

On December 16, 2014, the Vatican concluded a six-year Apostolic Visitation of women religious in the United States by issuing a general report, variously praised as positive, affirming, encouraging, an olive branch and a lovefest. Shortly after the visitation was launched in 2008, without any prior consultation with the sisters in the United States, Cardinal Franc Rode, head of the Vatican congregation in charge of religious orders, warned about “some irregularities or omissions in American religious life” and “a certain secularist mentality that has spread among religious families, perhaps even a certain feminist spirit.” This kind of comment created a heavy atmosphere of worry and anxiety that prevailed during the long investigation, but dissipated to some degree when the final report said nothing about a secularist mentality and contained no denunciations or sanctions.

Unfortunately, a separate doctrinal mandate by the Vatican is still in place which requires Archbishop J. Peter Sartain to oversee activities of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), for another two years - a continuing source of frustration and anxiety for many of the approximately 40,000 sisters represented by LCWR.

The final report on the Apostolic Visitation, generated by investigations into 341 communities of sisters in the United States, gratefully acknowledges the immense contributions of women religious, especially in education and health care. “Since the early days of the Catholic Church in their country, women religious have courageously been in the forefront of her evangelizing mission, selflessly tending to the spiritual, moral, educational, physical, and social needs of countless individuals, especially the poor and marginalized.” The report also notes that the sisters in the United States responded positively to the Second Vatican Council by branching out into new ministries to those on the margins and by updating their theological and professional formation.

After this laudatory introduction, the report summarizes the investigation process, designed and led by Mother Mary Clare Millea, and highlights some of its empirical findings: for instance, the median age of women religious in the United States is mid-to-late 70s and the current number of 50,000 sisters is a decline of around 125,000 since the mid-1960s when the numbers peaked. The report does not assign any blame for the decline, but considers the high number years as a “relatively short-term phenomenon” not typical of the history of religious life in the U.S.

This analysis is significant since it does not endorse the criticism of commentators, such as neo-conservative author George Weigel, who suggests the decline is caused by LCWR affiliates deviating from previous traditions: not wearing religious habits; abandoning convent life for apartments; paying more attention to the Enneagram than Teresa of Avila; holding notions of orthodoxy that are “innovative,” and relating to Church authority in a way best described as “barely concealed contempt.” By refusing to follow the critics who blame the renewed orders for the decline, the report opens up the possibility of a broader examination of factors influencing the numbers situation, including cultural, economic, societal, and ecclesial developments, such as expanded opportunities for lay ministry.

The report goes on to present a mix of praise, caution, suggestions and observations: the sisters have found creative ways of using the distinctive charisms of their orders to serve “the needs of the Church and world;” some institutes are expending considerable energy to promote vocations, while others suspended efforts given “the ever-widening age gap between their current members and potential candidates;” each institute should evaluate their liturgical prayer so that it fosters an intimate relationship with Christ; sisters are cautioned not “to displace Christ from the center of creation and of our faith;” women religious live community life in a variety of ways, and those “who reside alone do so for reasons of ministry or health;” the leaders of religious institutes should serve the community, and all members should remember “there is no room for authoritarianism or blind submission;” all religious should heed the advice of Pope Francis “to imitate Christ” who was “close to the poor” in order to “contribute to the integral development of society’s most neglected members;” some religious institutes did not collaborate fully in the visitation process, “a painful disappointment” for the Vatican, which remains willing “to engage in respectful and fruitful dialogue;” the Congregation quotes Pope Francis on “the indispensable and unique contributions of women to society and the Church;” and, in its conclusion, the report expresses hope that the Apostolic Visitation will strengthen religious institutes “in fidelity to Christ, to the Church and to their founding charisms.”

The Final Report has generated a great deal of commentary. Ann Carey, who wrote *Sisters in Crisis, Revisited*, which examines the decline of renewed orders, insists that the report is “a vindication of the Vatican’s decision to conduct the apostolic visitation,” because it found “areas of concern” in some religious institutes.

Sister Sharon Holland, president of LCWR, suggests that sisters should dwell more on the final report and the positive aspects of the process than on the start of the investigation and the currently unanswerable question of why it happened. In retrospect, some sisters think the process, painful as it was, had the positive effect of bringing communities closer together. One sister said: “Sharing who we are and what we do was one of the best experiences of my life; it made me happy all over again to be a member of the community.”

Noting her own personal anxiety and anger over the Vatican investigation, Sr. Christine Shenk, Executive Director Emerita of Future Church, points out that for years her community’s leadership “diverted precious time, energy and resources away from sorely needed ministry to the marginalized to address a searching Vatican inquiry that we had neither chosen nor had a part in shaping.” Christine feels special empathy for leaders who, early in the process, felt a “wrenching tension” as they had to make use of canon law to protect the financial assets of their orders from Vatican control. She quotes approvingly a sister who sees the whole event in a large historical perspective: “This peaceful, non-violent stand resisting institutional violence against women was a turning point in the relationship of the church and women, when the women risked everything . . . It would be wonderful to write in the history books that this was the beginning of true equity in the church, true inclusion of women as equal partners.”

The publisher of the *National Catholic Reporter*, Tom Fox, sees the Final Report as “a form of institutional cover-up” of an unexplained “assault on women,” a “grand mistake” that has left persistent wounds. He blames the misguided investigation on “an exclusively male authority structure” attempting to pass judgment on women religious. For Fox, the apostolic visitation, which caused so much “pain and humiliation,” reveals more about “anachronistic structures, entrenched clericalism, the undue separation of men and women, and the lunacy of men taking on the task of investigating women than it provides fresh insights into religious life or answers to the complex challenges facing the women religious today.” Fox does laud the report for its attempt “to stop the bleeding” by new, more open leaders in Rome, but insists that the only way to move forward is through a “Vatican restructuring” that “leads to the inclusion of women as true collaborators in church management matters.”

The highly respected scripture scholar, Sandra Schneiders, wrote a commentary on the Vatican report, examining some of the deeper issues, concerns and hopes involved. Commenting on the symbolism of the press conference introducing the report, Schneiders notes that “six years of suspicion, threat, judgment, accusations, mutual distrust and justified anger at rank injustice cannot be abolished with a few pages of appreciative acceptance, no matter how sincere,” especially since “the doctrinal evaluation of LCWR hangs over the head of U.S. religious.” Continuing her penetrating analysis of linguistic symbolism, she insists that phrases such as “sexual complementarity” and “feminine genius” are “code for the theory and the program of sexual apartheid and female subordination in the church.” She credits Cardinal Braz de Aviz, the new head of the Congregation in charge of religious institutes, for using more inclusive language and for, at least implicitly, distancing himself from his predecessor Cardinal Rode who, for unknown reasons, initiated the investigation.

Referring to the process of the investigation, Schneiders attributes the positive tone of the report, in part, to the religious orders who refused to “allow themselves to be defined by the implied or actual accusations” of the Vatican, but “delted more deeply into their own charisms, documents and experience” and shared the results with the investigators. Schneiders goes on to laud the report for its truth telling, an accurate reporting of what the investigation revealed, which involved a recognition, “almost staggering in its originality,” that “people involved in ecclesiastical process have a right to the truth about matters that touch them directly.”

In her last section on engaging the future, Schneiders sees the positive report as part of “the revitalization of the dynamic of the Second Vatican Council that began in 2013 with the election of Pope Francis,” who either directly or indirectly helped resolve the impasse. The Vatican office for religious “now has conciliar rather than restorationist leadership,” and the report it produced is a “reaffirmation of the dynamic of renewal initiated by the Council,” which affirms “the prophetic nature” of religious life and “the right to self-determination of religious congregations.” All of this is “good news” at this “critical juncture” in the ongoing relationship between the Vatican and religious women.

Offering advice that can be applied to all of us, Schneiders concludes by insisting on the importance of holding “in life-giving tension two basic realizations.” We should not simply whitewash this traumatic experience, which never should have happened and which produced so much damage, in “a desire to make everything all right.” We should not suppress the experience but should learn from it. At the same time, we should not “nurse resentment” or allow residual anger to adversely affect future relationships within the church. “If not forgetting makes us prudent,” as Schneiders puts it, forgiveness and reconciliation should make us “magnanimous and hopeful.”

My own reactions to the report are colored by conversations with women friends who belong to religious orders. I heard of deep anger, hurt, and puzzlement, especially at the beginning of the unexpected and unwelcomed investigation and of simmering frustration as the process dragged on. It seems there was a good deal of resistance to filling out the questionnaire, especially to providing full financial disclosure. “We simply did not trust the Vatican,” said one sister. Those who watched the press conference announcing the final report were positively impressed with the new Vatican officials in charge and extremely relieved that there were no harsh criticisms or sanctions. All of my friends reminded me that they remain concerned over the status of LCWR.

My empathy for the unnecessary suffering of religious women was heightened by the story of a dying sister, who, when she heard of the investigation, asked the extremely poignant question: “Did we do it all wrong?” I want to offer comfort by saying you did it more right than most. The truth is that religious women answered the Vatican II call for renewal in exemplary fashion that has served as a model for both clergy and laity. They deserve praise and gratitude for their immense contributions to the renewal of the church and not further suffering for alleged doctrinal deviations.

There is truth in the notion that a common enemy brings diverse groups closer together. The Vatican investigation helped unify members of religious orders who may disagree theologically but came together to combat a common threat. The visitation promoted conversation among different religious congregations as they searched together for effective responses to questions posed by the Vatican. Finally, some conservative Catholics supported the sisters for personal reasons. For example, a financially successful Catholic, who typically supports strict Vatican teaching, defended the nuns because a sister who taught him in high school convinced him he could make something of himself.

For me, the positive report is another hopeful sign that Pope Francis is making a difference in the pastoral practice of the church, and that the spirit of Vatican II can still be revived and tapped despite decades of resistance at all levels. The renewal envisioned by the Council and implemented in important ways by women religious in the United States remains a powerful ideal worthy of our best efforts.

