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Why I'm not a nun

Kate Childs Graham | Mar. 26, 2009

An Open Letter to Apostolic Visitor, Mother Mary Clare Millea, ASCJ

Dear Mother Millea,

Congratulations on your recent appointment as Apostolic Visitor for the Apostolic Visitation of communities of women religious in the United States. I send you many blessings as you embark on this noble endeavor.

While the impetus for this study has not been publicized, many have speculated that a primary reason is the decline of vocations in communities of women religious. If this is the case, I am sure you will agree that only looking to communities of women religious is akin to a teacher asking those present in class why their peers are absent. As such, I offer my experience as a member of the laity who has actively discerned not to become a woman religious.

For many women religious, the decline in vocations is not for lack of presence. Women religious play a vital role in this country, not only in schools, churches and hospitals but also on the front lines of social justice movements and in ministry to those who need it most. Through their presence at many different levels of society, women religious proclaim the gospel message. Merely by observing their utter devotion to God, who wouldn?t feel a call to lead and serve as they do? I certainly did.

Since I was a small child, women religious have been an integral part of my life. In fact, my first trip at one month old was to witness the final vows of two of my mother?s dearest friends. Women religious have educated me, given me the gift of music, unveiled my passion for social justice, demonstrated how to be a good leader and guided my spiritual journey. Today, I count many of these women as trusted friends and mentors.

Their impact on my life was so great that in college, when I felt my call to grow closer to God, I spent two years discerning my vocation to religious life. Women religious welcomed me with open arms, and I yearned to join them in their service to God. However, my decision not to join a community of women religious had little to do with their impact or welcome. In fact, had it just been their influence today you could probably call me Sister Kate. Rather, my decision not to become a woman religious was due to institutional church teaching on sexuality and gender.

You see, my discernment to religious life was inextricably linked with my guilt and self-reproach in discovering my identity as a lesbian woman. Campus ministers and priests at my college recommended that I try to change myself or at the very least repress this part of me. So desperately did I want to please them and follow church doctrine that I thought by becoming a woman religious I could hide from my true self. This, as you can imagine, made for a very unhealthy discernment. As I began to listen to my conscience, the voice of God within me, I discovered that church teaching against homosexuality is both flawed and destructive. Then, because I had framed religious life as a hideout, it no longer seemed relevant for me to become a woman religious.

However, it was not only coming to terms with my sexual orientation that steered me away from becoming a

woman religious, it was also the inherent sexism I saw in our church. In my experience, women religious often feel the brunt of this sexism. I have seen women pushed out of their positions at parishes, Catholic organizations and even the bishops? conference itself in favor of male priests. I have seen entire communities of women controlled by the whims of one man. I have listened to women whose true vocation was to the priesthood and becoming a woman religious was the closest they could get to fulfill their vocation.

In the spirit of full disclosure, you will be glad to know that while I still try to heed my call to lead a religious life, God has guided me toward my call to married life. My partner, Ariana, and I have now been married just shy of six months. I do wish that one day both women and men religious who feel a call to religious life but not to celibate life will be able to fully heed their call.

My hope is that the Holy Spirit will be able to work through the Apostolic Visitation, revealing and healing the homophobia and sexism that is prevalent at all levels of our church. My story is just one of many; however, I truly believe that until these wounds are healed, our church will see a decline, not only in vocations to religious life but also in the laity.

Again, congratulations on your appointment. Indeed, it is a great privilege and honor for you to meet with these women who have so deeply impacted my life and the lives of many others.

With hope,

Kate Childs Graham

Author?s Note: As I am certain Mother Millea would appreciate hearing from all of us whose lives have been impacted by women religious, please send your testimonies or observations to:

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