

Why they stay(ed)

Sr. Sandra Schneiders | Aug. 17, 2009



Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders

Essay

Two sets of questions concerning U.S. women religious are roiling the waters in and outside the church today: 1) Why are religious disturbed about the apostolic visitation? 2) What is the real motivation for this investigation?

Why are religious disturbed about the visitation?

Some laity, and even some (mostly more conservative) religious, wonder why religious would be upset at the invitation of Vatican officials to a discussion of their life with a view to encouraging and supporting the quality of religious life today. After all, no life is perfect and sometimes helpful outsiders can see things insiders miss.

Many religious (members and leaders) as well as Catholic laity and some priests and bishops are disturbed by the Apostolic Visitation currently being conducted for two reasons: the fact of the investigation; the mode of the investigation.

The fact: Religious congregations (sometimes called "orders" or "communities") are in regular dialogue with church authority. The officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or the LCWR, which represents, through their leaders, about 95 percent of religious in the U.S. meet, by their own initiative, annually in Rome with the officers of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican bureau concerned with religious life, for the purpose of such dialogue and they make strenuous (often unreciprocated) efforts to create open communication (see documentation on the LCWR web site). Heads of orders are in regular contact with local ordinaries and most orders invite the local bishop to visit on various occasions. They must, and do, consult with the bishop and/or pastor when there are concerns about the ministry of religious in a diocese or parish.

Furthermore, religious life, including the behavior of its members, is no longer hidden in cloistered dwellings but is reasonably open to the view of both laity and clergy. Some people, lay or cleric, might prefer religious to wear atemporal uniforms of homespun and sensible oxfords rather than simple contemporary professional clothes, or to live in special dwellings and teach in a parish school rather than living, perhaps individually or intercongregationally (as some religious have since the first century) or at a distance from their headquarters (as missionaries always have), in relation to their now diverse and widespread ministries. But there is nothing

intrinsic to religious life about a particular type of clothing or dwelling or ministry. Clothing of religious, according to the directives of Vatican II, is to be simple, modest, hygienic, and appropriate to the times; housing is to be appropriate to the form of community life and poverty specified in an order's approved documents (called "constitutions"); ministries are to be undertaken in obedience as obedience is understood in those same documents. These norms are applied differently by different orders and this has always been the case, often enough even among houses of a single order. Jesus and his itinerant band of ministerial disciples wore no special clothes and had no fixed abode. He brought down the murderous ire of the hierarchy of his own religious tradition because, among other things, he related to women as equals and involved them along with men in his ministry, reached out to the "disordered" and marginalized in his society, laid healing hands on the suffering, conversed with and allowed himself to be challenged and changed by people outside his own religious tradition, refused to condemn anyone, however "sinful," except religious hypocrites burdening people with obligations beyond their strength.

The current "Apostolic Visitation" is not a normal dialogue between religious and church authorities. It is the ecclesiastical analogue of a grand jury indictment, set in motion when there is reasonable suspicion, probable cause, or a *prima facie* case of serious abuse or wrong-doing of some kind. There are currently several situations in the U.S. church that would justify such an investigation (widespread child sexual abuse by clerics, episcopal cover-ups of such abuse, long term sexual liaisons by people vowed to celibacy, embezzlement of church funds, cult-like practices in some church groups) but women religious are not significantly implicated in any of these. Religious are disturbed by the implied accusation of wrong-doing that *the very fact* of being subjected to an apostolic visitation involves, especially because the "charges" are vague or non-existent. We will return to this point in regard to the second question about motivation.

The mode: The characteristics of a grand jury indictment process (which have led most modern western countries to abolish the grand jury as a judicial instrument) are that the grand jury can compel witnesses to testify under oath; proceedings are secret; defendants and/or their counsel may not hear the witness against them.

A number of features of the current investigation of religious are problematic or repugnant to intelligent, educated, adult women in western society. For example, even though the visitation had been authorized well before the annual meeting of the LCWR officials with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome in late 2008, the forthcoming visitation was not even hinted at during that meeting. The religious leaders discovered that their orders and members were under investigation by reading about it in the secular press. Many religious experienced this, rightly or wrongly, as an expression of contempt for them and especially for their leaders. And Americans could hardly not see this tactic as a kind of "sting" operation in which enforcement personal raid suspects who are already deemed guilty, using the element of surprise to prevent escape, hiding of evidence, or defense. Religious are not trying to escape since they are all in religious life by their own choice. The evidence of the quality of their lives is the hospice patients they comfort, the students they teach, the directees and retreatants they counsel, the poor they feed, the sick they nurse, their peace work and justice advocacy, the research and art they produce. They do not feel that their carrying out of Vatican Council II's directives in the renewal of their lives and their resulting presence to and ministry in the world for which Jesus died needs defense.

In other words, whatever the Vatican may have intended, the initiation of this "visitation" was calculated to appear to many Americans, Catholic and others, inside and outside religious life, not as an invitation to respectful and fruitful dialogue and ongoing improvement of their lives but as an unwarranted surprise attack. One religious speaking to me referred to it as "the Pearl Harbor model of dialogue."

Apostolic visitations, precisely because they imply suspicion if not guilt, are typically undertaken in regard to specific groups, e.g., a religious order, province, or monastery, a diocese, a particular pious society, or particular

practices or behaviors, e.g., suspect cults or fraudulent claims of apparitions or private revelations, etc. This investigation, however, targeted indiscriminately all 60,000 or more U.S. women religious in some 400 orders. It would be equivalent to setting out to investigate all sacramentally married people in the United States, or all the priests and bishops of every diocese in the country. Undoubtedly some abuses could be found in any such global group, as they probably can be among religious. But the implication that whatever abuse is being investigated is so widespread and deep-rooted among religious that all of them must be investigated is deeply disturbing if not insulting. These women, who have no obligation to be or remain religious, have given 30, 40, 50, 60, even 70 years of their lives in largely unremunerated service to the church and its members. What could possibly justify such universal suspicion?

Religious then learned that a single "visitor" had been appointed, without any consultation, for the entire population. Her competence might indeed be astounding. But she was an unknown among U.S. women religious who include in their number a virtual "hall of fame" of outstanding, highly credible women who might have been tapped for this sensitive role. The visitor is unknown because she has spent a good part of her mature religious life outside this country and belongs to a small order with one small province in the United States. But could any one person, however talented and experienced, no matter what group she belonged to, questioning subjects without the presence of any witnesses and rendering secret reports which the subjects may not verify even for accuracy much less "tone" or "inference," possibly carry out a task of such scale and scope? Nevertheless, leaders of religious orders made good faith efforts to cooperate with a process that is hardly comprehensible to people not living in a totalitarian political system.

They then found out that phase three of the investigation would involve "site visitations" (of congregations chosen by the single investigator) by teams composed by the single investigator from a pool of nominees who must swear a loyalty oath, not to the people being investigated whose reputations and ministries are at stake, but to the investigating authority (the Holy See). Superiors were invited to submit names of candidates for these teams. Understandably, many religious -- congregations as a whole, superiors, and individual religious -- declined the invitation to make any kind of loyalty oath to any human being (they have all made lifelong vows to God which they consider quite adequate) or to investigate their fellow religious and write secret reports about them. The solidarity among women religious, both within their own orders and among orders, is too deep for many to even contemplate participation in such a process. But that leaves open the unsettling possibility or even likelihood that those who are willing to become site visitors will have views of religious life, authority, and justice quite different from those they investigate.

Furthermore, the orders selected for site visitations have been asked to pay the transportation and other expenses of those sent to investigate them! Each successive element of the visitation has elicited more gasps of shock and disbelief from American women used to a legal system that, despite its grave flaws, espouses transparency, protects the rights of the accused, and is based on an assumption of innocence.

Most recently the *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document for the second phase has appeared. All heads of orders will be required to answer in writing a long, detailed questionnaire which will surely consume a great deal of valuable time that congregational leaders should be devoting to their very heavy primary responsibilities: spiritual leadership of their congregations, fostering community, supporting ministry, caring for their members both active and infirm, and trying to handle the enormous financial challenges facing most orders today. Furthermore, every individual religious is being asked to reflect on this same list of questions. Most (probably all) congregations frequently spend quality time, individually and corporately, in reflection and examination of their life, on planning and implementation of processes for the improvement of the quality of their lives and ministries, and on decision-making for their immediate and long-range futures. Being asked to address a list of "one-size-fits-all" questions is not only a questionable consumption of valuable personal, community, and ministerial time and energy but implies that religious have been living in a state of superficial distraction or self-delusion from which they need to be awakened by mandated self-examination. Most women religious will tell

anyone who asks that they spend a great deal of time and energy in serious reflection on their personal spiritual life (in daily prayer, annual and more frequent retreats, spiritual direction, personal discernment of life and ministry with their community and its leadership, ongoing education) and their corporate life in community and ministry (in congregational days, assemblies, chapters, small group meetings, council meetings, community discernment processes, and so on). These inquiries run much deeper than the mechanical questions on the *Instrumentum*.

At the end of all this investigation, including the site visitations of phase three, the single investigator will (apparently without the help of anyone) synthesize all this material and write a comprehensive secret report on the whole of ministerial religious life in this country to the Vatican. Women religious are professionals who are very familiar with assessments and evaluations of their institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social service agencies and certification processes for personnel including themselves. Such professionals could not imagine appointing, for example, a single chemistry professor from a foreign university to evaluate single-handedly all the universities in the United States (programs, professors, administration, finances, libraries and laboratories, admissions processes, graduation and placement statistics, extracurricular activities, student life, etc.), judge them all, and make a secret report to the Department of Education on their "quality." Religious orders are extremely diverse in foundation, history, charism, purposes, personnel, government, traditions, problems, financial resources, ministries, community life, spirit, and so on. Even if the report gets things basically right about one order, how applicable would that be to the others? To many, this investigation appears, at the very least, astonishing, if not downright mind-boggling in the unprofessionalism of its process.

In short, not only does the fact of the investigation feel threatening if not sinister but its mode is upsetting to adult professional women religious.

What is the motivation of the visitation?

The motivation for the visitation remains very vague. Perhaps the most commonly voiced hypothesis of both lay and religious, is that the purpose of the investigation is to ascertain the size and status of the financial assets of religious orders of women in order to enable the U.S. bishops to take possession of those assets to pay their legal debts. Even if there is no validity to this hypothesis (and I dearly hope there is not) it is distressing that Catholics' confidence in their hierarchy has been so eroded that they suspect their bishops of wishing to further impoverish religious orders struggling to support their elderly and infirm members. Another frequently voiced hypothesis, with perhaps more credibility, is that Cardinal Franc Rodé, the head of Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, wants to mandate for all women religious a return to pre-conciliar lifestyles akin to those in his eastern European homeland under Communism. Again, the suspicion is not without some basis in remarks the cardinal has made publicly, but there is no proof of such an intention and, in any case, such a move would surely occasion far more trouble than the Vatican probably wants to deal with.

The only "purpose" stated in the official documents is "to look into the quality of the life of women religious in the United States who are members of apostolic religious institutes." At several junctures Cardinal Rodé, who initiated the investigation, has suggested that his concern is about the "decline in numbers" of religious in these orders. There seems to be an implied "cause and effect" relation between these two concerns, namely, that the decline in numbers is somehow due to the poor quality of the life of religious. It is time to address this implication with some facts.

It is true that the numbers of U.S. women religious declined precipitously, by tens of thousands, from the highpoint (at least 120,000) in the mid-sixties to something around 60,000 today. This was due principally to two factors, not identical, namely, the sharp drop-off in numbers entering religious life and a major exodus of professed religious from the life. These phenomena were largely simultaneous which leads many people to fail to distinguish between them.

Numbers entering: The inflation of numbers of religious from the late 1940s to 1960s paralleled the influx of large numbers of men following Thomas Merton into monasteries in the disordered social aftermath of World War II. This brief period of heightened religious enthusiasm has been studied extensively and I will not engage this data here. Suffice it to say that, prior to the vocational tsunami beginning in the 1940s and peaking in the mid-1960s, the total number of women religious, between the 1700s when the first ones came to this country and the early 1900s, was nowhere near the post-war high point. Indeed, it was closer to today's "low point." To understand the sudden decline in entrants after 1965 one has to understand the sudden inflation immediately after the war. I will mention here only the most important factors.

Pre-*Humanae Vitae* Catholic families tended to be large, often five to ten children. The U.S. bishops insisted that parents were morally obliged to send those children to Catholic schools which were almost totally staffed by the unpaid workforce of women religious. Thus the average Catholic girl spent most of her waking hours for eight to twelve years in the company of "the nuns," becoming familiar with their life, admiring them as "special" people, as the favorites of God and male authority figures in the church, as uniquely powerful women who were more educated and professionally engaged than most other women they knew. The nuns wore fascinating and exotic clothes, lived in mysterious enclaves whose interiors "seculars" could only imagine, and seemed to enjoy a special *esprit de corps* among themselves in their secret world.

At that point in time the Catholic girl had two viable life options when she completed high school (or more rarely college): to marry like her mother and begin her own life of child rearing or enter the convent. While by far the majority chose marriage (probably as naïvely as the minority chose religious life!), the numbers from every graduating class entering the convent was impressive. And parents, trained to regard a "vocation" in the family as an honor and blessing, could afford to offer one or more children to God without fear of dying without grandchildren. Novitiate classes could number 30 in a small congregation to a hundred or more in a large one. And Catholic culture made leaving the convent after profession as unthinkable as divorce.

Post-*Humanae Vitae* (ironically, this document reiterating the ban on "artificial contraception" seemed to precipitate, or at least not prevent, a sharp decrease in the Catholic fertility rate) Catholic families are as small as those of most other Americans, i.e., one or two children. The number of Catholic schools rapidly declined. Even those that existed usually had few or no sisters in the classroom. Parents claimed their right to send their children to the schools of their choice, often choosing a better endowed or geographically closer public school over a Catholic one. Feminism and other forces combined to open opportunities to girls well beyond the "marriage or convent" choice. There was no profession or ministry open to a woman religious that was not equally open to a laywoman. Parents who wanted grandchildren were less inclined to promote their (often only) daughter's choice of the convent. Church officials were rapidly closing the "feeder" institutions (Catholic schools) and religious orders were losing their high schools to economic and personnel pressures.

The bad news in all this, of course, was that by the mid-sixties very few Catholic girls considered religious life and even fewer entered. The good news is that the only real reason, now, for a young woman to enter was that she really felt called by God to a life of consecrated celibacy lived with others who shared this vocation and expressed in a total commitment to the service of God's people. Not having a husband or children, not becoming personally wealthy, perhaps not being able to pursue exactly her professional interests were no longer seen as just "part of the package" of an otherwise "special" and therefore rewarding vocation but as difficult, free choices of a highly demanding life which could find justification only in a genuine religious vocation. Women took considerably longer to come to such decisions. The huge novitiate classes of 18-year olds disappeared and women entering tended to be in their late 20s or 30s or even older and applying, not as "classes" or "bands," but as individuals. This had little to do with the quality of religious life. It had everything to do with there being far fewer Catholic children to begin with. They were not exposed to religious life (or, often, even to normal Catholic culture within which a religious vocation might seem normal or attractive); opportunities for women

had broadened enormously; parents tended not to encourage vocations; women were putting off life-commitment decisions for a decade or more beyond high school.

Religious leaving: Beginning in the late 1960s through the 1980s there was a massive exodus of women from religious life. There were certainly some who left in bitterness and anger at what they considered an alienating and oppressive life of uniformity and repression in which they had somehow become trapped. But the vast majority, many of whom continue to this day to maintain warm relationships with their former orders and convent classmates, left because they came to realize that they were not called to religious life. Many realized that they were called to marriage and that celibacy was not required for holiness or for engagement in ministry which was, for many, the main reason they had entered. Others wanted careers, financial independence, or personal autonomy incompatible with religious poverty, obedience, and community. The new theology of vocation and moral freedom and responsibility encouraged by the Council made the once "unthinkable" (i.e., change of state of life) thinkable. The stigma attached to "leaving the convent" largely vanished making the change culturally acceptable. These women, part of the great influx of the 1950s and '60s, were now in their 20's, 30's, or 40's, generally well-educated and professionally prepared for a world and church that now had much more room for lay women in many areas. Many of the thousands of women who left religious life within a couple decades of entering remain to this day profoundly grateful for the psychological, spiritual, and professional formation they received in religious life. They are not sorry they entered and do not consider their convent experience a "mistake" or those years "wasted." But they are also glad that they realized in time that they were not called to that life and that it was possible for them to peacefully follow God's will in leaving as they had followed that will, as they understood it, when they entered.

The combination of many departures and few entrants has created a "gap" between age 20 and age 50/90 in most orders. This creates problems for women entering today who have few peers and few religious right ahead of them. No one under-estimates the seriousness of this situation and efforts like "Giving Voice" (a cross-congregational association of younger religious) and intercongregational formation programs are trying to address it. But it is important to realize that neither the exodus from religious life nor the decline in numbers entering was due to a sudden deterioration in the quality of religious life. The change in demographics, in the sociology of the Catholic sub-culture, in theology of states of life and vocation, in roles of women in church and society, and many other factors we cannot delve into here created the situation with which we are contending today.

That situation, in my opinion and that of most religious I know, is indeed challenging but not desperate. Nor will it be rectified by a retroversion to pre-Conciliar convent lifestyles or disciplinary initiatives of Vatican authorities. The response, which is and will continue to be arduous, lies with those who have stayed.

Conclusion: The ones who stayed

A far more interesting question than who left and why is, "Why did the ones who stayed, stay?" These are the women who, today, compose the largest cohort in religious life, the 60-80 year olds. This is not only the largest but also the most vibrant group in religious life flanked at one end with a small number of wonderfully courageous new entrants in their late 20s to 40s and at the other end, by a still numerous group of women in their 90s and beyond who continue to witness with stunning beauty to the joy and fruitfulness of a life totally given to God and God's people. The members of this largest cohort are examples of "80 being the new 60." Generally in vigorous mental, psychological, and physical health, they have to take time off from full-time ministries to celebrate their 50th and 60th anniversaries in religious life. They are carrying the responsibilities of leadership in their orders and supporting with indomitable hope and courage the church-wide but beleaguered effort to keep the spirit and substance of Vatican II from succumbing to the tides of restorationism. These religious are not hankering for the "good old days," for a return to special clothes and titles, instant recognition and elite status in church and society, and someone to support them, think for them, and keep their life in order

in a turbulent world. The real question is, who are these "stayers" and why did/do they stay?

These women are the contemporaries of those who left in the exodus of the '70s and '80s. Like those who left, they were young (20s to 40s), perhaps the best educated group of women in America at the time, professionally precocious, theologically well-grounded, and becoming increasingly interdependently autonomous as women in the church and world. These religious were eminently well-positioned to leave and had every reason (but one) to do so. They watched in anguish as increasing numbers of their friends made that choice. Religious life had little to offer them, humanly or materially speaking. Orders were losing their big institutions; financial insecurity was becoming a major concern; few were entering. The institutional church was repudiating feminism in all its forms; the papacy was engaged in vigorous restorationism; many in and outside the church including some in religious life had resigned themselves to (or rejoiced in) what they saw as "the death of the Council" or the "end of renewal." The exciting theologies of liberation and lay ministerial empowerment in the church were being repressed in favor of a renewed clericalism and centralization of power. From a strictly human standpoint it was a bleak time for those who had come of age in the joyous, Spirit-filled enthusiasm of the Council when community, equality of discipleship in the church, commitment to the building of a better world, deepening spirituality, inter-religious dialogue, feminist empowerment were the very air they breathed. From every angle hope was being crushed and old world narrowness, neo-orthodoxy, and Vatican re-centralization were replacing the Spirit-filled, world-affirming, humane spirit of John XXIII and the Council.

In this crucible the ones who stayed were tested by fire. Elsewhere I have referred to and described in more detail this period as a corporate "dark night of sense and spirit" for women religious. They were experiencing a deep purification of any sense of spiritual superiority (to say nothing of arrogant certainty), of elitism, of corporate power and influence, of "most favored status" or mysterious specialness in the church. Their faith was being battered by profound theological tensions raised by the clash between what they most deeply, if obscurely, knew was true and what was happening in the church and world. They had to find the taproot of their vocation, not in peer group euphoria, social status, or preferential treatment by the hierarchy, but in the core of their spirituality, face to face with the One to whom they had given their lives in celibate love, in the emptiness of a poverty that was spiritual as well as material, and in an obedience unto the death of everything they cherished, except the God in whom they believed. They found out experientially why Jesus withdrew to the mountains or the desert in the middle of the night and before dawn to pray, not to "set a good example" for the less spiritual but because he desperately needed God to make it through one more day.

As this cohort of women religious made its way through the 1990s toward the new millennium, and even as financial and ecclesiastical problems multiplied, a serenity began to surface from the darkness. Even secular sociologists, but especially the laity who associate with these religious and those they serve, have recognized that the joy and counter-intuitive confidence, the capacity for work and suffering, the whole-hearted commitment to their own spiritual lives and to the people to whom they minister, the unity and solidarity in community that is evident in most women's religious Congregations -- given the enormity of the challenges they confront -- must be rooted in something, Someone, much deeper and more central to their lives than anything temporal or material.

Some congregations have had to face their imminent demise and have begun to prepare, not to be passively wiped out by circumstances beyond their control, but, like Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, to die into Christ's resurrection leaving a legacy that will somehow rise in those they have loved and served. Many congregations have reconfigured their corporate lives by consolidation or merging or refounding and are launched into new adventures in a still strange land. Others, though diminished in size and resources, have decided that they can and will make it together into the future and have undertaken vigorous, faith-based strategic planning, including vocation work, to make that happen. But the important thing for our purposes here is that these women are still "staying" because, in the very core of their being, they do not just "belong to a religious order"; they *are* religious. Hopefully, the present investigation will make evident to those whose

concerns gave rise to it the meaning of religious life as it is being envisioned, lived, and handed on today in Congregations renewed in and by that Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit called the Second Vatican Council.

[Sandra M. Schneiders, a member of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Mich., is a professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, Calif.]

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