

Vatican women religious study outlined

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 3, 2009



Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman (CNS photo)

Facing uncertainty, and perhaps some alarm, among women religious in the United States about a new apostolic visitation ordered by the Vatican, the American sister handling communications for the project has said its aim is not to impose a particular model of religious life but rather to help "revitalize and renew" all kinds of congregations.

Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, spoke by telephone from her office in St. Louis, where until recently she led the Office for Consecrated Life in the St. Louis archdiocese.

A native of Texas, Ackerman will assist Mother Clare Millea, the General Superior of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who was appointed Apostolic Visitor by Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Millea will eventually file a report for Rodé.

This will be the first formal Apostolic Visitation of women's congregations in America, though in the mid-1980s Pope John Paul II appointed a commission led by then-Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco to study religious life in the United States, with a special focus on women's communities. That commission filed its report with the late pope in October 1986.

Observers say that neither Millea nor Ackerman are high-profile figures in the United States, though their communities are generally seen as leaning toward the conservative wing of the church. (After Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane publicly challenged Pope John Paul II to open all ministries in the church to women during a 1979 visit to the United States, the Sisters of Ft. Francis of the Martyr St. George was one of two orders that took out a full-page ad in the *Washington Post* apologizing to the pope.)

Ackerman, however, said that a reputation for conservatism had "nothing to do" with her own decision to join her order. More broadly, she said the apostolic visitation is not driven by concern over ideologically-charged symbolism such as whether sisters wear habits.

Ackerman also said that Millea "interacts well with all kinds of religious." She pointed to the fact that Millea's order is a member both of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the main umbrella group for

women's congregations in the United States, which has a reputation of being fairly liberal in outlook, and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, which is often seen as a conservative alternative.

The following is the full text of the Feb. 3 interview with Ackerman.

Q: You said during the Jan. 30 press conference in Washington announcing the visitation that you couldn't speculate about the motives for doing it now, or for focusing on the United States. Is there anything more you can say on those two points?

Ackerman: I haven't spoken to the cardinal, so I really have nothing new to report. Obviously the church has a great love for religious life. Religious are very important, not just in the life of the church but also in the broader society. This study of religious life will be an opportunity for religious institutes to be strengthened in their charisms, in their ministries, and to do more good works.

The decree announcing the visitation refers to concern about "the quality of the life of religious women in the United States." Can you flesh out what's meant by that?

It will look at the essential elements of religious life — for example, our commitment to our vows, our life in community, our life of prayer (both liturgical and personal), and our apostolates. Overall, the concern is for the vitality of religious life — how women are living religious life. Obviously, some statistics will be involved, especially given the declining membership in some congregations. I should say that those declines are not just of concern to women religious, but also very much to the laity.

People love the sisters, and they want there to be more sisters, to continue the good works they're doing. Religious women are doing many generous works in a variety of fields, and these days they're often doing those works with fewer people. Many are now older women who in the past wouldn't have had to work for so long. Financial issues go along with that as well. With fewer sisters working, there are greater retirement needs, greater health care needs, and so on. The idea of this study is to address all of those concerns, and to come up with something that will be beneficial to religious in the long run to help them to revitalize and to renew.

Some people have linked this visitation to the recent apostolic visitation of seminaries and religious centers of formation, but you seemed to be careful to distinguish the two.

That's right. This isn't part two of the seminary visitation, and our visitation doesn't follow from it. They're two separate studies.

If people want to get a sense of the kinds of questions you'll be asking, it wouldn't make sense to consult the materials from the seminary visitation?

No, it wouldn't make sense. These are really two different projects.

Will there be an *Instrumentum Laboris* for the visitation? [Note: An *instrumentum laboris*, or "working paper," is a Vatican document laying out the scope and nature of a project or event. For the recent seminary visitation, the 4,600-word *instrumentum laboris* listed 54 questions for visitors to ask grouped within 11 areas of concern.]

I'm sure there will be one, but it hasn't been developed yet.

Will it be made public when it's ready?

I hope so, though I can't say yes definitively right now. I just found out about this job three weeks ago, and we've tried to be as transparent as possible within that short period of time. There will certainly be more we can

share as things develop.

You've already broken ground in terms of transparency by launching a web site. (www.apostolicvisitation.org[1])

Yes, and we want to expand the web site as the project develops. For example, we'd like to get photos from these communities, because there are so many congregations out there doing so many good things. We want to show the face of religious life to people who visit the site. We also hope to have links to articles that appear as time goes on. The primary purpose of the site, however, is as an instrument for people to see what the visitation is all about.

Contemplative congregations aren't included in the visitation. Why not?

Their lifestyle is very different from active religious institutes, so it just seemed natural to limit the focus.

Will there be a visitation of contemplative orders sometime in the future?

I wouldn't know, although I'm not aware of any discussion about that.

Will the major organizations of women religious in the United States, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, have any role in the process?

It's too early to say, but from what I understand the visitation will work directly the superiors general of the congregations, at least in the first phase. The superiors will be receiving a letter about the visitation, and right now I'm not sure if that letter will come from the cardinal or directly from Mother Clare. It will invite them to contact Mother Clare directly for a personal appointment, either in Rome or in the States, to offer voluntary input about anything that want to share with her. All religious institutes that have a provincialate, a generalate, or houses of formation in the United States will get the letter, even though in some cases their superiors may be overseas. That's one of the reasons it may be easier for some of them to meet with Mother Clare in Rome.

Do you have a sense of the timing of when these letters might go out, and when the meetings will take place?

We still have to develop a timeline for all this, but my sense is that we're talking about a few months from beginning to end. Overall, Mother Clare has said that she wants to be done in a little over two years.

Will Mother Clare run the visitation out of Rome, or will she relocate to the States?

That's not determined yet, but judging from the personal meetings that will make up the first phase, it's obvious that she will spend some time here. She's the superior of her congregation, and their Generalate is in Rome. The Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus also have a province here in the States, based in Hamden, Connecticut.

Will you be working out of Hamden?

That also still has to be decided. I will have to be working there at least part of the time, but we don't know yet when that might be. We're still working on the scheduling. Officially, my last day here in St. Louis was yesterday, although I've still got a couple of days of things to finish here. For the time being, I'll be working from the provincialate of my community, which is in Alton, Illinois.

One practical question about the visitation: Who's paying for it? Will congregations be asked to shoulder the cost of bringing out visitors, for example?

I don't know, but I don't think so. There will be some private donations to help cover the costs. We certainly don't want to impose new burdens on communities, many of which are already experiencing financial challenges.

Did you know Mother Clare before taking on this project?

Yes. I've been in this job [in St. Louis] since 1996, and for part of that time she was the provincial superior of her community. She came on a visit to St. Louis to spend time with her sisters here, and as part of that visit she came to speak with me as the director of the archdiocesan office on consecrated life. I was very impressed with her, so when I heard that she had been appointed the apostolic visitor, I thought, "What a blessing to everyone." She's just a great listener. She interacts well with all kinds of religious.

Her order belongs to both the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, which is fairly rare.

That says a lot right there. It goes along with the type of person Mother Clare is. She has a real respect for religious of all backgrounds and outlooks. I know she wants to open this initiative up to the superiors general, and to give them a chance to share from the heart what will be helpful for her to know.

Can you tell me something about your own experience of religious life?

I was born in Houston, Texas, and ended up in Corpus Christi. I had grown up Catholic, but I didn't really meet any sisters until I was already out of college. I was a journalism major at a small college in south Texas, and afterwards I worked for a TV station and the local daily, where I got to know the Catholic church much better. For example, I got to know the sister who worked in the Catholic schools office in Corpus Christi. When a job opened at on the diocesan newspaper, I was hired and spent about a year there, which is where I really discerned my vocation. I saw one of those ads inviting you to send in for information about religious life, which is how I found my community.

What attracted you to the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George?

I was already becoming a secular Franciscan, who I was attracted to the Franciscan charism, its spirit of simplicity and joy. I visited this particular community in 1979, and I thought it had a really good community spirit and a good prayer life.

Your congregation has a reputation for being on the conservative end of things. Was that part of the appeal?

It had nothing to do with my decision, because at the time I honestly didn't know the difference. I was a young person and I didn't think in those terms. For example, the question of wearing the habit wasn't even in my mind. I came to my community because God called me to it, and the habit wasn't an issue. Over time I've grown to love the habit as a wonderful sign, but that wasn't the appeal. It's just part of the life that I came to love.

Your years as director of the Office for Consecrated Life in St. Louis must have given you some feel for the variety of religious life.

In 1996, the sister who held the job before me was taking another position in her community, and then Archbishop Rigali sent a letter to the major superiors asking them to suggest names of sisters who might be qualified. I was interviewed, and ended up doing this job for 12 years. For me, it's been a real gift to work with all the different communities, both of men and women. I have really grown to appreciate the variety and the dedication of all these congregations, and I've developed friendships with them. That's been a real blessing.

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Links:

[1] [Http://www.apostolicvisitation.org](http://www.apostolicvisitation.org)