

## Mother Millea speaks about the visitation

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 18, 2010



Apostolic visitor Mother Mary Clare Millea (right) and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Franciscan Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck at a Jan. 14 reception opening the "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. (Ben Sullivan)

A little over a year ago, Mother Mary Clare Millea became the most talked-about nun in America almost overnight. In December 2008, the Vatican tapped Millea, a Connecticut native and superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to run arguably the most controversial "apostolic visitation" ever carried out in this country: A sweeping review of women's congregations, capping decades of tension about the state of the soul of religious life in America.

Sometime in the next few days, the first wave of letters will be reaching a sample of women's orders to say they've been selected for an on-site visit, with those visits slated to begin one week after Easter and to continue throughout the spring and fall of 2010. The visits mark "phase three" of the process, after exchanges between Millea and major superiors (phase one) and the collection of written responses to questionnaires sent to every congregation in the country (phase two).

The fourth and final phase will be the preparation of detailed reports on all 420 "units" of women's religious in America, meaning congregations as well as their individual provinces, to be shipped off to Rome, plus a comprehensive report at the end. What the Vatican may do with all that input, of course, is the great unknown.

In the eyes of some critics, the visitation amounts to an attempt by the church's male-dominated power structure to put the toothpaste back in the tube, trying to drive emancipated women religious back into a more obedient and traditional posture. Supporters extol the visitation as a long-overdue reaction to a crisis following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) -- a crisis expressed in declining vocations, chronic dissent, and an overly horizontal spirituality that sometimes values political crusades or social ministry more than devotion and prayer.

In that sense, the ferment over the visitation isn't just about women's religious life, but the broader direction of the Catholic church in the early 21st century.

Having served in Rome for 18 years, Millea is no naïf about church politics. She's aware of the fears the visitation has unleashed in some circles, and the hope of dramatic change in others. Nonetheless, she insists

she's not running this project to serve anyone's agenda, but rather to tell the truth about the state of women's religious life in America -- and fundamentally, she says, it's a good news story, even if there are also "enormous problems."

On Tuesday, Millea sat down for an interview at the U.S. headquarters of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Hamden, Connecticut, where she's set up an office for the Apostolic Visitation. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

\* \* \*

**NCR: A year into this process, are you in a better position to understand some of the fear and resistance it's generated?**

**Mother Clare Millea:** Initially I got many reactions along the lines of, "We were not consulted, we were not warned, this was just thrown on us." That's certainly foreign to our American mentality, and our way of doing things. ? One time I said to a major superior who lives in Rome, "You and I both live here, and we know this is what happens. Why don't we just get over it?" She laughed and said, "You're right. Let's do it."

I don't know what people's fear level is right now, I can't speak to that. I know we've tried to communicate at each step of the way. Each phase of the visitation has been refined according to what we've heard from people. We're trying to be as open as possible. ? Hopefully we can rebuild that trust and allay that fear that has been built up.

**Where are you in the process, and where will it go from here?**

We're still evaluating all the data we've received from the congregations. In that process, we're choosing some congregations to receive an on-site visit. Those visits will begin one week after Easter. We'll have eight weeks of visits in the spring, and several more weeks in the fall. We're choosing a representative sample, looking at congregations with mother houses in different parts of the country, because the realities certainly are different. Some are small, some large, some are thriving and some are declining.

**It's not that the congregations which get visits are the ones flagged as problems?**

Exactly. I think that's very important. We want to show what religious life really is. Certainly, we're going to show them 420 different versions of it, but we're not going out to target people perceived as having problems.

**Will there be a mix of congregations perceived as progressive and as traditional?**

Yes, certainly ? what conference they belong to, all the variables. We also want to see some which have health care systems, some in education, as much variety as possible.

**How many congregations will get visits?**

I think that in the spring we're going to do between 30 and 40, and more than that during the fall.

**In total, roughly a hundred?**

Probably, which would be roughly 25 percent of the congregations in the visitation. Certainly, we could never do them all. Each one sounds very interesting, but that's just humanly impossible. This visitation had a beginning, and we also want it to have an end!

**When might that end come?**

If we can do a good sample during this year, from April through the beginning of December, I would like to cut off the on-site visits at the end of 2010 and then during 2011 complete the individual reports to the [Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, usually called the "Congregation for Religious," in Rome]. I had originally said [it would be done] halfway through 2011, but that may not be realistic, because each one does require quite a bit of work. My final report will have data from my own interviews with the major superiors last spring, the written responses from the congregations, the interviewers' impressions of the congregation if they've had an on-site visit, and then any other data people have spontaneously sent to us.

**How many individual reports will there be?**

I'll do a report on every congregation that has been a part of the visitation, whether or not they had an on-site visit. That's 420 reports. We're actually calling them "units" [rather than congregations], because if there's a congregation that has five different provinces, each of those provinces is a unit in itself. Those reports will probably be connected, but each reality could be different from the others.

**Then you'll do a comprehensive report at the end?**

It will have some general trends, but certainly not in any detail. That will be in the individual reports.

**When will the women's communities be getting feedback?**

They would be getting feedback from the Congregation for Consecrated Life, after I've submitted the reports. My mandate is to send the reports only to Rome, and they'll get the feedback from them.

**Will you be sending the 420 reports as you get them done?**

I probably will. I don't see any reason to hold them back until they're all in. As we process them, the congregation as well can process them.

**It's possible that between now and then there will be a new prefect of the Congregation for Religious, since Cardinal Franc Rodé is already past 75. Would that affect the timetable?**

I don't anticipate that it would. I've pretty much set the timetable myself, according to what I believe is realistic. We're deeply into the visitation now, the third phase, and the fourth phase is only the writing of the reports. I can't see it not continuing to its completion, no matter who's in charge.

**How far in advance will congregations know they'll be getting an on-site visit?**

We want to give them at least a two-month turn-around. We're a few days late for the first set of visits, but this week we'll get our first letters out to the congregations that have been chosen for an on-site visit.

**What will a visit consist of?**

We're going to have religious going in and meeting whoever in that congregation would like to speak to them. We can't oblige anyone to speak to the visitors. The idea is to tell their story. They're not going in to verify data that we already have, but to hear the story of the sisters individually. How did they get to be a part of this group? What are their joys and their hopes?

**The visitors won't be carrying check-lists, saying, "You told us you have sixteen people in formation. Let's see them?"**

tNo. That's where it's different from, say, an accreditation visit. The visitors are going in fresh and unhindered by preconceived ideas about the congregations. They just want to hear the stories.

**How many visitors will there be?**

It's going to depend on how many sisters are in that unit, and how many wish to have an interview. We're doing a rough calculation now. There will be at least two, and normally there wouldn't be more than five. Five would be a very large congregation with many sisters who would like to speak with the visitors.

**How many visitors, in total, will be involved?**

We have about 80 persons who are committed to doing this. ? We're going to have women religious going to visit women religious. I think that's certainly a landmark way of doing a visitation.

**How were they chosen?**

We asked the major superiors to recommend people. Then, other people made recommendations as well. We checked them out, of course. We tried to see where they lived, who they worked with. We got fine, fine recommendations. We then invited them to be a part of this. It's all a volunteer participation.

**It's been reported that some congregations either didn't comply with your questionnaire, or didn't comply fully. Is that accurate?**

This is a very important point. We've been going through and analyzing the data that's come in. In January I sent another letter to the major superiors, asking those who did not reply or who replied inadequately, to really reconsider the response to the Holy See. As of today, we have a response from virtually every congregation in the country. My office staff was just looking at that this morning, and we have just seven little tiny entities who have not responded. One of our staff persons is in the process of calling them, because they're tiny groups that we think may be confused that they didn't have to participate. We would like to at least have their statistical data so we can get a better picture.

I think that's phenomenal, because it shows that virtually every congregation in the country realized that the Holy See has the authority to ask for information and that they have the obligation to respond. Were all of those one hundred percent compliant in answering every question? No. But we have excellent data on most congregations.

In the end, I can only write a report on what I know. Many congregation leaders told me in the face-to-face interviews the wonderful things their sisters are doing, and asked, "Are you going to tell this good news to the Holy See?" Of course I am. We want the Holy See to see what religious women mean for our country. I can only respond based on what I know, so every response is data.

**Your point is that it's in the interest of the congregations to respond?**

I would think so, yes.

**What percentage were fully compliant versus only partially compliant?**

Virtually every congregation has responded, in the majority of cases satisfactorily. We are open to continuing dialogue, and there are congregations who responded in a certain way who have said we want to talk to you about this. At this point I'm preparing for the on-site visits, choosing that sample, getting the teams lined up, so I really have not dealt with that kind of response, but I do intend to.

**Are congregations being chosen for visits in part based on how they answered the questionnaire?**

To some extent. In our first group of visits, we are targeting those congregations who have pretty satisfactorily responded, so that there will be an openness, and so they can get out the message for us that this is a positive experience.

**I can imagine that if a congregation didn't fill out the questionnaire, and then they get a visit, they might be tempted to think: We're being targeted because we didn't jump through the hoops. Is it wrong to think in those terms?**

People are going to think what they want. We can't control that. But they're going to have to look at the whole picture. Everybody knows what everybody else did, and they'll have to look around and say, "Well, that group filled it out and that group did too, and they both got visited." We're trying to be fair. We're not targeting any group.

**The Vatican has estimated the cost of the visitation at around \$1 million. Has that cost been covered?**

We're not involved in the fund-raising. When we need money, we ask the Congregation for Consecrated Life. All I can say is that we're meeting our expenses. As our bank account gets low, I request funds from the Holy See.

**So far, Rodé hasn't said you have to tighten the belt?**

No. He has a copy of the budget, and I give him periodic updates on what we've spent. We still receive what we need.

**Because Rodé's appeal was to the bishops, do you presume the bulk of the money is coming from dioceses?**

I don't think so, but that's just an idea. I know that was a request for voluntary assistance. I don't know how much they received, but I believe it certainly wouldn't be covering the whole cost of the visitation.

**You're presuming that the bulk is coming out of the ordinary operating budget of the Congregation for Religious in Rome?**

I haven't asked that question, but I presume so.

**Critics say part of the subtext of this visitation is to ensure that if women's congregations decide to give up their institutions, the church -- by which people usually mean the bishops -- keeps the property. Is that part of the agenda?**

We had originally asked for some data about property and finances, and we've withdrawn that request in the face of reasonable objections. There is a canonical principle, of course, that any property that belongs to a religious congregation is essentially property of the church. For example, we have this beautiful mother house here on a 100-acre piece of property. If we were not able to use it, our superiors would have the obligation, before selling it to a developer, to make it known to the diocese. At the same time, there's no obligation to give away our property to a diocese. If we need the money to support our elderly sisters, for example, we can sell it and use the profit. But, there has to be a dialogue with the church involved.

Is this visitation aiming to ensure that the sisters don't do those kind of transactions? No, that's not part of our purpose.

**There is talk about "going non-canonical" in some circles, meaning cutting ties with the institutional church and regrouping under civil law. Are you concerned about that?**

Those kind of workshops have been publicly advertised, and people are considering them. I don't know how widespread that is, or how many people are actually doing that. I think that for someone to say, "I'm going non-canonical," is kind of a misnomer, because we do become canonical at our baptism. But for a group of persons who are involved in a certain institution to say it's no longer officially aligned with the Catholic church, that's certainly a possibility.

**It's a fairly dramatic step.**

It is. We'll have to wait and see what choices people make, but I know it's being talked about and models are being proposed

**Cardinal Rodé has spoken several times, including in an interview with me last October, about what he sees as a deep crisis in post-conciliar religious life. The question some ask is, how can you trust the objectivity of a process when the guy in charge seems to have already made up his mind?**

I can't guess what someone over there will do with the information I give him. We don't even know who will be receiving the information by the time we turn it in. I think the only thing I can control is that I report with integrity, with fairness and without bias. My slant is certainly not a punitive thing, or something that would raise red flags for sanctions. I want to present a fair picture of the joys of a congregation, their struggles, the obstacles they see to be able to carry out their ministry. The data that will be received over there, which will be the official vehicle for communication between the Holy See and the congregation, is not going to predispose them to something negative.

**You're saying that you're not running this visitation to serve an agenda, whether that's Cardinal Rodé's or anyone else's?**

I was given a mandate, and I have really been given free rein to conduct it, to design the process, to use the people that I feel are appropriate, without any restrictions.

**At the end of the day, do you have a good news story to tell about women's religious life in the United States?**

I do. "Good" doesn't mean, of course, without enormous problems, but it is good. There are many, many unsung heroes. One of the things that impressed me most in the first phase, when I talked to these generals, is how they told me the stories of so many of their older sisters who no longer receive a salary but who are out there, working one-on-one with an illiterate person, or in a soup kitchen, or wherever. The joy and the pride of the sisters is something else [about their older members], saying this is the continued fruit of a lifetime of dedication. It's not just that today she's tutoring, but that all her life she has given, and is still giving, according to her capacity. That's one example of wonderful news.

**You think there's more of that than we realize?**

There really is. Another thing is that the press has certainly generated a lot of interest, and I think people are a little bit more willing to want to learn about this way of life. I think that's going to have an effect of putting our option of life out there in the public eye for young people.

**So if nothing else, this visitation has got people talking about women's religious life in America?**

It certainly has, and I think that's good. Regardless of who initiated it, and who is carrying it out, I think there's a bigger plan here.

The same thing might be said even of just this on-site stage. I predict that it's going to be known where the visitors are, and it may draw attention to some communities who are quietly doing what they've been called to do. It may generate new interest in their way of life, which we don't know much about right now. When I think about those kind of things, I get excited, and I do think there's a bigger plan here and good things will come of it.

### **Any other general impressions?**

I've seen so clearly how our American Catholic people love the religious. They've expressed that love in many different ways. Some would say, "Be nice to our poor sisters." Others are concerned because they see a very diminished presence of the sisters, and so many generations of Catholics have gained so much from their contact with the sisters.

Although the fact that the numbers are diminishing is not a surprise to anybody, I've also been very happily surprised to see a great interest in so many communities, who maybe have not attracted vocations in a while, who are now really investing. They've reclaimed their identity, and they say, "We want to live. We want our charism to continue." They've really put a lot of energy into vocation promotion, in a very healthy way, and are seeing results. I'm very pleased with that. Even some very small communities, just seeing the statistics come in with their younger candidates, I've been very impressed and happy.

We would certainly be idealistic to think that we're going to return to the numbers that we had, but religious life as such, from what I see, is going to continue.

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is [jallen@ncronline.org](mailto:jallen@ncronline.org).]

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