U.S. Sisters

Accolades and Admonitions

Laurie Brink, O.P.

U.S. women religious have been in the public spotlight of late. While the Vatican has been investigating the quality of life of sisters, a national traveling exhibit opened that extolled the historical contributions made by these same women. Both the scrutiny and the praise being focused on women religious have created a polarity of responses. Perhaps a more thorough trust in the Trinity and a less ardent defense of various ecclesiologies might provide an entrée into a richer relationship among all members of the church.

Sisters in the Public Spotlight

In the decades since Vatican II opened the windows of the church, the breezes have blown through every aspect of our faith and life. One of the more noticeable changes that has left some of the faithful still pining for old days is the change in dress for women religious. Convents, once the home for sisters who taught in the school, are becoming parish offices. Institutions run by sisters are now under the capable direction of lay leadership. Without distinctive dress, established homes and institutions, sisters are no longer “seen” in the public and ecclesial circles. This, coupled with the decline in membership—through aging and lessening of vocations—has created an atmosphere in which one person asked, “Do they have sisters anymore?” Just when the cloak of public invisibility had almost settled over the nation’s 57,000 women religious, two very different, very significant events reminded everyone that women religious remain a force to be recognized and reckoned with.

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The “Women of Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America” exhibition, initiated by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)—an organization to which ninety-five percent of U.S. women’s apostolic communities belong—put a spotlight on the innumerable works of charity, the hundreds of institutions established, the thousands of people educated—all at the hands of women religious in the United States. Almost simultaneously, the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life—the Vatican office charged with overseeing the congregations of men and women religious—initiated an apostolic visitation of sisters in the United States in order to “look at the quality of life of apostolic congregations of women religious.” The first celebrated the outward accomplishments of a unique subset of American women; the second questioned the vitality—and some would say the fidelity—of the inner life of those same communities.

Ironically, these two events find their roots in the congregations themselves. The Vatican-initiated visitation of woman religious congregations in the United States originates in those very communities’ efforts to embrace the invitation and challenge of Vatican II. *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Vatican II document that dealt with issues of religious life, directed that the community was to adapt and renew under the direction of its own leadership, which the document named as “competent authorities, especially to general chapters.”

This attention to communal authority has—at times—led to conflict with hierarchical ecclesial authority (Fialka, 325–335). The question of the appropriate authority can be seen from two very different vantages: either it is a sign of viability in the Church, the spirit unsettling our perceptions or priorities, or it is tantamount to religious treason, a willful disregard for “God-given authority of the hierarchy” (Butler 2007).

For the majority of Catholics, questions of who tells whom what to do, what to wear, or where to work that are being bantered about between clergy and religious is of no interest. Only when occasional confrontations reach the media are most people in the pew aware of any alleged disharmony. So when the announcement of a Vatican-sponsored review of American sisters hit the public airways, many were shocked. Responses ranged from:

The Vatican is now conducting two inquisitions into the “quality of life” of American nuns, a dwindling group with an average age of about 70, hoping to herd them back into their old-fashioned habits and convents and curb any speck of modernity or independence. (Dowd)

to:

Cardinal Rodé “knows the problems that trouble religious life in America today: the dwindling of some women’s orders, the rebelliousness of others. The apostolic visitation will surely encourage the growth of healthy communities. Just as certainly, it will help Church leaders identify the religious communities that are
doomed to fail, and/or to cause grave problems for the Church, if they do not promptly change their directions.” (Lawler)

And all points in between. Suddenly, American religious women were publically visible. Not just as a result of what they had accomplished, so celebrated by the Women of Spirit exhibition, but in large part, in direct response to their way of life.

The Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, under the its then-prefect, Cardinal Franc Rodé, announced the visitation on December 22, 2008. In a later radio address, the cardinal noted concerns for the diminishing number of vocations as well as “some irregularities or omissions in American religious life. Most of all, you could say, it involves a certain secular mentality that has spread in these religious families and perhaps, also a certain ‘feminist’ spirit” (Sadowski).

Just a few months after his interview, the Women of Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America traveling exhibition opened. According to the press release announcing its Cincinnati debut, the exhibition chronicled “the untold stories of the innovative, action-oriented women who played a significant role in shaping the nation's social and cultural landscape” (www.WomenandSpirit.org).

“Few people are aware of the tales of the brave women who came to this country to help immigrants assimilate into the fabric of America,” said Jane Burke, S.S.N.D., executive director of LCWR. “Their heroic presence during many of the formative periods of our nation is an important part of American history and the legacy of the Sisters” (www.WomenandSpirit.org).

The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution in September 2009 honoring and commending “Catholic sisters for their humble service and courageous sacrifice throughout the history of this nation.” The resolution was introduced by Representative Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, who noted that “regardless of religious affiliation or conviction, Catholic sisters have not only nurtured countless hearts, minds, and souls throughout our nation’s history, but they have played a vital role in shaping American life. The humble sacrifices, the heartfelt dedication, and the tremendous contributions of these women are in earnest need of recognition” (Sweas, 2009).

The laudatory and well-deserved accolades for the exhibition and the history of women religious in the United States provide a welcomed shot in the arm for many of today’s sisters. Indeed, the past has been noble; but what about the future? The visitation’s worry over the decline in religious vocations is one point of shared concern.

The Vatican Visitation

The laudatory and well-deserved accolades for the exhibition and the history of women religious in the United States provide a welcomed shot in the arm for many of today’s sisters. Indeed, the past has been noble; but what about the future? The visitation’s worry over the decline in religious vocations is one point of shared concern.
This diminishment of membership in women and men’s religious communities has not appeared without warning. In fact, the visitation concern seems a late response to a much publicized report about the future of religious life done by David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis. Nearly twenty years ago, the report predicted that religious congregations had a ten-year window of opportunity, after which they would face irreversible decline.

The Nygren-Ukeritis report was not without hope. Though the authors listed the “restraining forces” limiting the growth of religious life as individualism, work absorption, materialism, and parochial assimilation, they also noted avenues of potential growth. The forces that could open a way to a future included reclaiming the vocation to religious life, excellence in leadership, recognition of the charism of religious life, role clarity, and greater corporate identity.

The study acknowledged that “the prevailing espoused orientation of religious orders since Vatican II has been toward the prophetic, emphasizing systemic and personal service to the poor as a fundamental distinguishing attribute of the vocation to religious life,” but that the contemplative dimension was the most important dimension in the transformation of religious life (Nygren and Ukeritis 1992, 234). “Those (religious orders) that are most responsive to pressing human need and motivated by the love of Christ will be vitalized as long as their efforts are consistent with their tradition” (Nygren and Ukeritis 1992, 235).

The reaction to the announcement that Rome was taking a particular interest in the quality of life of sisters in the United States has drawn sharply different responses from women religious. Two of the more recent and widely discussed papers on U.S. women religious are from Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., S.T.D., professor of New Testament and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology and from Sister Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., Ph.D., professor of Dogmatic Theology, St. Joseph’s Seminary, New York. Interestingly, both women possess an S.T.L., which is a licentiate of sacred theology, conferred by an ecclesiastical faculty. Both approach the topic of religious life from their academic disciplines—Schneiders has recourse to Scripture, while Butler relies on doctrine.

Butler’s address, “Apostolic Religious Life: A Public Ecclesial Vision” was one of eight presentations given at the symposium “Apostolic Religious Life since..."
Butler discusses three challenges resulting from women religious’ responses to Vatican II. These include the universal call to holiness and the special vocation of apostolic religious, adaption of the apostolate and the “monastic” ideal, and commitment to social justice and the direct proclamation of the Gospel. The fourth challenge is one of competing ecclesiologies. The two models that seem particularly at odds are the idea of the church as People of God and the church as institution (Butler 2008, 13–17).

On the former, Butler writes, “Apostolic religious in this group claim to owe allegiance to the ‘People of God’, but envision this ‘People’ as an unstructured community of believers, devoid of hierarchical authority. This ‘model of the Church’ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine” (Butler 2008, 17).

The consequences of a “discipleship of equals” ecclesiology has direct ramifications on the vows of a religious, according to Butler. “It must be said forthrightly that those who reject the God-given authority of the hierarchy, for whatever theological reason, simply cut the ground out from under the vocation to ‘religious life’ as the Church understands and regulates it. An anti-hierarchical ecclesiology provides absolutely no justification for profession of public vows, in particular, for making a vow of obedience” (Butler 2008, 19).

In a five-part series published in the National Catholic Reporter, Schneiders addressed Butler’s specific concerns about the ecclesial aspects of the vows. “Religious make their vows to God (not to their superiors or Church officials) to live religious Life (not to exercise some particular function, office, or ministry). . . . But religious make their vows according to the constitutions of their order (which includes a particular relationship to Church law), in the presence of their superiors, but only to God. In the concrete, this means that religious, unlike the clergy, are not agents of the institutional Church as Jesus was not an agent of institutional Judaism” (Schneiders 2010, part 4).

One of the speakers at the Stonehill symposium was Cardinal Rodé himself who presented on the topic “Reforming Religious Life with the Right Hermeneutic.” The visitation was announced a few months later. In fall 2009, Rodé noted that though the visitation had been planned prior to the Stonehill event, “the multitude and complexity” of the problems facing American sisters was clearly demonstrated by the speakers.
The visitation process has included voluntary input by superiors of women's apostolic religious congregations in the United States; documents and information requested by the visitator, Mother Mary Clare Millea, A.S.C.J.; on-site visits by visitation teams of about 25 percent of the congregations; and the preparation of a report to be given to the prefect of the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (www.apostolicvisitation.org).

 Shortly after the announcement of the visitation of women religious, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious learned that it too would be investigated, but by a different office—the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—concerning matters of doctrine. More than 95 percent of the congregations of women religious in the United States belong to LCWR.

 Schneiders succinctly stated what several religious, clergy, and members of the laity had said more privately. “When the Vatican investigation of U.S. women religious was announced some months ago without any preparation, consultation, or even the courtesy of a notification to congregational leaders that it was about to happen, many people, religious and laity alike, were stunned at what seemed like a surprise attack aimed at a most unlikely target, given the massive and unaddressed problems besetting the clergy and hierarchy at the moment” (Schneiders 2010, part 1).

 Since the announcement in January 2009, the visitation has completed three of the four stages. The final report is being prepared, but it will no longer be sent to Cardinal Rodé, who initiated the investigation. In January 2011, Pope Benedict XVI named Brazilian Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz of Brasil to succeed Rodé.

 Archbishop Braz de Aviz responded candidly to questions posed by NCR regarding his openness to women religious and their concerns about the visitation:

 What the Holy Father wants is fidelity to the consecrated life, but we also have to be in dialogue with the world and all the other things that women religious strive to do. I would say that “secrecy” is not the spirit of this intervention. You know, whenever a higher level of authority in the church intervenes, they’re doing so because they have a responsibility to carry out a mission, but there’s often a problem of trust. I want to create trust—I believe in that very much. We have to get past this vision of seeing one another as enemies, believing that the ‘other’ is somehow far from God or a threat to me.” (Allen 2011) 

 Moving from Differing Ecclesiologies to Trinitarian Relationship

The visitation comes as a response to the changing times in the church and the world. More than forty years after Vatican II, some are bemoaning that the faithful have moved too quickly, while others argue we have moved in the
wrong direction. No one seems to fear we have been stagnant. The dilemma facing women’s religious communities is no less significant or foreign to the problems of the clergy or the rest of the laity. How will we be church today and into the future? Cardinal Rodé and those who presented at the Stonehill symposium hold dear to the model of church that recognizes the hierarchy as a necessary, if not divinely ordained, constituent of the church as institution. Schneiders and others advocate for a model that sees the church as community, as People of God.

In his book *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles presented five types of ecclesial forms, which he labeled: the church as institution, the church as mystical communion, the church as sacrament, the church as herald, and the church as servant. He noted, “To a great extent, the five basic types [of models of the church] discussed . . . reflect distinctive mindsets that become manifest in a given theologian’s way of handling all the problems to which he addresses himself, including the doctrine of God, Christ, grace, sacraments, and the like” (Dulles 2000, 4).

Perhaps our starting point should not be determining what model of church tradition and practice have been presented to us. Rather, women religious who find themselves at odds with the institutional church and often at odds with their own members might find common ground in a discussion of Trinitarian theology—how we understand the relationship of God, Jesus the Christ, and Spirit and subsequently how we can model our lives in light of that communion. Catherine Mowry LaCugna explained that:

The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is to affirm that God who comes to us and saves us in Christ and remains with us as Spirit is the true living God. . . . From this perspective the doctrine of the Trinity serves a critical theological function, to critique the tendency of praxiological theologies to promote a particular construal of reality as the only legitimate one, or as the one that perfectly mirrors intradivine life. (LaCugna 1991, 380)

The polarity in our church that is also experienced in our religious communities is antithetical to the holy communion to which the Trinity calls us. As LaCugna noted, “Both theology and praxis would be quite different if the doctrine of the Trinity were allowed to serve at the center of Christian faith” (LaCugna 1991, 379). And I would add at the center of our discussion of religious life.

*A Parable of the Family of Jesus*

A creative tension exists in our understanding of Trinitarian theology. It is bound up in the idea of relationship and how that relationship is sustained and strengthened for the good of the whole. All language about God is metaphoric. We are simply too limited in our human capacity to describe the infinite. And so
we must settle for our best efforts expressed in language, however fraught with its own shortfalls and biases. Perhaps revisiting an episode from the life of Jesus might provide a new lens with which to understand Trinitarian relationship and how to hurdle the ecclesiological obstacle in religious life today.

All three synoptic gospels include the story of Jesus’ encounter with his family (Mark 3:20-35 // Matt 12:46-50 // Luke 8:19-21). In Mark’s account, Jesus returns “home” to Capernaum and is so pressed by the crowd that he and his disciples are unable even to eat. The text then reads, “When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind!’” (Mark 3:21). The Greek word is from *exišëmi*, which has the metaphorical connotation of “to be out of one’s wits.” A more modern vernacular translation might be “he is crazy.” It’s unclear if the “they” who think he is out of his mind are his family members or the crowd.

While his family is making its way to Jesus, scribes who have come from Jerusalem accuse him of being possessed by Beelzebul, a circumlocution for Satan. The charge is that Jesus is able to cast out demons because he is in league with them. To this illogical claim, Jesus responds: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand” (Mark 3:24-25).

At root the challenge is to the origin of Jesus’ authority. It is not by an evil spirit that Jesus is able to conquer the evil realm, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. To cast aspersions on this source of power is unforgiveable. In a pronouncement beginning with, “Amen, I say to you,” Jesus draws a line in the sand. All sins will be forgiven, save the sin against the Holy Spirit. “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness” (Mark 3:29). On the heels of this announcement, his mother and his brothers arrive and stand outside. Word reaches Jesus.

“Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you.’ But he said to them in reply, ‘Who are my mother and (my) brothers?’ And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. (For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’ ” (Mark 3:32-35).

**The Household of Communion**

In its Marcan context, the story establishes that Jesus’ authority is derived from God and his power is expressed through the Holy Spirit. But what are we to make of the familial frame that opens and closes our pericope? Are his well-meaning but misguided mother and brothers and sisters (included in some manuscripts) a reflection of our own response to the current polarity in our church? In the context of the debate on religious life today, who is “outside” judging those “inside” as crazy? And *vice versa*. 

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A few points in this narrative have relevance for our discussion on the current status of religious life. First, Jesus acknowledges a house divided against itself cannot stand. The Catholic faith is a wide tent, able to cover an expansive array of “theologies” and “ecclesiologies” while still remaining true to its nature. The challenges facing women’s religious communities in the United States is not unlike those facing the larger church community. Numbers are dwindling; folks are disheartened. The consumerism of our society threatens to turn faith into a commodity. Rigorous debate and disagreements are part of our tradition, but name-calling serves no Gospel good.

Second, when we set ourselves up as the “orthodox” camp and label the “other” as heretical, we are perilously close to blaspheming the Spirit, since God’s spirit abides in all the baptized—not just those whose ecclesiology or theology I share.

Finally, the text doesn’t tell us if Jesus’ family ever came inside. In fact, it transforms the conflict by removing the walls that distinguish who is truly “family.” “Whoever does the will of God” joins in relationship with Jesus—the relationship that he shares with God, by whose authority he preaches, and with the Holy Spirit who is manifest in his works of healing.

Depending on one’s personal experience, the term “family” may not provide a suitable term for adult relationships. LaCugna suggests that “household is an appropriate metaphor to describe the communion of persons where God and creature meet and unite and now exist together as one” (LaCugna 1991, 411). A more thorough trust in the Trinity and a less ardent defense of various ecclesiologies might provide an entrée into a richer relationship among religious, ordained and laity alike. We are all invited to ask the question, “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?” And despite our theological differences, we must claim, “Here are my mother and brothers and sisters, for we all do the will of God.”

References


