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We've given birth to a new form of religious life

Sandra Schneiders | Feb. 27, 2009

Sandra M. Schneiders

Editor's note: *When the Vatican announced in January that it was undertaking a study of institutes of women religious in the United States, many women religious were taken by surprise. Reactions were mixed, some welcoming the study, others anxious about it.*

Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders shared her thoughts with some colleagues and friends in an e-mail that was not meant for publication. But her letter did become public and *NCR* received several requests to publish the letter. We contacted Sr. Schneiders and she gave us permission to share her letter with our online readers.

Author's Note: *The following is not and never was an article nor intended for publication. It originated as a spontaneous response in an e-mail conversation among a few colleagues. It became public, so I am making a few changes [in brackets] to clarify references for readers who may not be conversant with the subject matter.*

Dear [Friends]

Thanks for your e-mails.

I am not inclined to get into too much of a panic about this investigation -- which is what it is. We just went through a similar investigation of seminaries, equally aggressive and dishonest. I do not put any credence at all in the claim that this is friendly, transparent, aimed to be helpful, etc. It is a hostile move and the conclusions are already in. It is meant to be intimidating. But I think if we believe in what we are doing (and I definitely do) we just have to be peacefully about our business, which is announcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, fostering the Reign of God in this world.

We cannot, of course, keep them from investigating. But we can receive them, politely and kindly, for what they are, uninvited guests who should be received in the parlor, not given the run of the house. When people ask questions they shouldn't ask, the questions should be answered accordingly. I just hope we will not, as we American Religious so often do, think that by total "openness" and efforts to "dialogue" we are going to bring about mutual understanding and acceptance. This is not mutual and it is not a dialogue. The investigators are not coming to understand -- believe me, we found that out in the seminary investigation. So let's be honest but reserved, supply no ammunition that can be aimed at us, be non-violent even in the face of violence, but not be naive. Non-violent resistance is what finally works as we've found out in so many arenas.

In my work on the renewal of Religious Life over the last eight years I have come to the conclusion that Congregations like ours [the kind represented by LCWR in this country] have, in fact, birthed a new form of Religious Life. We are really no longer "Congregations dedicated to works of the apostolate" - that is, monastic communities whose members "go out" to do institutionalized works basically assigned by the hierarchy as an extension of their agendas, e.g., in Catholic schools and hospitals, etc. We are ministerial Religious. Ministry is integral to our identity and vocation. It arises from our baptism specified by profession, discerned with our Congregational leadership and effected according to the charism of our Congregation, not by delegation from the hierarchy. We are not monastics at home. We are not extensions of the clergy abroad. Our whole life is affected by our ministerial identity: searching out the places (often on the margins of Church and society) where the need for the Gospel is greatest (which may be in Church institutions but often is not); living in ways that are conducive to our ministry; preaching the Gospel freely as Jesus commissioned his itinerant, full time companions to do. Our community life and ministries are corporate but not "common life" in the sense of everyone in the same place at the same time doing the same thing.

The phase of postconciliar "up-dating" for us was brief. We realized, by our return to the Gospel and to our own foundations, that we were called to much more radical [meaning in-depth] renewal than surface adjustments of lifestyle. There is no going back. But I think we may have to claim this, calmly and firmly, in the face of this now organized effort to get us back into the older form. We are as different from "apostolic Religious Congregations? [such as those represented by the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, or CMSWR] (of whom the Vatican is much more approving) as the mendicants were from the Benedictine monks. The big difference is that they [apostolic Religious Congregations] read *Perfectae Caritatis* and did what it asked: deepened their spirituality (I hope), and did some updating -- shorter habits, a more flexible schedule, dropping customs that were merely weird, etc. We read *Perfectae Caritatis* through the lenses of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* and we were called out of the monastic/apostolic mode and into the world that *Gaudium et Spes* declared the Church was embracing after centuries of world rejection.

There is no problem with CMSWR-type communities continuing the older form. Benedictinism didn't disappear when the Franciscans were founded. There is only a problem if they feel called to halt the journey we are on. That's where, in my view, we just have to be as courageous as our forebears like Angela Merici [founder of the Ursulines] and Mary Ward [IBVM) and Nano Nagle [PBVM] and Marguerite Bourgeoys [CND] and Louise de Marillac [DC] and all those other pioneers of apostolic Religious Life long before it was officially approved in 1900. The institutional Church has always resisted the new in Religious Life, especially among women. But the new will continue to happen. At this moment in history, we are it. So, let's be what we are: Religious who are not cloistered and ministers who are not ordained. Canon law has no categories yet for that combination. But we exist. Law follows life, not vice versa.

On the subject of the Stonehill "symposium" [1] [held at Stonehill College, 2008, and very critical of LCWR-type Congregations] - it wasn't a symposium where people come together to share diverse views in the effort to reach greater truth. It was a pep rally for those convinced they are right and can only be right if people not like them are wrong. They were listening to themselves. That's fine -- provided they don't go after other people. We are not after them. This is a fake war being stirred up by the Vatican at the instigation of the frightened. Let's not get into it. Also, what is the worst thing that can happen from this investigation? They are surely not going to shut down 95 % of the Religious Congregatons in this country, even if they'd like to, any more than they closed all the seminaries that were not teaching 19th century moral theology or buying the official line that the clergy sex abuse scandal was caused, not by corrupt bishops protecting pedophile priests, but by homosexuals in seminaries.

Well, that's where I am on this. I refuse to go into a panic over it. There are better things to do. Always glad to hear from any of you on any of this.

Peace and courage,
Sandra

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