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CARA Study Given Wrong Twist

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The fine study of new members of religious communities by the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate is unfortunately being used to support a bogus conclusion.

News reports have taken the results to bolster the false notion that there is a surge of growth in conservative, habit-wear congregations that belong to the Vatican-favored Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. This growth, as assumed in major media accounts, is a rebuke to the "no-growth" liberal communities that belong to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious which is under investigation by Rome for alleged disobedience.

To the fierce opponents of LCWR and its member groups (about 95 percent of all of them) this "proves" that the renewal undertaken by these groups has failed, while the keepers of the old nun tradition are thriving.

Hogwash. CARA found slightly fewer than 4,000 new members in women's and men's orders since 1993. Of that number, about 40 percent returned the survey, 73 percent of those women. If that percentage holds true for the entire population of new members, about 3,000 have entered about 450 women's communities.

Over the 15 year stretch, that amounts to about 200 a year in both LCWR and CMSWR groups.

That's infinitesimal. About one third of the LCWR related groups report no new members; but a fourth of the CMSWR say the same. Overall, two-thirds of the total are CMSWR related, meaning that using a base of 200, they have gained about 132 a year, not exactly a deluge.

But here's the biggest factor that usually goes unreported. HALF of the newcomers in BOTH umbrella groups lose half the new entries before they take their final vows. That doesn't leave much in terms of real

numbers.

I honor all those who enter whatever religious communities that they choose. Their devotion is admirable. But let's not allow the slight tilting in the direction of traditional groups be portrayed as a major new direction and a slap at LCWR. Very few of any stripe are entering anywhere anymore.

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