



The Apostolic Visitation: An Invitation to Intercultural Dialogue

For women religious in the United States, these are extraordinary times.

In February 2009 Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), stunned American women religious by announcing “an Apostolic Visitation of the Generalates, Provincialates, and Centers of Initial Formation of the Principal Religious Institutes of Women in the United States of America.” The purpose of the visitation is, according to Cardinal Rodé, “to look into the quality of the life of apostolic congregations of women religious in the United States.”¹

Scarcely had this news been absorbed when a second announcement compounded the surprise and confusion of United States women religious. In March 2009 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was informed by letter that Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had initiated a doctrinal investigation of LCWR’s activities and initiatives, particularly citing the tenor and content of various addresses given at the LCWR annual assemblies in recent years.

While the visitation of women religious and the investigation of LCWR are distinct, their simultaneity was not lost on many observers, and it has been reported that Cardinal Levada’s decision to investigate LCWR was made while in communication with Cardinal Rodé. These two initiatives stirred up questions, a variety of feelings, and—given that those principally affected did not participate in the planning of these investigations—a broad range of speculation about motivations and possible (or probable) outcomes.

This article will focus on only one of these initiatives, the Apostolic Visitation. The first section will consider the process of the visitation and the storm that arose as knowledge of it spread across the country. The second section will offer a perspective with which to understand and prepare for the visitation, namely, as an invitation to intercultural dialogue. The third section will suggest a habit of heart which may prove useful for visitors and visited alike. The concluding section will propose some potentially beneficial outcomes of the visitation.

The Visitation and Initial Responses to It

On the face of it, the visitation is a fairly straightforward two-year process. Cardinal Rodé appointed

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M. Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to oversee the visitation. Sister Clare announced three phases for the visitation. The first phase, completed in July 2009, offered major superiors of orders of women religious in the United States the opportunity to meet with Sister Clare in person or by

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phone or letter to express their hopes, joys, concerns, and other observations about their orders; approximately fifty-two percent of them did so.² The second phase was a questionnaire, completed in November 2009. This questionnaire solicited a wide range of

empirical data from every apostolic order of women in the United States, and asked for whatever observations and aspirations they wanted to express. Compliance with this second phase varied widely across the country. Because of concern expressed by many major superiors, the request for personnel and financial information was dropped from this phase. The third phase of the visitation, on-site visits of “a representative sample of religious institutes,”³ will begin in the spring of 2010. For this phase Sister Clare will be joined by other religious, women and some men, who will form teams of visitors. After on-site visits are complete, Sister Clare will send Cardinal Rodé a confidential report summarizing all the information gleaned from the visitation’s three

phases. In addition, individual confidential reports of all congregations will be prepared for the cardinal. The reports of those congregations receiving on-site visits will be more extensive.

The visitation’s website (www.apostolicvisitation.org) offers both the reason for the visitation and its objective. The visitation “is intended to comprehensively assess and encourage the growth of Catholic institutes of women religious in the United States who engage in apostolic works.” Why a visit? Because “religious life has passed through challenging times. The Congregation for Consecrated Life is aware that many new congregations have emerged in the United States while many others have decreased in membership or have an increased median age. Apostolic works have also changed significantly because of societal changes. These and other areas need to be better understood and assessed in order to safeguard and promote consecrated life in the United States.”⁴

It sounds so benign. Why the furor from so many quarters?

The anguish of many people, religious women and a throng of their supporters and friends as well, springs from the very nature of an apostolic visitation, something generally intended for the correction of abuses. The lack of participation of major superiors in the visit’s design, the secrecy about those chiefly responsible for it, and wonderment about its conclusions—all of this causes concern. What abuse exactly is this visitation meant to correct? Most women religious believe they have been living faithfully that form of religious life which emerged from their obedience to the church’s mandate for renewal at Vatican Council II, and which is distilled in the congregations’ constitutions—rules



of life previously approved by CICLSAL, the very congregation now mandating the visitation. Furthermore, congregations have built into their governance certain internal structures (general chapters, for example, or the periodic visits of those in leadership) for the protection of their spiritual heritage, for evaluation of their fidelity to their constitutions, and for assessment of people's needs in the light of the gospel so as to establish ministerial priorities.

Women religious in the United States have also embraced a pattern of discernment and decision-making which welcomes the participation of every member. For many religious congregations, transparency and collegiality have become a way of life. Why, then, a visitation initiated without the collaboration of those being visited, lacking collegiality, shrouded in secrecy? The apostolic visitation of women religious and the concurrent investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious make many feel beleaguered, others fearful, others suspicious or angry.

There are other voices being heard, of course. Some think it is high time someone examined what is happening among women religious—whether the vows are being lived, whether prayer is still the core of religious life, whether women religious should be working outside institutional church structures, and whether women religious should be advocating for those on the margins or promoting issues of justice within and beyond the church.

Still others believe that the visitation provides an opportunity for women religious to go more deeply into issues of substance. The forty questions posed by the visitation's *Instrumentum laboris*, that is, its working paper, touch on everything from charism, vows, lead-

ership, formation, spiritual life, and community living to mission, ministry, and financial administration.⁵ For many women religious today, conversations on these topics happen less frequently than they would wish because of the multiple demands placed on their time and energy. There is always the danger that values taken for granted or left unarticulated become inoperative. Conversations on the essential elements of religious life may help participants discern anew where the Spirit is leading.

These conflicting voices and divergent responses mirror the church at large not only in response to the visitation but on myriad issues large and small. Clearly, we need to find a way to talk together, to speak with integrity and honesty about matters of substance with those who may not share our worldview. Above

all, we need to find a way to reframe the conversation which this visitation invites us to have among ourselves and with our visitors. Even though the visitation is limited to the United States, and visiting teams will be formed from members of U.S. orders, the visitation is sure to find a range of "cultures" among us because of differing generations, theologies, spiritualities, formation experiences, educational opportunities, and so on. The growing discipline of intercultural dialogue may

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provide the best framework and some guidance for our exchange.

Intercultural Dialogue: A Definition and Some Guidelines

Choose any Internet search engine and you will find thousands of entries on intercultural dialogue, offering various definitions of it and rules for engaging in it. The following definition is representative:

Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception. In this definition, "open and respectful" means "based on the equal value of the partners"; "exchange of views" stands for every type of interaction that reveals cultural characteristics; "groups" stands for every type of collective that can act through its representatives (family, community, associations, peoples); "culture" includes everything relating to ways of life, customs, beliefs, and other things that have passed on to us for generations, as well as the various forms of artistic creation; "world perception" stands for values and ways of thinking.⁶

Intercultural dialogue invites all interested parties to an open and respectful exchange with a view to deeper mutual understandings. Intercultural dialogue promotes esteem for diversity and insists that "different" does not mean "deficient." It fosters mutuality in the face of unequal power relations and forges partnerships in a common cause. And surely the most profound outcome looked for is the transformation of all who take part—interior conversions that make room for changed forms, images, and behaviors and the freedom to see new possibilities and to make choices that promote growth.

Among some simple rules for intercultural exchange, the most important is that of active listening, listening to one another with respect and openness, indeed with reverence. Each religious community being visited has a unique history shaped by the founder and her or his culture and circumstances. Each order has a unique charism and spirit, a set of traditions, beliefs, customs, even a particular "vernacular language" shaped over the years from the teachings and writings of members who have gone before, prophets and mystics among them, who have had a formative influence on the institute. Each order has a rule of life which is precious to the members, having been carefully composed and then gradually finding its way into their hearts.

There may be a common set of questions in the *Instrumentum laboris* and a range of issues to be explored during on-site visits, but the answers will be as varied as the wonderful variety of religious communities which for almost two millennia have grown up in response to the Spirit's promptings regarding particular needs of the day and the place. There are no "right" answers, but there will be many ways that sisters will express their following of Christ within a particular rule of life. The visitors, too, will have specific and precious religious heritages that shape their understanding and expectations of religious life. Active listening—listening that is open to the hearts of others in the dialogue—is required of visitors and the visited alike.

A second rule for the dialogue is to speak from one's own experience, not in the language of "they" or even "we," but "I." I believe, I think, I choose, I struggle with, I have come to appreciate, even I don't know or I am not sure. The living of religious life is an imprecise science, dependent as it is in the last analysis on each



one's intimate and unique relationship with God. We grow into our understanding of prayer, the vows, communal life and mission during the course of years of choices made before God, in the power of the Spirit, and in communion with one another. Each member's experience and expression of religious life has been shaped by so many different influences, chief among them prayer, community life, ministerial experiences, and wise guides along the way. Rarely, if ever, can we read one another's mind or heart. Best, then, to speak only our own truth.

A third rule for the dialogue is not to fear differences but to welcome a respectful challenge, a thoughtful follow-up question. Particular external choices of lifestyle—for example, regarding housing options or ministerial options or the use of money—are less important than the *reasons* such choices have been made, the communal discernments which prompted this or that decision. In some instances clearly life-altering decisions have been made by local communities or whole congregations after long and serious prayer and reflection. These choices do not admit of true or false, yes or no, but require a reflective exchange whose eventual reward will be deeper insight.

A fourth rule of intercultural dialogue is to come to common agreement about the scope of the conversation. Both the *Instrumentum laboris* and the questionnaire of phase two of the visitation present a wide range of topics for personal reflection. Not all of these topics, however, were appropriate for comment in the questionnaire of phase two, especially if major superiors were in possession of information gleaned in personal manifestations of conscience, nor should some topics be included in the on-site dialogues of phase three.

There are canonical norms which govern the extent of the dialogue. Subjects such as the frequency of one's sacramental participation are more appropriate to the internal forum and, in any case, are beyond the scope of the visitation. Furthermore, any questions with potentially incriminating consequences may also be politely deflected. Participants in an intercultural dialogue must know and accept the boundaries of the conversation; in an apostolic visitation, the boundaries are demarcated in canon law.⁷

Finally, intercultural dialogue is best and most fruitfully employed when all the participants have had an opportunity to shape the dialogue and accept the rules which bind the participants. In the case of the apostolic visitation, certain rules have been imposed from the outset which are troubling to some of those expected to participate. Especially neuralgic among women religious who are used to openness and transparency is the secrecy surrounding the visitation's motivation and its final reports. Some opportunity for participants to negotiate the rules of the visitation would be a good-faith gesture to women religious who welcome courageous, gentle, and respectful dialogue as partners with a church they love.

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A Useful Habit of Heart

The habit of heart I want to recommend in preparation for the visitation comes from my own experience of an earlier visitation. More than twenty years ago, I was part of the first apostolic visitation of seminaries and houses of formation in the United States. In 1981 the Holy See appointed Bishop John A. Marshall of Burlington, Vermont, to serve as apostolic visitor for this process, which took nearly seven years from announcement to formal conclusion. At the time of the visit, I was a member of the faculty of the Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago, teaching in the department of Word and Worship. Bishop Marshall himself led the party of visitors to CTU, and I was invited by the administration to meet with him.

My visit with Bishop Marshall was not a happy experience for me, perhaps because intercultural dialogue had not yet been discovered. Upon my being asked “What are you doing here?” my half hour was spent, about equally, in parrying questions about the alleged behavior of others on the faculty and staff and in defending my interpretation of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and other liturgical norms. Too quickly our conversation ended, and I realized almost at once that I had not had a chance to communicate my appreciation of CTU, its extraordinary faculty and student body, and its commitment to educating faithful ministers for the post-Vatican II world church. Furthermore I had been given no opportunity to speak of my own contribution to the mission of CTU. I asked for and was granted a second visit.

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Why put myself through that experience twice? The words of 1 Peter 3:15 express it best. “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gen-

tleness and reverence.” I wanted to give an account of my hope, based on a faculty where intellectual rigor and faith were wed, on a student body of women and men from all over the world preparing to commit themselves to a life of service of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and on the local church in Chicago, where the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin gave extraordinary witness to the very qualities of holiness and gospel service we were trying to nurture in ourselves and instill in our students.

For many women religious, hope is what has kept us faithful to this privileged journey in the midst of the numerous challenges of these last several decades. Changing demographics, underfunded ministries, elder care decision-making, conversations towards merger, customs no longer viable, and ministerial needs forever outstripping our human and material resources—all of these realities have tested congregations and their leaders. At the same time, that basic love and longing for God which brought us to the threshold of religious life still drives us, together, to seek and find God in contemplative prayer, in a life of common purpose, in zeal which keeps even the oldest among us focused on mission.

Hope is the glue in religious life today. That hope must be the undercurrent of every exchange during on-site visits. If our visitors discover little else, they should leave with the conviction that hope is why we came to religious life and why we stay and why we get out of bed each morning and why, despite all the challenges and limitations we experience, we try every day to be God’s heart on earth.

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the author of First Peter to link hope to gentleness and reverence, two other habits of heart which we do well to foster. If we do so, the intercultural dialogues in our future will accomplish in all of us, visitors and visited, great transformations of head and heart and mission.

Hopeful Expectation

What might be expected at the conclusion of this apostolic visitation? Approximately three hundred forty communities of apostolic women religious will have contributed to a composite picture of religious life in the United States. Sister M. Clare Millea has the unenviable task of summarizing all the information and impressions gleaned from her visits with major superiors, from the empirical data tabulated from many questionnaires, and from the reports of numerous on-site visits to motherhouses and houses of formation. This composite report together with individual reports of the religious orders will be presented to Cardinal Franc Rodé and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It is to be hoped that major superiors and their councils will have had an opportunity to see these reports, to correct factual errors, and to participate in the assembling of recommendations before their formal presentation to Cardinal Rodé.

Then what?

Here are some possible hope-filled outcomes, first on the institutional level. The *Instrumentum laboris* poses some thoughtful questions about institutional sponsorship, care of the elderly, ongoing formation resources, and so on. In the course of the visitation, it is possible that some “best practices” might emerge—the kind of information that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious has worked to surface and circulate among its

members for many years. While respecting the autonomy of each institute, congregations with similar projects or needs might be invited to consult with other congregations that have addressed similar issues with success. Another institutional prospect might be that those communities no longer viable because of a lack of either personnel or financing might be given the support they need to make decisions for their future.

On the personal level, the visitation could have a profound outcome. The *Instrumentum laboris* for this visitation has a long series of thoughtful questions for personal study and prayer. These questions touch on the essence of religious life with two serious omissions: contemplation and other forms of solitary prayer are not mentioned, nor is there any reference to the quality and tone of community life, only to religious exercises performed in common. Apart from those lacunae, the document together with its numerous citations of other documents from the Apostolic See is, on balance, a rich resource for reflection and prayer and for conversations within and across communities and congregations. Whether a congregation receives an on-site visit or not, this process has the potential for renewal among us. It also has the possibility of instilling in us a deeper realization of our place in the church and a deeper appreciation of our work as collaborators with our ordained and professed brothers in the public life of the church.

And is it foolish to hope for one last outcome? Is it possible that this Apostolic Visitation might conclude with a resounding “thank you” to nearly sixty thousand women who have lived religious life as faithfully as nature and grace could achieve, making God’s love known through their ministries and by their very lives? For this, let us pray to the Lord.

Notes

¹ Letter of Cardinal Franc Rodé to the Superiors General of Congregations of Women Religious in the United States, 2 February 2009.

² Of approximately 340 eligible communities, 177 responded through visits or letters to Phase One. See the Apostolic Visitation website <www.apostolicvisitation.org> “Update on the Progress of Phase 1.”

³ See Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Instrumentum Laboris* for Apostolic Visitation of the General Houses, Provincial Houses, and Centers of Initial Formation of the Principal Religious Institutes of Women in the United States of America. Protocol No. 16805/2008.

⁴ The Apostolic Visitation website, Frequently Asked Questions.

⁵ A copy of the *Instrumentum laboris* is available on the Apostolic Visitation website.

⁶ European Roma Information Office, White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue.

⁷ See the Resource Center for Religious Institutes, *The Apostolic Visitation of Women Religious in the United States: A Canonical Reflection*. 9 March 2009.