

Apostolic Visitation

OF INSTITUTES OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES

January 12, 2010

Dear Sister,

I recently returned from my Generalate in Rome, refreshed and renewed by having participated, together with faithful from all over the world, in the beautiful Christmas liturgies presided over by our Holy Father, Benedict XVI. I assure you that I remembered all the women religious of our country in grateful prayer, especially at the tomb of St. Peter and before the many “presepios” or Christmas cribs I saw during the holy season.

Since returning to the States I have been reflecting on the crystalline message contained in one of Pope Benedict’s latest gifts to the Church, *Caritas in Veritate*. He begins this masterful encyclical dedicated to the Church’s social teaching by stating that love has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. He states that truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. “Truth, in fact, is *logos*, which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion. Truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things. Truth opens and unites our minds in the *lógos* of love: this is the Christian proclamation and testimony of charity” (4).

For nearly a year now, we women religious have been engaged in a communal seeking of love in truth, a dialogue with the Church, an experience of grace (*cháris*), which is the Apostolic Visitation. Our common search to enhance the vitality of our congregations, to affirm our sisters and to encourage new membership will bear fruit in the measure that our participation is marked by “the splendor of truth and the gentle light of Christ’s charity” (8).

As you recall, in the first phase of the Apostolic Visitation process I engaged in dialogue with superiors general. Attentive listening to their hopes and dreams convinced me of their love for and pride in their sisters. It deepened my esteem for women religious, who courageously and faithfully witness to their foundresses’ and founders’ spiritual patrimony and spend themselves in generous service to the Church. The Phase 1 interviews and letters also helped me formulate more precisely the procedures of the Visitation.

During Phase 2 of the Apostolic Visitation, you were asked to complete a *Questionnaire* regarding fundamental aspects of your congregation’s identity, present life style and future projections. As I reflect on the fine input submitted by many major superiors in response to the *Questionnaire*, I see that the process is generating much self-evaluation and dialogue between congregational leaders and their sisters. I commend and thank those of you who have shared your stories and hopes, an expression of an authentic search for growth in charity, illumined by the light of truth.

When I recently met with Cardinal Rodé, he assured me that the Holy Father continues to show his interest in and support of the Apostolic Visitation. The Cardinal was pleased to hear about the wholehearted and genuine responses of many congregations to the *Questionnaire*. However, I also shared with him my sadness and disappointment that not all congregations have responded to this phase of dialogue with the Church in a manner fully supportive of the purpose and goals of the Apostolic Visitation. He encouraged me to ask those who have not yet fully complied to prayerfully reconsider their response. I take this opportunity, then, to once again invite all major superiors who have not responded fully to the *Questionnaire* to do so.

I make this request in light of the fact that the *Questionnaire* serves as an integral part of the Visitation process. It offers you and your sisters a privileged opportunity to present to the Apostolic See your congregation's unique charismatic identity, as well as your communal and ministerial expression of religious life. It likewise affords the Apostolic See a way to listen to the joys, accomplishments, hopes and concerns of your sisters and to seek, together with you, strategies for enhancing the vitality of your institute.

I know that some congregations have had questions and concerns regarding the completion of the *Questionnaire*. My staff and I are eager to resolve those with you to the extent that the Apostolic Visitation process allows it. It would be helpful for us if you would inform the Apostolic Visitation office if you intend to amend your response to the *Questionnaire*. If you have any questions about responding online, the CARA staff will be happy to assist you as well.

The third phase of the Apostolic Visitation will begin in April 2010 with on-site visits to a representative sample of institutes, conducted by teams of religious who will act individually and collectively in the name of the Apostolic See. The Visitors were chosen from among the many fine religious nominated by superiors general and others and represent a variety of congregations and areas of expertise. Prior to conducting the on-site visits, all potential Visitors will participate in an orientation workshop during which they will pronounce a public profession of faith and an oath of fidelity to the Apostolic See. This profession carries with it a special grace which will strengthen the Visitors in their delicate and important task.

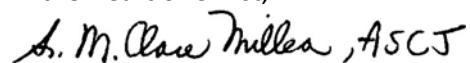
The on-site Visitors will engage in dialogue primarily with the members of leadership teams and a representative group of the sisters, eliciting their vision of the joys, challenges and obstacles they face in seeking to live religious life authentically. The details of the on-site visit will be arranged with the individual congregations in such a way as to provide the Visitors a broad and objective picture of the life and mission of the congregation and its impact on the local Church. The visitation team members will formulate a report for the Apostolic Visitor in which they will seek to articulate the accomplishments, the key strengths and challenges of the institute as revealed in their dialogue and will include any recommendations which they consider appropriate.

In the fourth phase of the Visitation, drawing from the data gathered in the previous phases, I will prepare for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) a summary report of each institute, whether or not an on-site visit has taken place. Each institute will subsequently receive feedback from CICLSAL for the purpose of promoting its charismatic identity and apostolic vitality in ongoing dialogue with the local and universal Church.

I was happy to receive an invitation to the Reception and Exhibition Preview of *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* to be held January 14 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. I look forward to viewing this worthy tribute to religious of the past and present and to meeting with the officers of the Leadership Council of Women Religious who have so graciously invited me to attend.

I thank you for your kind attention to this letter and for your continued participation in the Apostolic Visitation. Please be assured of a constant remembrance in my prayer. May Our Lady of the Visitation obtain for us a quickening of prophetic grace, that we may serve our sisters in faithfully loving the Church, and love the Church in humbly serving our sisters.

In the Heart of Christ,



Mother Mary Clare Millea, ASCJ
Apostolic Visitor