



## The Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious: A Visitor's Perspective

How many times in our lives, while living through a particularly challenging situation, we reflect on earlier situations in which we felt stretched beyond our own limited resources and abilities. Unable to do anything but rely upon God in surrender and trust, we later realize that not only did the Lord sustain us beyond our imagining, but those very experiences taught us the relational and practical skills we would need in far more challenging circumstances to come. I have reflected often during the past year about how many of my personal experiences have shaped and honed the gifts I hope to bring to the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States.

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During my early years in religious life, I learned to see beyond external limitations—such as those of the mentally challenged children and adults I lived with and served—and was able to truly respect and cherish, as they do, the inner beauty of each unique person.

Much later, as the newly elected superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and before beginning dialogue or canonical visitation with each of my more than 1200 sisters, I made a whirlwind tour of the communities in the fourteen nations in which my sisters are missioned. I was welcomed into every faith community by lively music, colorful dance, lovely handmade gifts, and much jovial hugging. At one point, exhausted by travel, extreme changes of climate and culture, and the strain of communicating in various languages, I tearfully confided to a priest my difficulty in responding with enthusiasm to these endless outpourings of love. Father gently explained to me that his people needed to use exuberant gestures to express their joy and gratitude for visible signs of God's presence so that they would not succumb to the weight of their daily struggles for survival. That simple explanation was a truly graced moment for me, a key to entering into the world of those faith-filled people and many others whom I would later come to know.

Moments such as these throughout my many years of congregational service have intensified in me the desire to synchronize the beating of my heart with the heart of the other person, to understand, accept, and lovingly embrace her in her uniqueness. International living and travel have strengthened in me the liberating conviction that "my way" is not the only valid way or necessarily the best way to be or to do. While I still struggle at times to succinctly articulate my congregation's unique

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charism of witnessing that God loves each person with the human and divine love of Jesus, I am continually awed to sense the charism coursing through the veins of every Apostle of the Heart of Jesus throughout the world. I feel constantly renewed and challenged by my sisters to authentic religious living while at the same time I try to discover with them how we can grow in personal holiness, effective gospel witness, and fruitful ministry in communion with the church.

My recent appointment as apostolic visitor to the institutes of women religious in the United States, the first instance of a woman religious being delegated with apostolic authority to carry out such a service to the church, seems overwhelming at times. While my affirmative response to this mandate from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) requires considerable personal sacrifice, I have embraced it as a joyful expression of that unconditional assent to the divine will that I freely offered to God, to the church, and to my superiors on the day of my religious profession. Personally and through the religious who assist me in carrying it out, I sincerely endeavor to encounter with holy respect the members of each of the religious institutes involved in the apostolic visitation.

### **The Church's Pastoral Concern for Religious Life**

In the apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, Pope John Paul II clearly affirmed that consecrated life, with its variety of charisms and institutions, is a treasure which has its origin in the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is a gift of God the Father to the church through the Holy Spirit, a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, and an intimate part of the church's life, holiness, and mission.<sup>1</sup>

Women and men freely choose to live in institutes which are canonically erected by the competent authority of the church. Through the profession of vows or other sacred bonds, according to the institute's proper law, they profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience and, through the charity to which the counsels lead, are joined in a special way to the church.<sup>2</sup> On her part, the church has the duty of clarifying the identity, the vocation, and the particular mission of religious institutes and promoting their ecclesial communion.<sup>3</sup>

The apostolic visitation of institutes of women religious in the United States was promulgated with the express approval of Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>4</sup> In a recent address to the members of the council for relations between CICLSAL and the men's and women's International Unions of Superiors General, the Holy Father noted that religious communities are not exempt from the increasing difficulty encountered in proclaiming and witnessing to the gospel in our modern globalized society. While acknowledging the difficult crisis that has affected many congregations by reason of the aging of members, a more or less pronounced decrease in the number of vocations, and a certain "spiritual and charismatic weariness," he indicated that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire a new commitment to fidelity in

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long-established institutes and in new forms of religious consecration as well. He pointed out that authentic actualization of the founders' charism has resulted in a promising new ascetic, apostolic, and missionary impetus for many congregations.<sup>5</sup>

The current apostolic visitation can rightfully be seen as a pastoral desire of the Apostolic See to journey with religious congregations as they respond to Pope Benedict's renewed invitation to "start afresh from Christ."<sup>6</sup> In open and honest dialogue with the universal church, the visitation is a means for congregations to evaluate their present reality with courage and truth, to rediscover their founding charism, and to live it in a more authentic manner appropriate for the present time. In particular, it offers major superiors and their sisters a privileged opportunity to present to the Apostolic See their congregation's unique charismatic identity, as well as their communal and ministerial expression of religious life. It likewise affords the Apostolic See a way to listen to the joys, accomplishments, hopes, and concerns of the sisters and, together with the religious themselves, to seek strategies for enhancing the vitality of the individual institutes.

In order to attain beneficial results, the dialogue with the Apostolic See must begin with an honest self-evaluation of the congregation's lived fidelity to its internal norms and to universal church law. The grace of the apostolic visitation can only occur in a climate of prayer, docility, open dialogue, and collaboration, with a sincere desire on the members' part to examine the congregation's strengths and weaknesses and to effect changes which would enhance the expression of its charism and ecclesial identity.

### Phases of the Apostolic Visitation

The apostolic visitation is being carried out in four phases. In Phase 1, which lasted from April through July 2009, more than 75 percent of the superiors general whose institutes are included in the visitation responded to the invitation of Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of CICLSAL, to enter into personal dialogue with the visitor. Attentive and respectful listening to the hopes and dreams of those wonderful congregational leaders deepened my esteem for the women religious who courageously and faithfully witness to their foundresses' and founders' spiritual patrimony and spend themselves in generous service to the church. The major superiors' love for and pride in their sisters were clearly evident as they shared their collective story and vision. These interviews and letters helped me formulate more precisely the objectives and procedures of the visitation.

In July 2009 the *Instrumentum laboris*<sup>7</sup> or working document for the apostolic visitation was released, outlining its nature, purpose, and procedures. Major superiors were encouraged to use the reflection questions contained in the working document to engage their sisters in a process of self-evaluation regarding their congregation's unique identity, their present experience of community life, their mission and ministry, and their hopes and concerns for the future.

During Phase 2 of the apostolic visitation, major superiors were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding fundamental aspects of their congregation's identity, present lifestyle, and future projections. The questions were similar in content to those already suggested for community reflection in the *Instrumentum laboris* and were based on the model of religious life proposed in post-Vatican Council II documents on religious life<sup>8</sup>



and the Code of Canon Law. The questionnaire was composed of three sections. Part A requested statistical data about the congregation itself, the demographics of its members, living arrangements, care for elderly and infirm members, and ministerial presence. Its results have been collected by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), which will prepare an aggregate report of the findings for all reporting institutes, respecting the anonymity of the individual congregations.

The questions in Part B of the questionnaire offered the major superiors the opportunity to share with the Apostolic See the unique reality of their congregation. They were designed to permit the major superiors to express each congregation's unique way of living the evangelical counsels, in accord with their founding charism and their own fundamental documents, approved by the church. The questions also sought basic information regarding governance, vocation promotion and formation policies, the spiritual and common life, mission and ministry, and financial administration. In addition, major superiors were invited to offer further explanations or comments to express their reality more completely.

In Part C of the questionnaire, major superiors were asked to submit basic and supplementary congregational documents, such as constitutions, ancillary norms, formation plans, and chapter decisions. A complete copy of the questionnaire is available on the Apostolic Visitation website.<sup>9</sup>

The canonical model of religious life which underlies the questions does not fully correspond to the lived reality of certain institutes. The questionnaire extended an invitation to those communities which appear to be evolving into a new form of consecrated life to describe their emerging expression of vowed living.<sup>10</sup> Honest and

respectful conversation between the institute and the Apostolic See could predictably lead to greater clarity of purpose and identity.

During Phase 2 the apostolic visitor also extended an invitation to bishops and individual members of religious communities to share their observations. Input from any persons whose lives have been affected by women religious is also welcomed. All such contributions are assured confidentiality. A core team of religious who are aiding the visitor is currently evaluating the data received in preparation for the subsequent phases of the apostolic visitation.

The third phase will begin in the spring of 2010 with on-site visits to a representative sample of institutes conducted by teams of religious visitors who will act individually and collectively in the name of the Apostolic See. The visitors were chosen from among the many fine religious nominated by superiors general and others and represent a variety of congregations and areas of expertise. Before conducting the on-site visits, all potential visitors will have participated in an orientation workshop during which they will pronounce the public profession of faith and the oath of fidelity to the Apostolic See that are made by those assuming offices to be exercised in the church's name.<sup>11</sup> This profession carries with it a special grace which will strengthen the visitors in their delicate

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task. It will assist them to faithfully carry out their role in communion with the sound teachings and practice of the Catholic Church and not according to their own private judgment or subjective ideology.<sup>12</sup>

The on-site visitors will engage in dialogue primarily with the members of leadership teams and a representative group of the sisters, eliciting their vision of the joys, challenges, and obstacles the religious face in seeking to live authentically their charismatic identity. The details of the on-site visit will be arranged with the congregations to be visited in such a way as to afford the visitors a broad and objective picture of the life and mission of the congregation and its impact on the local church. The visitation team will formulate a report for the apostolic visitor in which they will seek to articulate the accomplishments, the key strengths, and the challenges of the institute as revealed in their dialogue and will include any recommendations which they consider appropriate.

In Phase 4 of the visitation, drawing from the data gathered in the previous phases, the apostolic visitor will prepare for CICLSAL a summary report of each of the participating congregations, whether or not they will have received an on-site visit. Each of the congregations will receive feedback for the purpose of promoting their charismatic identity and apostolic vitality in ongoing dialogue with the local and universal church.

There is much good news to tell about the history and present reality of religious life in the United States. There are also great challenges to be faced so that religious may continue to offer selfless service to the church and to the people who long for our unique witness to Christ through our lives, works, and words. May the fervent prayer of the church sustain women religious on the path of ongoing conversion and renewal that they

may be a more vibrant presence and effective instrument of evangelization into the future. As did Pope John Paul II in the conclusion to *Vita consecrata*, we entrust all religious to the Virgin of the Visitation, that the church may always be gifted with generous women who, as loving consecrated persons, will continue to bring Jesus to the poor, the hungry, those without hope, the little ones, and all who seek Jesus with a sincere heart.<sup>13</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, §§1 & 3.

<sup>2</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 573, §2.

<sup>3</sup> See *Vita consecrata*, §4.

<sup>4</sup> Decree, Prot. N. 16905/ 2008, at <<http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/decreed.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Members of the Council for Relations between the CICLSAL and the USG and IUSG, 2/18/2008, at <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080218\\_usg-uisg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080218_usg-uisg_en.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* See also CICLSAL, instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002).

<sup>7</sup> To obtain a complete text of the *Instrumentum laboris*, see <[www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/news/resources/InstrumentumLaboris.pdf](http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/news/resources/InstrumentumLaboris.pdf)>.

<sup>8</sup> See especially John Paul II, *Vita consecrata* (1996); CICLSAL, *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002); CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* (2008).

<sup>9</sup> See <[http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/ques\\_A.pdf](http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/ques_A.pdf)> and <[http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/ques\\_BC.pdf](http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/materials/ques_BC.pdf)>.

<sup>10</sup> See Questionnaire, Part B, Section 1, E: "Is your institute moving toward a new form of religious life? If so, how is this new form specifically related to the church's and your institute's understanding of religious life?"

<sup>11</sup> See <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFOATH.HTM>>; *Origins* 28 (1998): 163-164.

<sup>12</sup> See *Lumen gentium*, §25.

<sup>13</sup> See *Vita consecrata*, §112.