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A Response to the Final Report of the Apostolic Visitation
Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious
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Vatican City
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When the Apostolic Visitation of Women's Religious communities in the United States was announced, the Members of the *Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious* (CMSWR) welcomed the invitation from the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* (CICLSAL) to prayerful self-reflection, self-evaluation and dialogue. We were genuinely confident that we would be both affirmed and challenged in the process.

In speaking with Religious Superiors, Pope Francis has said, "... it is not possible that a consecrated woman ... not 'feel' along with the Church. A 'feeling' along with the Church which was generated in us in our Baptism; a 'feeling' with the Church which finds its filial expression in fidelity to the Magisterium, in communion with the pastors and the Successor of Peter, Bishop of Rome, the visible sign of unity."¹

The Apostolic Visitation offered us a tangible opportunity to 'feel' along with the Church. In the words of one member Superior of the CMSWR, "from the beginning preparations to the closing prayer, (the Visitation) was an overwhelmingly beautiful experience." Another was grateful that the process opened up "community-wide study and discussion, providing each sister the opportunity to reflect on fundamental areas of our life and apostolate, and to share with one another." The on-site visit for a third was "refreshing and gave me a deeper sense of joy in the Holy Spirit working within our charism..." Another Superior summed up the general experience by stating, "We were not disappointed during any phase of the Visitation."

As we welcome the Final Report, we are particularly grateful for those who have given countless hours of thoughtful labor to this effort, hopeful that, in time, it will bear fruit for the good of religious life and the Church.

The Final Report acknowledges the fact of the "widely diversified expressions of apostolic religious life" in the United States while focusing on the overall trends evident in the majority of communities. Underneath that broad brush stroke, there is another trend. It is a quiet one and small, but nonetheless significant, and one which has consistently grown over these first 15 years of the new millennium. While the overall trend may be towards aging and diminishment, apostolic Religious Life is not dying in the United States. There is reason for hope. The same voice of love which called women to courageously and selflessly tend the poor, weak and young in the past is still calling young women today. It is the voice of Jesus, and the experience of His personal love continues to lead young women to our doors.

Within the 125 communities of CMSWR members, nearly 20% (almost 1,000) of the Sisters are currently in initial formation (in the years prior to final vows). The average age of Sisters is 53 years -- well below the overall trend.² There is cause for wonder, here, and gratitude. Our culture can be quite antagonistic towards the faith, and skeptical

¹ Pope Francis, Address to the *International Union of Superiors General* (UISG); May 8, 2013
<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-women-religious-superiors>

² CMSWR, internal demographic survey, 2013.

at best towards religious life, and yet from this milieu the Lord is surprising women with His love, His mercy, and the possibility of a new and beautiful life consecrated by public vows.

Those who enter our communities have benefitted from the avenues opened to women over the last 50 years. They are educated, and have been formed in family, school and work environments that have encouraged and developed their native capacities and gifts as women. They fully expect that the Church will, likewise, receive their “feminine genius,” their voice on behalf of the poor and vulnerable Jesus in our midst, and their thoughtful contributions to the concerns of the Church at large. These women know the power of vowed religious to spark new life in weary hearts, and anticipate giving themselves in the apostolate to bear this life to those most in need.

These women enter religious life out of a world they know well in order to follow and give themselves totally to that which the world cannot give. They are responding to an invitation from the Lord that holds a Divine promise confirming the goodness of their identity as women and their purpose in life, their essential mission of spiritual, maternal love. These women are looking to live – concretely and definitively – in a manner which confirms what they have first experienced in their hearts. The CMSWR has assisted the formation of these young religious that they may, for a lifetime, live religious life “from the inside-out”, i.e., not so much from rule as from the principles which the rule manifests.

The findings of the 2009 Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA) study on candidates to religious life ring true to the Members of the CMSWR.³ These candidates are seeking a way of life which includes elements which have always been core to the identity of religious life, and yet they do so without the influence of a culture where such elements – or even religious life itself - is prevalent or familiar. What are some of these elements?

- They have encountered the living Lord in prayer and begun to follow Him in a new life in the Spirit. Young women look, above all, to live a religious life founded on the Sacraments and which includes a rich, robust and daily common and personal prayer life as an irreplaceable means of personal growth and of spiritual communion in community.
- They know precisely through experience that to follow the Lord means to not be alone, and they want to walk this path closely together with others who share the fire of their love for the Lord. They want to be assisted and held accountable in a community where all are sincerely, even if imperfectly, striving towards perfect love.
- These women know they could live quite well, and successfully, in the world as lay women. The call they have experienced interiorly is to separate themselves from that world in order to serve it with and from the Heart of Christ. They want to be externally recognizable as tender mothers in the Church - so they can be found and approached at any moment, in any circumstance, with confidence, by the poor and needy who are often hidden on the margins of society or in the darkness of fear.

While we cannot but rejoice to see the initiative of God in the lives of the young, the Church and the world look for the witness of mature women religious who, by the radiance of their lives, communicate the fact that God’s promises are true and trustworthy. There is no act so powerful, no act that can “wake up the world,”⁴ as much as a consecrated woman who says in her very being, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”⁵ That’s

³ Sr. Mary E. Bendyna, O.P. and Mary L. Gautier, “Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference,” Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2009.

⁴ Pope Francis, meeting with Union of Superiors General of Religious Men, November 29, 2013; published on January 3, 2014; http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf

⁵ Gal. 2:20

precisely what women religious have been saying and living since the earliest days of our Country's founding, and to prodigious apostolic fruitfulness. Today, this legacy continues.

As regards the apostolates of women religious in the United States, the communities associated with the CMSWR share in some of the overall trends of the Final Report, and again we note distinctions from these trends. Professed Sisters in our communities (81% of the members are in active ministry) labor in a variety of corporate apostolates. The greatest number of Sisters are dedicated to the care of the sick and elderly in health-care facilities and hospital settings; the second largest number of Sisters are serving in a ministry of education, teaching in every academic setting from nursery and pre-schools to university/seminary programs; and the third largest number bring the Gospel to people of all ages by way of evangelization, catechesis and religious education (outside of school settings). These most common forms of apostolate have long-standing and venerable histories among religious communities of women in the United States. Our gratitude and admiration for those who have gone before us grows with each passing year, as does our desire to give to those religious who will follow after us an inheritance "incapable of fading or defilement."⁶

Vita Consecrata reminded us that, "The first duty of the consecrated life is *to make visible* the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world."⁷ It is to this end, in faith, that the Members of the CMSWR and our communities renew our love and commitment to give our hearts, our love, our lives to Jesus in His Church, echoing the words of Blessed Mother Teresa, "We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus." Our small but significant numbers eagerly give the little we have - our five loaves and two fish - that Jesus - who can do so much with so little, so long as we give Him everything - may multiply our small offering into "something beautiful for God."⁸ For "with God nothing will be impossible."⁹

We consider it a providential blessing that the final report of the Apostolic Visitation comes at this moment of grace: the beginning of the *Year of Consecrated Life* called by Pope Francis. This year shines a spotlight on religious life not just in our country but across the globe, not just for religious but for the whole Church. We were happy to initiate a nation-wide, collaborative endeavor in celebration of this year of grace -- together with all US women and men religious and with the enthusiastic support of the nation's Bishops - of three theme specific Open House Days at convents and friaries throughout the US. The first Open House Day will take place on Sunday, February 8, 2015. The second, a Service Day with religious, will be held during the summer of 2015, and a Day of Prayer with Religious on Sunday, September 13, 2015.

It is a beautiful time for religious life in the Church and we look to all Religious Sisters in the United States that together, we may give witness and encouragement to one another as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, in the pattern of Our Lady, in love and ever increasing holiness.

⁶ 1 Peter 1:4

⁷ *Vita Consecrata*, 20

⁸ Malcolm Muggeridge, title of 1967 BBC Interview and later book: *Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta* (HarperCollins, 1971)

⁹ Lk 1:37