
The Apostolic Visitation of Women Religious in the United States has elicited a lot of speculation about its purpose and intended outcome and roused various emotional responses from religious and laity alike.

Some speculation allows for an honest effort on the part of the Vatican offices to evaluate the Vatican II-inspired renewal efforts of U.S. women religious, their discerned change in choices of ministry or ways of ministering, and the reality of their meager vocation recruitment. Most people, even among the critics, acknowledge that U.S. women religious took seriously the renewal call issued by Vatican II and responded more wholeheartedly than the men religious and the rest of the U.S. church. Realizing that certain ministries no longer required the massive effort of sheer numbers, women religious followed the church's lead and their own original charisms by seeking to serve those marginalized in our current society makeup—the poor, the handicapped, women in dire straits—and by advocating for justice in many spheres. While many more needy people were being served, women religious often lost the visibility that accompanied their corporate mission in schools and hospitals. Among a



number of factors in American family life and culture, vocational recruitment suffered from the positive secular possibilities of the feminist equality movement and from the continued limits imposed on women's roles and leadership in the church.

There is no doubt that the U.S. church is as strong as it is because of the work and witness of women religious through the 19th and 20th centuries. Many are the verified accounts of bishops and local pastors using and misusing the work of religious women in their own chosen endeavors. The generous sacrifices of women religious in the U.S. church are documented and unforgettable.

What now needs to be honored in the current, often still hidden and unacknowledged, ministry of women religious is their being the church's arms reaching out to a world-in-need. The witness of their apostolic lives cannot now be measured by institutions, corporate devotional emphases, or monastic garb. Apostolic religious life cannot be well evaluated by monastic criteria, which seemingly inspire the current study.

The theology of religious life has never adequately explained the breadth of religious-life development because it has retained monasticism as its norm. Church leadership has consistently found apostolic religious life to be second-class and deficient as measured against the monastic ideal.

Perhaps the Vatican study will be the occasion for a breakthrough in the understanding and acceptance of the breadth of apostolic religious life in the church of the 21st century. U.S. women religious will have offered the worldwide church a most precious gift of wisdom and insight into the true living of the Spirit-given charism of active religious life.

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