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## Final Report on the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States of America

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### Introduction

At the conclusion of the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States of America, conducted "*to look into the quality of the life of religious women in the United States*", this Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) presents this report to the women religious themselves as well as to the Church's Pastors and faithful. In addition to this general report, it is foreseen that individual reports will be sent to those Institutes which hosted an onsite visitation and to those Institutes whose individual reports indicated areas of concern. Letters of thanks will also be sent to those Institutes which participated in the first two phases of the Visitation.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life is sincerely grateful for the presence of women religious in the United States and for all that they contribute to the Church's evangelizing mission. Since the early days of the Catholic Church in their country, women religious have courageously been in the forefront of her evangelizing mission, selflessly tending to the spiritual, moral, educational, physical and social needs of countless individuals, especially the poor and marginalized. Throughout the nation's history, the educational apostolate of women religious in Catholic schools has fostered the personal development and nourished the faith of countless young people and helped the church community in the USA to flourish. In addition, a great majority of the Catholic healthcare systems in the United States, which serve millions of people each year, were established by congregations of women religious.

In response to the appeal of *Perfectae Caritatis* to return to the Gospel, "the ultimate norm of religious life" and to "their founder's spirit and special aim" (*PC, 2 a & b*) women religious sought to adapt their life style and mission in ways that might enable them to more effectively respond to contemporary needs. In a spirit of creative fidelity to their charisms, they branched out in new ministries to those most on the margins of the Church and society. Women religious in the United States also notably pursued ongoing theological and professional formation seeking to further their ability to serve the Church's evangelizing mission and to prepare others to collaborate in it as well. Women religious typically engage in volunteer ministry well beyond the normal retirement age and even in their later years sustain the life and ministry of their sisters through their prayerful support.

### 1. The Apostolic Visitation to Institutes of Women Religious in the United States: Rationale and Overview

Visitations are a normal instrument of governance in religious life. Major superiors are required to regularly visit

those religious under their jurisdiction as an essential part of their loving service of their brothers and sisters. In addition, the Apostolic See regularly authorizes Apostolic Visitations, which involve sending a Visitor or Visitors to evaluate an ecclesiastical entity in order to assist the group in question to improve the way in which it carries out its mission in the life of the Church.

In December 2008, CICLSAL chose to conduct an Apostolic Visitation to the institutes of women religious in the United States which engage in apostolic ministry and which have a generalate, provincialate and/or initial formation program in the United States. Cloistered contemplative communities were not included in the Visitation. We initiated the Visitation because of our awareness that apostolic religious life in the United States is experiencing challenging times. Although we knew that any initiative of this magnitude would have its imperfections, we wished to gain deeper knowledge of the contributions of the women religious to the Church and society as well as those difficulties which threaten the quality of their religious life and, in some cases, the very existence of the institutes. We hope that this experience of prayerful reflection, self-evaluation and dialogue, in the light of Church guidelines for religious life, will continue to bear fruit in the revitalization of religious life as well as in greater collaborative efforts among religious institutes, with the Church's Pastors and lay faithful and with our Dicastery, in an ever deeper spirit of ecclesial communion.

In some ways, this Apostolic Visitation was unprecedented. It involved 341 religious institutes of both diocesan and pontifical right, to which approximately 50,000 women religious throughout the United States belong. Each province of institutes which had more than one province in the United States was considered a separate unit, for a total of 405 entities involved in the Visitation. The Dicastery appointed a woman religious from the United States, Mother Mary Clare Millea, ASCJ, as Apostolic Visitor, granting her the faculties to design and carry out the Visitation. She, in turn, chose a core team of American religious who assisted her throughout the process.

The Visitation process sought to convey the caring support of the Church in respectful, "sister-to-sister" dialogue, as modeled in the Gospel account of the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, and through the use of quantitative and qualitative data-gathering instruments. Given the vast proportions of this undertaking and the widely diversified expressions of apostolic religious life, the Visitor's General Report to the Dicastery presented, in broad strokes, current major trends of women's religious life. While these trends cannot be presumed to apply to each of the institutes, they were significant enough to warrant mention in her report. The Visitor also provided the Dicastery with a brief overview of each of the participating institutes, using data gleaned from personal interviews and written documentation submitted to her by major superiors and their councils, members of the religious institutes and any other persons who wished to contribute their personal input to the process.

The Visitation process took place between 2009 and 2012 and was divided into four phases. In the first phase, all the Superiors General of Institutes of women religious involved in the visitation were invited to speak with or write to the Visitor to share their hopes and concerns for their institute.

A Questionnaire was used in the second phase of the Visitation to gather empirical data and qualitative information regarding the spiritual, community and ministerial life of the individual congregations. After the Visitor carefully studied the data received, she prepared and sent teams of vowed religious to conduct the third phase of the Visitation, on-site visits to a representative sample of 90 religious institutes, representing about half of the apostolic women religious in the United States.

In the fourth and final phase of the Visitation, the Visitor presented to the Dicastery a final report and an executive summary of general issues and trends in women's religious life in the United States as well as the reports containing data specific to the reality of each of the institutes involved in the study.

In all of its phases, the Apostolic Visitation focused on the vocation to religious life as lived by the members of religious institutes who publicly profess the evangelical counsels and exercise some external apostolic work in the United States. The entire process sought to elicit from the leaders and members of the institutes a sincere and transparent depiction of their lived reality. It attempted to assist the Apostolic See and the sisters themselves to be more cognizant of their current situation and challenges in order to formulate realistic, effective

plans for the future. Particular attention was given to the vowed commitment of the women religious in fidelity to their charism, in light of the Church's teachings on religious life and the guidelines for its renewal indicated by Vatican Council II and post-Conciliar documents.

This Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life expresses heartfelt gratitude to Mother Clare for having accepted the challenge of such a huge undertaking and for having carried out this task in such a pastoral and professional manner. Sincere thanks are also offered to all who contributed to the success of the visitation process, in particular to the religious who served as her core team, those who conducted the on-site visits and all who cooperated in the Visitation to their congregation.

## **2. Empirical Findings of the Apostolic Visitation**

Great variations exist across religious institutes not only in their charism, mission, spiritual traditions, and communal life but also in more easily quantifiable characteristics such as the size and composition of their membership, the configuration of religious houses or other accommodations in which they live, their geographic dispersion and distribution, and the number, types, and settings of the works in which the religious are engaged. Despite these differences, the overall trends among a large majority of religious institutes, especially those related to aging and diminishment, are clear.

Today, the median age of apostolic women religious in the United States is in the mid-to-late 70s. The current number of approximately 50,000 apostolic women religious is a decline of about 125,000 since the mid-1960s, when the numbers of religious in the United States had reached their peak. It is important to note, however, that the very large numbers of religious in the 1960s was a relatively short-term phenomenon that was not typical of the experience of religious life through most of the nation's history. The steady growth in the number of women religious peaked dramatically from the late 1940s through the early 1960s, after which it began to decline as many of the sisters who had entered during the peak years left religious life, the remaining sisters aged and considerably fewer women joined religious institutes.

## **3. Charism and Identity of the Religious Institutes**

Speaking of the variety of expressions of religious life in *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II praised the countless persons who have publicly consecrated their lives to God in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life, for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God. Seeking to embody the Gospel in their own lives, they strive to be "images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cf. Phil. 2:5-11), so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation" (VC, 9).

The Apostolic Visitation noted that the majority of women religious have a strong sense of the history of their institute and the charism of their foundress/founder and draw strength from the courageous example of their early members. Sisters today generously and creatively place their charism at the service of the needs of the Church and the world. The religious interviewed during the on-site Visits were proud to share the historical and charismatic roots of their community and their own vision and lived experience of its identity.

Many sisters expressed great concern during the Apostolic Visitation for the continuation of their charism and mission, because of the numerical decline in their membership. The processes of reconfiguration and merger that have occurred among religious institutes in recent years have sought to preserve and promote the founding charism of the entities involved.

In addition, the majority of the religious institutes are intensifying their efforts to share their charism with lay collaborators and those whom they serve so that the charism might continue to enrich the life of the Church. Mission effectiveness training programs prepare lay collaborators to carry forward congregation-owned or sponsored ministries according to the original charism. Associate and similar programs enable lay persons to share in differing degrees in the life and charism of the institute. This Congregation praises these creative ways of sharing the charismatic gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the Church and asks that the essential difference between the vowed religious and the dedicated lay persons who maintain a special relationship with the institute

be respected and celebrated.

#### 4. Vocation Promotion and Religious Formation

The promotion of religious vocations is a challenge which not only directly concerns the religious themselves but also involves the whole Church in presenting the attraction of the person of the Lord Jesus and the value of the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis stated that "[t]he fraternal life and fervor of the community can awaken in the young a desire to consecrate themselves completely to God and to the preaching of the Gospel. This is particularly true if such a living community prays insistently for vocations and courageously proposes to its young people the path of special consecration" (EG, 107).

The Apostolic Visitation report noted that most institutes in the United States have experienced a decline in new vocations in recent years. Currently, a significant number of religious institutes are expending considerable spiritual and material energies in the area of vocation promotion. While some of these have since shown an increase in the number of candidates entering and remaining, for many other institutes the results are not commensurate with the expectations and efforts. Some institutes reported that they have suspended vocation efforts for a variety of reasons, the most common being the declining membership and the ever-widening age gap between their current members and potential candidates.

In general, candidates to the apostolic religious life tend to be older, more educated, and more culturally diverse than in the past. Vocation and formation personnel interviewed noted that candidates often desire the experience of living in formative communities and many wish to be externally recognizable as consecrated women. This is a particular challenge in institutes whose current lifestyle does not emphasize these aspects of religious life.

Many formators conveyed to the Visitor that candidates often have extensive professional backgrounds but less prior theological and spiritual formation. Formation programs of religious institutes studied during the Apostolic Visitation contain varying degrees of emphasis on these and other essential elements of holistic formation. Sisters in various stages of initial formation generally expressed good understanding of their community's charism and generous enthusiasm for embracing and bearing its ideals into the future.

The Dicastery expresses its gratitude to women religious for joyfully responding to the call to a life of total consecration to Christ in selfless service to our brothers and sisters. We urge them, as well as the Church's Pastors and all who love and esteem this life choice to offer fervent prayer for religious vocations and to seek new ways to present the significance of religious life to those who are discerning their life choice and to encourage them on their vocation journey.

We ask the religious institutes to evaluate their initial and ongoing formation programs, assuring that they provide a solid theological, human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all of these various aspects (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 65).

#### 5. Praying with the Church

Regularly placing oneself in God's presence, entering into dialogue with the One who has called us "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (*I Pt* 2:9) is an essential part of the life of all consecrated persons, summoned to pray with the Church, both communally and individually. The Council decree *Perfectae Caritatis* asked religious to cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer, especially in daily reading and meditation on sacred Scripture and in the celebration of the Eucharist (cf. *PC*, 6). Today, Pope Francis repeatedly insists that the Church does not evangelize unless she constantly lets herself be evangelized: "God's word, listened to and celebrated, above all in the Eucharist, nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the Gospel in daily life" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 174).

A review of the Constitutions and other directives of apostolic religious institutes generally revealed that

institutes have written guidelines for the reception of the sacraments and sound spiritual practices. This Congregation asks the members of each institute to evaluate their actual practice of liturgical and common prayer. We ask them to discern what measures need to be taken to further foster the sisters' intimate relationship with Christ and a healthy communal spirituality based on the Church's sacramental life and sacred Scripture.

## 6. Called to a Life Centered on Christ

In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us. ... God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father eternally utters his Word in the Holy Spirit. Consequently the Word, who from the beginning is with God and is God, reveals God himself in the dialogue of love between the divine persons and invites us to share in that love" (VD, 6).

The Church is continually challenged to a fresh understanding and experience of this mystical encounter. However, caution is to be taken not to displace Christ from the center of creation and of our faith. Truly, the Word of God is the one through whom the cosmos is created and sustained in being since "all things have been created through him and for him, and he is before all things, and in him all things have their being (cf. *Col.* 1:16f).

This Dicastery calls upon all religious institutes to carefully review their spiritual practices and ministry to assure that these are in harmony with Catholic teaching about God, creation, the Incarnation and the Redemption.

## 7. Community Life

Our instruction *Fraternal Life in Community* states: "Consecrated together – united in the same 'yes', united in the Holy Spirit – religious discover every day that their following of Christ 'obedient, poor and chaste', is lived in fraternity, as was the case with the disciples who followed Jesus in his ministry. They are united with Christ, and therefore called to be united among themselves" (*FLC*, 44). When the demands of a particular apostolic work require a religious to serve in a place where there is no community of her own institute, our instruction further states that an intercongregational "community life" can be advantageous for the work and for the religious themselves (cf. *FLC*, 65a).

The Apostolic Visitation report noted that for women religious in the United States the expression of community life is varied, ranging from communities composed of many individuals who live a structured common life to individuals who live singly or with one other sister, from her own or another institute. Most women religious who reside alone do so for reasons of ministry or health, and both they and their institutes are committed to mutual support, communication, and contribution to the life of the community.

We urge religious institutes to reflect deeply upon their lived experience of the community dimension of their consecrated life and to courageously take steps to strengthen their communities that they might become ever more convincing signs of communion in Christ.

## 8. The Service of Authority

The role of superiors has always been of great importance in the consecrated life. The Church has consistently taught that "those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible for the community, as guides of their sisters... in the spiritual and apostolic life." Those entrusted with religious authority must know how to involve their sisters in the decision-making process and, at the same time, remember that "the final word belongs to authority and, consequently, that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected" (*Vita Consecrata*, 43).

The Apostolic Visitation report noted that the majority of sisters have a positive image of their major superiors past and present. Many are described as demonstrating foresight and wisdom in dealing with complex personnel, ministry and administrative issues of their institutes. The vast majority of sisters interviewed spoke of

their major superiors' caring provision for the needs of the elder and infirm sisters in their present and future circumstances. However, some also expressed concern about the difficulty of identifying and forming new sisters for leadership because of the increasing median age of the members.

This Congregation expresses its gratitude to the sisters who minister within their own communities for the precious service rendered to their institute and to the Church. As our instruction on the service of religious authority states: "Persons in authority are at the service of the community as was the Lord Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples, in order that the community in its turn be at the service of the Reign of God (cf. *Jn 13:1-17*)." At the same time, the superior's obedience to Christ and her careful observance of the norms of the Church and her own institute help "the members of the community understand that their obedience to the superior is not only not contrary to the freedom of the children of God but causes it to mature in conformity with Christ, obedient to the Father" (*The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 17). It is essential that those who lead and those who obey are deeply convinced that since they are first and foremost sisters there is no room for authoritarianism or blind submission.

## 9. Financial Stewardship

The Visitor's report indicated that many religious institutes exercise wise stewardship, socially responsible investing and strategic planning for the maintenance and reconfiguration of congregational facilities to meet changing community and ministerial needs. Many institutes also generously contribute to the Church's efforts to alleviate poverty throughout the world. Despite careful stewardship, most institutes reported a significant and ongoing loss of income for several reasons. Among these are the long-term consequences of women religious having been undercompensated for their ministry over an extended period of time. The current diminishment in membership in most institutes results in fewer sisters earning a salary or stipend. Elder religious serving as volunteers do not receive remuneration for their service. Also, many sisters working with the poor and disenfranchised are partly or wholly subsidized by their institutes. Some sisters serving in ecclesiastical structures receive relatively low salaries or have lost their positions in the downsizing of the institutions they serve.

In many institutes long-range planning for the care of the elderly, retired, and infirm sisters is a high priority. Changes in the healthcare system in the United States, resulting in uncertainty regarding the availability of government funding for the future needs of the elderly, is a particular cause for concern. A great number of religious institutes receive assistance through the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO). This organization conducts an annual, national parish-based appeal which yields the largest amount of donations of all national collections. Since its inception in 1988, the NRRO has distributed more than \$500,000,000 to institutes of women religious for the care of their elder and infirm members. The respect and gratitude of the nation's Catholics for religious are clearly and concretely demonstrated in this outpouring of support. Despite responsible stewardship and the assistance from NRRO, however, many institutes are still significantly underfunded in this area.

In an economic system that often, too often, creates inequity and exclusion (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53), consecrated persons, following the poor Christ, are called to testify that only through fraternity, sharing, solidarity, and a wise use of assets can the many forms of misery and poverty inflicted be redeemed.

The Dicastery encourages all religious institutes in their efforts to wisely administer their resources in order to provide for the needs of their members and to further the Church's evangelizing mission. At the same time, we ask all religious, by their individual and corporate witness to evangelical poverty, to heed the plea of Pope Francis to imitate Christ who became poor and was always close to the poor, so that we might concretely contribute to the integral development of society's most neglected members.

## 10. Collaboration in the Evangelizing Mission of the Church

The Apostolic Visitation noted that education, broadly defined to include all of its levels and types, is the most common ministry among sisters in the United States. The second most common ministry is internal service, which includes leadership, administration, formation, and support services for the institute. Other relatively common works are pastoral and spiritual ministry, which includes parish ministry, pastoral care, chaplaincy,

spiritual direction, and retreat work, followed by health care and social services. Once again, this Congregation wishes to express the profound gratitude of the Apostolic See and the Church in the United States for the dedicated and selfless service of women religious in all the essential areas of the life of the Church and society.

Women religious in the United States can resonate with Pope Francis' insistence that "none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 201). Nearly all the foundresses/founders of religious institutes were very active in areas of social justice. Recent chapters of many institutes have studied their own history to discover creative and purposeful ways of responding to current societal issues as their foundress/founder would have addressed them today. This Congregation gratefully acknowledges this apostolic zeal and encourages women religious in their resolve to continue to respond courageously to the Holy Father's urgent plea for spiritual conversion, intense love of God and neighbor, zeal for justice and peace, and the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty (*Ibid.*). As the Holy Father further insists, only by working together to create a new mind-set of solidarity will we make those concrete decisions which will lead to the elimination of the structural causes of poverty and "would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 190).

## 11. Ecclesial Communion

Number 46 of *Vita Consecrata* states: "A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion, so strongly proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as 'witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design'".

Some sisters freely spoke of their sense of ecclesial communion during the Apostolic Visitation. Many described themselves as integral members of the Church and expressed their desire to collaborate in maintaining and strengthening bonds of ecclesial communion with the pastors of the universal, national and local Church, with the laity and with other religious congregations. Some religious also expressed a desire for increased communication and collaboration between the two conferences of women religious in the United States.

A number of sisters conveyed to the Apostolic Visitor a desire for greater recognition and support of the contribution of women religious to the Church on the part of its pastors. They noted the ongoing need for honest dialogue with bishops and clergy as a means of clarifying their role in the Church and strengthening their witness and effectiveness as women faithful to the Church's teaching and mission. Some spoke of their perception of not having enough input into pastoral decisions which affect them or about which they have considerable experience and expertise.

This Dicastery is well aware that the Apostolic Visitation was met with apprehension and suspicion by some women religious. This resulted in a refusal, on the part of some institutes, to collaborate fully in the process. While the lack of full cooperation was a painful disappointment for us, we use this present opportunity to invite all religious institutes to accept our willingness to engage in respectful and fruitful dialogue with them. As the International Theological Commission stated in a recent study: "[w]herever there is genuine life, tension always exists. Such tension need not be interpreted as hostility or real opposition, but can be seen as a vital force and an incentive to a common carrying out of [their] respective tasks by way of dialogue" (*Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, 42).

We believe that the upcoming Year of Consecrated Life is a graced opportunity for all of us within the Church – religious, clergy and laity – to take those steps toward forgiveness and reconciliation which will offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion to all. We reaffirm the desire of our Dicastery to strengthen the spirit of ecclesial communion in our direct contact with conferences of major superiors of women religious, as well as with the superiors and members of the individual institutes. We express the hope that together we may welcome this present moment as an opportunity to transform uncertainty and hesitancy into collaborative trust, so that the Lord may lead us forward in the mission he has entrusted to us on behalf of the people we serve.

It will certainly be of interest to all that Pope Francis has asked our Dicastery, in close collaboration with the Congregation for Bishops, to update the curial document *Mutuae Relationes* regarding the collaboration among

bishops and religious, in accord with the Church's resolve to foster the ecclesial communion which we all desire.

In addition, we joyfully welcome the many recent statements by Pope Francis about the indispensable and unique contributions of women to society and the Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father readily acknowledged that "many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church" (EG, 103).

This Congregation is committed to collaborate in the realization of Pope Francis' resolve that "the feminine genius" find expression in the various settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 103). We will continue to work to see that competent women religious will be actively involved in ecclesial dialogue regarding "the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life" (EG, 104).

## 12. Conclusion

The Apostolic Visitation of the Institutes of Women Religious in the United States modelled its approach on the Gospel encounter between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. These two women, one a virgin and the other married but barren, overcame fear and uncertainty to joyfully embrace their role in God's plan of salvation. So too the Apostolic Visitation offered new opportunities for women religious to discover God's presence and salvific action in fruitful communication with other religious, with the Church's pastors and lay faithful.

May the self-assessment and dialogue sparked by the Apostolic Visitation continue to bear abundant fruit for the revitalization and strengthening of religious institutes in fidelity to Christ, to the Church and to their founding charisms. Our times need the credible and attractive witness of consecrated religious who demonstrate the redemptive and transformative power of the Gospel. Convinced of the sublime dignity and beauty of consecrated life, may we all pray for and support our women religious and actively promote vocations to the religious life.

Indeed, the entire Church sings the Magnificat to celebrate the great things that God does for women religious and for his people through them. We look to Mary, who constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives, the one who set out from her town "with haste" (Lk 1:39) to bring Jesus and the Gospel gift to others. In the words of Pope Francis we turn to Mary in prayer: "Star of the new evangelization, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 288).

*Given in Rome, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, September 8, 2014 Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary,*

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