Hopes & Unexpected Gifts After the Apostolic Visitation

ON December 16, 2014, a press conference held by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) brought the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of U.S. Women Religious to its formal close. For closure, many still wait—contemplating the need and worth of the process; the validity of hopes based on the final report; and the cultivation of dialogue, attitudes and relationships so critical in navigating the “middle space” of U.S. women religious history.

Back in 2010, shortly after the Visitation was announced, Sister Doris Gottemoeller (South Central) wrote in iViva! Mercy: ‘As we await our ‘company,’ we may think we know what to expect … we might do better to be open to surprise” (September-October 2010). In the reflections that follow, sisters from across the Institute share what “surprise” gifts we take away from the process, the significance of the Visitation for Mercy sisters and all U.S. women religious and the hopes we dare to cherish from the final report.

The dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. Photo by Flickr user Paul Williams. Creative Common License available at bit.ly/1ly5FCJ.
One style of leadership called for the Apostolic Visitation in January 2009, and a very different one reflected on its findings in December 2014. Throughout the press conference, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz (CICLSAL’s prefect) and Archbishop José Rodriguez Carballo, O.F.M. (CICLSAL’s secretary) offered their gratitude and spoke with great respect about the ministries and lives of women religious. Even their recommendations were invitational and aspirational, rather than the critique we had feared.

For many of us who witnessed the aftermath of Vatican II—its foibles and its movements forward—we take a view of history. The Church is both human and evolving, and our experience teaches us to be realistic. Yet, we take heart in the hopes offered to us by CICLSAL’s report. At this moment in time, the Church seems committed to actively involve “competent women religious … in ecclesial dialogue” about women’s leadership in the church. There’s a call for women religious and our brother bishops to intensify our collaboration. There’s hope that the “Francis effect” is moving us toward more conversation, mutuality and dialogue.

We celebrate these hopes as well as the unexpected gifts we found in the process of the Apostolic Visitation: our ability to work well with the Church through a very complex process; our ability to come together and work well with other congregations of women religious; our delight and gratitude for the affirmation we received from our lay colleagues; and finally, our presence throughout the process that ended in a positive outcome: deeper respect for our ministries and lives.

As women religious, we responded to the Apostolic Visitation the way women do. We gathered and shared our experiences and welcomed the support of our sisters and brothers. Having embraced the mystery of our call as followers of Jesus, we heeded the call of our community leaders to enter into contemplation as a body. The invitation to contemplation was a natural inclination for us—contemplation and action.

Catherine McAuley called us to serve those who are poor, sick and seeking truth, especially women. Catherine, however, encountered many challenges, kept her focus and received the guidance and support to address those circumstances. We, Sisters of Mercy, have a model in the instructions of Catherine and the story of her life. We know, also, the blessings of women religious of other congregations, our associates and partners as companions on the journey. We welcome the support of members of the clergy who walk with us.

**Sister Amy Hoey**

**Northeast Community**

Inserting the word “apostolic” before “visitation” changed the meaning of a favorite joyful mystery. I have long loved that feast, pulsing as it does with new life and spontaneity, but the announcement of the Apostolic Visitation came as a cold shower on a bright, sunny day. Surely, we have serious issues to confront as fewer women seek vowed membership, but the announcement brought with it an atmosphere of suspicion and negative pre-judgment that I found distressing.

My gratitude for our ILT’s courage and integrity deepened as they engaged in the Visitation process on our behalf. As the Visitation process dragged on, I’ll admit that I lost interest, but I did gain renewed hope from the gifts that Pope Francis brought to all of us. Mother Clare Millea, ASCJ, earned my gratitude for the way she coordinated the process. I’m encouraged by what I’ve read regarding the final report. There seem to be renewed opportunities for mutual trust in the multiple expressions of religious life in our Church. May we continue to rejoice in another one’s versions of the Magnificat!

**Sister Mary Janet Rozzano**

**West Midwest Community**

For me, the Apostolic Visitation held two gifts. First, it has deepened my understanding of the vow of obedience as expressed in our *Constitutions*. If the only thing we used to guide us through this process had been paragraph 28 of our *Constitutions*, it would have been enough. That article “impels us to search together for God’s will in fidelity to our mission.” This was a communal effort, involving members, leaders and other congregations. Our focus was outward—our mission expressed in community life and ministry.

Paragraph 28 goes on to state what for me is the most essential and demanding aspect of obedience: “Responsible obedience requires that we inform our minds and prepare our hearts for dialogue….” In our search for the truth we had to share honestly what we were thinking and feeling and what actions we thought our leaders should take. The challenge was to “listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God’s will.” That kind of openness and willingness to be influenced by one another is a rare, much needed quality in our world today.

Finally, paragraph 28 speaks of the fruit of obedience, not as something achieved by our own efforts alone, but by Spirit-given wisdom and courage. And what does the Spirit enable us to do? We don’t necessarily “win” or get things to go our way, but we are able “to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself.” At first look, that doesn’t sound like such a great gift. But certainly we know the cross is an indispensable part of the paschal mystery leading to new and transformed life.

The second gift of the Visitation flows naturally from this understanding of obedience. It is the nonviolent manner in which we have worked with both the Apostolic Visitation and the investigation of LCWR. I am inspired and proud that we have chosen this way. I believe in the value of our efforts to work nonviolently, respecting those with whom we disagree, willing to stay in dialogue with them, and resisting polarizing “we/they” and “good guy/bad guy” kinds of thinking. What a powerful witness for church and world at a time when violence in speech and behavior abounds! What a mercy-filled legacy for those who will follow us!
As a sister in higher education, I am part of a generation of sisters who have been significantly challenged and shaped by postmodern perspectives. I bring this lens to my reflections. The Visitation process and the subsequent report on consecrated life brought to light several key observations for me. First, the gap between traditional practices and shifting theologies continues to grow wider. The address of Sister Laurie Brink, OP, to LCWR in 2007, “A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century,” brought some of these perspectives to the forefront.

Second, there is a concern in the report that a growing number of sisters experience the mystical in ways that do not center on Christ. This may be unsettling for some sisters, but for others, it is a hopeful shift informed by postmodern theologies.

Third, the language of the report reveals nuanced patriarchal views which can be read positively, but these nuances reveal condescending language. Particularly troubling to me is the line: “We will continue to work to see that competent [emphasis added] women religious will be actively involved in ecclesial dialogue regarding the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life” (Evangelii Gaudium, 104).” Why the need for the qualifier, “competent”?

Finally, while we value the various aspects of our lives (theological, human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral) as noted in the report, we continue to struggle with the practicalities of integrating these into our current community lifestyles. More importantly, we struggle to integrate these aspects in ways that are meaningful to us as women, and in ways meaningful to those we serve.

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I thought [the Apostolic Visitation] could be a tense experience, but not necessarily negative. In religious life, we are called to be prophetic; that is, to show a different way of life. In this way, authority is given, as an exercise in dialogue, of common decision-making. …

The Visitation process gave evidence of the contributions of so many consecrated women that have given their lives to make Jesus Christ present, especially to the most vulnerable. For the Institute of Mercy, it was an exercise of gathering all of our strength, ingenuity, creativity and vitality of many years, that has been manifested in the works of mercy. It is the testimony of our leadership that we carry out [these works], together with the laity. We are one among many servants—we do not serve as superiors, but as sisters who walk with the people. With Saint Paul, we can say: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

FOR FURTHER READING

Apostolic Visitation Final Report [link]

From Global Sisters Report: Q&A with Sister Dolores Liptak (Northeast), a member of the Apostolic Visitation Team, by Dawn Cherie Araujo [link]