and Catholic schools and hospitals.²²

This is true as well of many apostolic women religious, whose institutes no longer control Church-related institutions. Given the median age of apostolic women religious in the United States (73 in 2008),²³ one can assume the retirement-age majority are employed or volunteer part-time.

The distinction, of course is that the deacons, ordained to service of the Word, the liturgy and charity, are (or can be) regularly and ceremonially seen by the ecclesia as ordained deacons. The deacon who

²² See Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate*, pp. 30–32.

²³ Bendyna, RSM, Mary E. and Mary L. Gautier. *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference*. (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2009) p. 28.

has faculties from his diocesan bishop can preach, baptize, marry and bury the faithful to whom he was ordained to carry the Gospel. While women religious may have employment in diocesan or parish structures, or in Catholic schools and hospitals not affiliated with their institutes, there is no regular public ceremonial recognition of their ministry, nor any opportunity for them to speak to the church assembly about how the Gospel informs their works. Why, then, would it be surprising that some women religious proclaim their understandings of the Gospel in different places and in different ways, other than preaching in the liturgy of the Eucharist? In this light, membership in groups that give them “voice,” whether Non-Governmental Organizations of the United Nations, or targeted interest groups, from SOA Watch to NETWORK, makes ultimate sense. However, their corporate and/or individual membership and work in these organizations calls forth the Apostolic Visitor’s question regarding whether “the ministerial works of your sisters are in accord with Church teaching and discipline.”

Overall, declining numbers of members combined with increased age points to a more limited mission and ministry of an institute as a whole. The founding charism of any institute lives through the lives of members and former members, and all those to whom they ministered. However mission and ministry eventually become questions of emphasis and influence. Specific charisms emphasize one or another Gospel value; individuals imbued with the specific charism lend its influence wherever they are. Faced with declining membership, institutes are less able to identify a corporate mission and ministry, even as they wish to retain the influence of their founding charisms. The recent suggestions of sociologist Patricia Wittberg, that fading institutes transfer their charisms to what she terms social movement organizations, echo the development of diaconate circles in Europe over 50 years ago. Wittberg’s recommendations that these social movement organizations take up specific works: soup kitchens or providing burial rites for the poor and homeless, for example, are for traditional diaconal works.²⁴

Finances

But, who funds the diaconate? As noted earlier, in the United States, most deacons are volunteers or part-time ministers, while their secular employment or retirement funds from non-ecclesial structures supports their ministry. Meanwhile, the founding charisms of institutes of apostolic women religious are now largely self-propelled by

²⁴ Patricia Wittberg, “Opening a New Window: Fifteen Years after the FORUS Study” *Review for Religious* (68:4) 2009 364–378.

individuals and small institute-financed ministries. In some cases, institutes have corporately determined to transfer assets to others living their charisms, for example to Josephites or Franciscans in third-world countries. On the point of finances, the questionnaire seemed less interested in further supporting individual charisms than in delving into the institute's finances. Notably, part way through the time period allocated for preparation of the questionnaire, changes to the requirements for Part C regarding financial holdings no longer required listing of properties owned or partly owned, nor a copy of the most recent independent financial audit. The retraction of the request followed some very public comment that the information was rightfully privileged to members of given institutes and their advisers.

The retraction, combined with the removal of another request in Part C of the questionnaire: a list of "each sister, year of birth, address and type of ministry (full time/part time)" changed the nature of the Visitation. The excised requests combine to present the Visitor viewing apostolic women religious as clerics, and individual institutes as the equivalent of parishes or dioceses, and the relationship of the Apostolic Visitation to these as one of command and control. The diocesan bishop has authority over the ministry of apostolic women religious in his diocese (and until 1917 Code of Canon Law could admit members to institutes of diocesan right), and it is he who rightfully is concerned about their governance, mission, ministry and finances.

If we recall the trustee debates of the American church, against the backdrop of some current US diocesan fiduciary worries, the hierarchy's concerns about the transfer of institutions and finances become self-evidently ones about alienation of property from ultimate diocesan control.²⁵

Conclusions

The Apostolic Visitation is here directing its inquiry specifically at sisters in simple vows, the mechanism devised over 400 years ago to allow women egress from the cloister and access to the people of God. Its questionnaire, however, focuses its categories and details on points more related to cloistered life.

As demonstrated, the six major areas of inquiry: 1) Identity; 2) Governance; 3) Vocation Promotion; 4) Spiritual and Common Life; 5) Mission and Ministry; 6) Financial Administration include questions that collide with the emerging view of religious life as lived

²⁵ However, Can. 635 §1 defines the temporal goods of religious institutes as ecclesiastical goods governed by further provisions of Canon Law where there is no express provision to the contrary. Can. 1274 §2 directs episcopal conferences to ensure the social security of the clergy, but there is no similar provision for religious.

by older, more established institutes of women religious in the United States. Members of these institutes are in turn living their ministerial lives more in accord with the ministerial lives of secular deacons. Of particular import is the fact that certain viewpoints are presupposed by the questionnaire, including what motivates individuals to consecrated life. What is left unexamined is the development of vocations to what would otherwise be traditional and historical ordained ministry for women. The impasse, then, is may not be between two views of religious life, but rather between views of ministerial life for women. The one (presumably of the Apostolic Visitation) searches for commitment to common religious life and horaria in conjunction with direct service to the church or church-related institution. The other, developing for women both inside and outside of convents, displays commitment to the people of God, sometimes supported by common religious life and sometimes not.

The institutes of women religious that appear to be criticized are providing financial and spiritual support to women totally dedicated to a new ecclesial ministry rooted in the deepest traditions of the ecclesia and echoing the ministry of women of Scripture, now anawim in both the desert of the Church and of the world.

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