

Apostolic Visitation

OF INSTITUTES OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES
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Remarks of Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman
January 30, 2009 news conference
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, DC

Good Morning. My name is Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman and I am a member of the American Province of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. A few hours ago, leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) received a letter from Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, announcing an Apostolic Visitation of the principal Religious Institutes of Women in the United States. The purpose of this visitation, which has begun officially with this announcement, is to "look into the quality of the life" of women religious in the United States.

To oversee this task, Cardinal Rodé appointed Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as Apostolic Visitor. I am pleased to represent Mother Clare as her spokesperson for the Apostolic Visitation. Mother Clare is in Argentina today, happily opening a new province of her religious congregation.

We've chosen to announce this Apostolic Visitation here at the National Shrine for a variety of reasons. It is widely recognized as the patronal church of the United States, located in its capital city, and it clearly represents the many cultures and ethnicities that comprise the church in America – as well as its many women religious. And here in the Shrine's "Hall of American Saints" are memorialized several women religious who have contributed greatly to the welfare of the Church and society in this country: Elizabeth Ann Seton, Francis Xavier Cabrini, Katharine Drexel, Rose Philippine Duchesne, and the newest American saint, Mother Théodore Guérin.

These saintly women represent and inspire hundreds of thousands of courageous and generous Catholic sisters who, since before our country was founded, have worked long hours and sacrificed home and personal comfort to build an amazing infrastructure of the faith which endures to this day. As such, they are pillars of faith not only for their religious congregations but for the entire Church and society.

The Catholic sisters who have come after them today number about 59,000 from more than 400 religious congregations. They are builders of a vast and important network of schools, health care facilities, and social centers. In a variety of services rendered in the name of the Church, they continue to give flesh to the words of Jesus Christ, "What you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me" (Matt. 25:40). Especially in these challenging economic times, the lives and dedicated service of these women religious bring hope and encouragement to the suffering, the lonely, the abandoned and the sick. Their commitment to the cause of truth and justice has an impact well beyond the Church and the boundaries of our country.

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The great work of these sisters goes forward during challenging times when fewer women enter their ranks and their median ages rise. Yet their dedication to the mission, entrusted to them by their founders and foundresses, remains steady and strong. The goal of this study is to “look into the quality of the life” of women religious in the United States. In doing so, we hope to discover and share the vibrancy and purpose that continue to accomplish so much, as well as to understand the obstacles and challenges that inhibit these individuals and institutions, thus limiting their growth and/or re-directing their resources and outreach.

The process, which is expected to take about two years to complete, has several stages. First, Mother Clare will solicit voluntary input from the superiors general through inviting them to make personal contacts with her in Rome or in the United States. During the second stage, the major superiors in the United States will be asked for information such as statistics, activities and community practices. Selected on-site visits will be made during the third stage. During this time, the sisters will have an opportunity to share with the visitation teams their joys and hopes, challenges and concerns about their lives as women religious in the Church today. The final stage will be the compilation and delivery of a comprehensive and confidential review by Mother Clare to Cardinal Rodé.

At the beginning of the Apostolic Visitation, Mother Clare asks for the prayers of the sisters who will be part of the study and of the Catholic clergy and laity. We pray that this study will be a source of grace and strength for the gift that religious life is in the Church and world. Men and women throughout our country have the greatest respect and love for the sisters who taught them or who were a healing presence during times of sickness or emotional distress. The ongoing contribution of Catholic sisters to the building up of the Church in our country through works of faith and charity can never be underestimated.

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