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More snippets from a conversation with Mother Millea

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NCR Today

Last week I published the bulk of a Feb. 16 interview with Mother Mary Clare Millea of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the sister in charge of a Vatican-sponsored apostolic visitation of women religious in America. For space reasons, a few bits of that interview were left on the cutting-room floor. Given the wide interest in the subject, however, I'll pass along here a few sections which didn't survive the editing process, but which nevertheless contribute to the record.

These questions and answers all come from the same Feb. 16 interview with Millea at the U.S. headquarters of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Hamden, Connecticut.

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I was talking yesterday with Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, and he made the argument that it's a mistake for American Catholics to compare today's numbers on anything, including religious life, with the peak period of the 1950s, because historically that peak was an aberration. Do you agree?

Yes, definitely. That was a very unusual and unique peak in the number of vocations in the 1950's. After the pioneering and the struggling times, part of it is that we built so many institutions. Those institutions met so many young people and influenced their lives, causing them to join and to become a part of that. That was a passing phenomenon, and many of the institutions have been taken over by other people so capably.

The fact that we no longer have 180,000 sisters in America, like in the 50s, doesn't mean that women's religious life is on death's door?

No, not at all. In fact, there's certainly a definite shift in the values of this new generation of young

people we have. There are young people looking for a stable way of life and something bigger than themselves to give themselves to for their entire lifetime. They are coming around looking. I do see hope that this will continue.

The other point Dolan makes is that in some ways the bishops find themselves running in circles trying to maintain an infrastructure built up during this historically anomalous period, which doesn't necessarily make sense anymore. In some ways, women's orders came to that realization a long time ago.

Sure. Many congregations have moved beyond the crisis point, because they have turned over their institutions. They may be ahead of what the dioceses and the parishes are doing at this point.

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I imagine one struggle for you is that however transparent you may want to be, you're also operating under a Vatican mandate that limits exactly how open you can be.

Definitely. It's a difficult balancing act sometimes. Take for example that letter I wrote in January to the major superiors. It went out to 410 major superiors, so as soon as we knew they had it in their mailboxes, we posted it so that we would be the first to do it, and then take the consequences and the questions that inevitably come from any letter like that.

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Can you give an example of the kind of thing you can't reveal?

Certainly, we're not going to tell you who participated fully and who didn't. One of the few things I don't plan to put on our Web site is a list of the congregations to be visited. We want the congregation being visited, and the people going there, to have the freedom to be relaxed and not have people outside their door. If a congregation chooses to say they're having a visit, that's fine.

You probably won't need to post the list anyway, because it will likely make the rounds on the Internet soon after your letters go out.

Of course! But we want to maintain our integrity.

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When you say you keep Cardinal Rodé updated, you mean you send written updates?

I do, and I always meet with him when I'm in Rome. He's fully aware, and I don't send anything out until he says, "That's fine," but I've not had any restrictions put on me. There's a very high level of trust there in what we're doing and in the people that I'm working with.

You're happy doing this work?

I'm peaceful doing it. I certainly wouldn't have chosen to do it, among other things because I do have a full-time job. My sisters are in 14 countries and four continents. Thank God, I can keep in touch electronically, and I had just finished visiting every single community and speaking individually with every sister in my whole congregation before this started. This was my year to catch up, and instead I've

dedicated most of the year here. But I'm peaceful, because I think that I'm serving where God wants me to right now, and there will be some very good benefits for religious life in our country.

I asked you a year ago if you had any idea of why you had been picked for this job, and you said no one had explained it to you. In the meantime, in your exchanges with Cardinal Rodé, do you have any more clear sense now?

It's interesting how things happen in your life, and he and I have mentioned it several times. Almost six years ago, we had our general chapter for the election of our government leaders. The people in charge before me had invited Cardinal Rodé to celebrate a Mass for our sisters at the end of the chapter. He had just been appointed prefect, so we were the very first congregation he visited as prefect and it coincided with my election as general. We had a wonderful liturgy at our mother house, and had dinner together. I think that was the beginning of a rapport, and subsequently when we had our own congregational challenges I would just stop and talk to him about it to ask his advice. Perhaps I wouldn't have done that if I had known what was coming! But that was how he got to know me, as I was consulting him about my own congregational affairs. That's how the connection came, he didn't just pull my name out of a hat. Looking back, I sometimes think I should have done it differently, gone to the second man in charge!

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