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Internet aims to bond women religious visitation supporters

by Thomas C. Fox



Ann Carey

Women religious, upset their orders are not cooperating with a Vatican study of their religious congregations, are using the Internet to bring together like-minded souls. They have formed a Yahoo group and are working with author Ann Carey who is to moderate contributions.

The Vatican announced last January an Apostolic Visitation of some 340 U.S. women religious congregations, saying its purpose is to assess the quality of life in the communities. The study has stirred controversy with some women religious vocally opposed to the effort and others supportive.

"We came up with the idea for the Yahoo group first of all because it was free. There are no funds for this effort. Also, since some sisters fear retribution from their superiors for their support of the visitation," explained Carey in an email to *NCR*. "Our Yahoo group allows sisters to exchange information and ideas while still protecting their identity if they so choose."

Those who participate in the discussion group can remain anonymous, if they choose, she said. I approve all members and all messages, to insure that nothing offensive is posted. I just enable the sisters to communicate with each other, and I post news about the Apostolic Visitation as I come across it.

Carey said the group has been running for less than a week and it has 27 members signed up.

One sister told me that through this group, she finally has a voice, since members of her order were allowed no input in their superiors' decision not to cooperate, and indeed were told not to talk about it.

The Yahoo group is called SistersSupportingApostolicVisitation. Instructions to join the group are provided on the SistersSupportingApostolicVisitation homepage.

Carey, a long time correspondent for *Our Sunday Visitor* and author of *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities*, has been a vocal supporter of the Apostolic Visitation. I asked to interview her recently and she replied, asking me to put my questions in writing. The following is a slightly edited version of our email exchanges.

FOX: What first drew you to write and report on women religious today?

CAREY: I was a correspondent for *Our Sunday Visitor* for 14 years. In the early 1990s, when the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious was approved by the Vatican as a second women superiors' conference in addition to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the OSV editor assigned me to cover that story. Women religious then became one of the beats I covered regularly for OSV. As I wrote more articles on the topic, I started getting contacted by more and more sisters who wanted to tell me their concerns about religious life. Eventually, I decided to do in-depth research about the post-Vatican II changes in women's religious orders, and in 1997 *Our Sunday Visitor* Publishing Division published my book, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities*.

What are your views of the Apostolic Visitation? Its timeliness? Its usefulness?

Well, many women religious have told me over the years that they are worried that their orders have changed the very nature of religious life and are becoming more distant from the church. This really isn't about getting sisters back into habits: This is about sisters who are operating outside the doctrinal and prayer life of the church. Many sisters have told me they've written and asked Vatican officials to do something to assist their orders, so I think the Apostolic Visitation was a response to requests from a lot of women religious. Also, it's no secret that most women's religious orders are aging rapidly and attracting few new vocations, so that has to be of concern. And finally, I think that some prominent women religious have been so public and bold in their dissent from church teachings—like Dominican Sister Donna Quinn, who has been very public in her support of abortion rights for years while still remaining in good standing in her order—that the Vatican couldn't ignore the dichotomy of vowed religious openly voicing dissent.

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When the women religious criticize the Apostolic Visitation they often cite what they describe as two structural flaws: One) that the U.S. women religious were not involved in the planning. Two) that the process lacks transparency, that is, they do not get to see, react, possibly correct misrepresentations, before the study is sent on for recommendations. What do you think of these criticisms?

First of all, I find it ironic that superiors who complain about being given no input are the same ones who have not allowed the members of their order any input in their decision about how to handle the visitation, and indeed have told their sisters not to talk about it.

Let's look at the facts: Before the working document and questionnaire for the visitation were composed, [Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus] Sister Mother Clare Millea, the Apostolic Visitor, invited every superior general to meet with her or call her to discuss concerns and make observations. So I do think there was the opportunity for input, and Mother Clare obviously has been listening, because she removed three sections of the questionnaire after some sisters expressed concern about confidentiality on financial and personnel data.

As a former teacher, I see the Apostolic Visitation as being similar to the periodic visits made to our school by the accrediting agency—the North Central Association. We knew that if we were to retain our accreditation, we had to measure up to the NCA standards; it was just a fact of life. Similarly, religious orders derive their canonical status from the church, and are answerable to church authorities. I see the Apostolic Visitation questionnaire as being a similar tool to the self-study our school had to complete before a NCA visit. Although this process took time, in the end we always felt that we had improved our school, and when the NCA did arrive, they knew what areas needed scrutiny, and we were proud to show off what we had done. It seems to me that if sisters really want to correct misrepresentations, filling out the questionnaire completely would help clarify many issues. Refusing to do so only raises more questions. Nor does sending along an order's constitutions satisfy anything, for the Vatican realizes what many religious also know: Some religious orders don't really live by their constitutions, but rather consider them an ideal.

As far as the charge of lack of transparency: Canon law protects the right of each member of a religious order to speak confidentially, one-on-one with a visitor. It would violate that canonical right for the visitation team to turn around and report to the superiors what their members told the visitor. It also would violate the privacy of each order for the visitation teams to release reports about individual orders for everyone to read. So I think this policy protects individuals as well as orders, just as businesses keep personnel matters confidential to protect the people involved. You can be sure that each order that is visited will eventually get a report from the Vatican with conclusions about the visitation of that particular order; otherwise, why do a visitation if you're not going to give feedback about how to improve? I do think there is some merit to the question: "If you don't have anything to hide, why are you so upset about the visitation?"

What is your reaction to the reports that a sizable number of the women religious has decided not to answer all the questions in the AV questionnaire?

Anecdotally, some sisters have told me their orders are not cooperating, and others have told me theirs are. Reports that claim specific numbers are speculative and unreliable. The only source that really knows how many orders are answering the questionnaires is the Apostolic Visitation office, and that office is not giving out any specifics, again respecting the confidentiality.

A while back Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rode, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said the Stonehill gathering influenced his decision to go forward with a recommendation for a Visitation to Pope Benedict. Clearly, it was an

important gathering. A number of women religious have said the gathering was not representative of a cross section of views of U.S. women religious and that only a faction was represented. What is your reaction to that view?

Any women or men religious were invited to attend free of charge, the speakers were publicized weeks ahead of time in America and other publications, and the leadership of both the LCWR and the CMSWR were invited, so there was no controlling of attendance. In fact, one sister sought me out at the end to voice her disapproval of my paper. Maybe people don't realize that it was an academic symposium, not an exchange of viewpoints. All the speakers had done serious research about religious life in their specific areas. I was the only speaker without advanced degrees in theology and/or philosophy.

What was the purpose of Stonehill? Who decided who got invited? What criteria, as best you know?

The symposium was part of the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Boston. The theme was "Apostolic Religious Life Since Vatican II: Reclaiming the Treasure." The purpose of the symposium was to have an honest discussion about issues in religious life that should be addressed. In his homily at the symposium Mass, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, a Capuchin, talked about recent studies of religious vocations that showed young people were more attracted to religious communities with a distinct identity and close ties to the church. And he said that an inability for self-criticism and "an obstinate attachment to failed experiments will alienate young people and accelerate the demise of religious life in our country."

Cardinal O'Malley invited me. He is a member of a religious order himself, and at that time he also was chairman of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations. As the only lay speaker, I think I was invited to give the lay perspective and because many religious are familiar with my book, *Sisters in Crisis*.

Any other thoughts on the visitation, or Leadership Conference of Women Religious doctrinal study, or aspects of current religious or church life you want to share?

One of our Yahoo group members said that the visitation can be "a moment of grace" for women religious to evaluate the paths they have taken since Vatican II, and I agree with her. It's beneficial for any person or any organization to have such assessments periodically. I think any honest person must admit that all is not well with religious orders, particularly women's religious orders, and it's time to face up to that fact.

Some women religious who resist the Vatican initiatives try to defend their position simply by enumerating all the wonderful work women religious have done and continue to do. I think everyone applauds women religious for their accomplishments, and most people recognize that sisters built the Catholic schools, hospitals and social service institutions across our country. But if doing good works were the only requirement to be a sister, millions of people would qualify under that criterion.

The critical point is that vowed religious have a unique position at the heart of the church that is rooted in love of Jesus Christ and the church, and that position needs to be maintained. It makes no sense to say you're a religious woman? a public figure in the church? and be publicly against the church. What organization has as its public face members who are against the mission of the organization? The sisters have to realize that they represent not themselves, but the church.

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