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Insights on the good news of religious life

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If there are lessons to be learned from the Vatican?s two-year, million-dollar investigation of religious women in the United States, one might be never to underestimate the capacity of religious women to get organized and to respond forcefully and effectively under pressure.

This response took many forms, but when the full story is told, one person will stand out as an articulate spokeswoman for many of us on the state of religious life in this country.

When concerns over the timing and nature of the apostolic visitation found their way to the e-mail box of Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, professor emerita at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., her private response to friends blossomed into a brilliant, public reflection on the nature of religious life.

Her response became a rallying point for many other critics of the Vatican probe, and the publicity this generated reshaped the conversation and raised the question of why the sisters were being investigated at all at the same time the church was under fire over its handling of the clergy sex abuse crisis.

Among the many insights Schneiders contributed to the discussion was the reminder that the majority of U.S. congregations being investigated were ministerial religious women, not monastics, and by their charisms, constitutions and canonical status were therefore distinct from the semicloistered, monastic-apostolic hybrid communities being touted by a conservative minority as the only authentic expression of religious life.

Ministerial religious women vow obedience not to the bishop but to their own superiors and are defined not by hierarchical projects but by their own call to share in the prophetic and itinerant mission of Jesus, especially at the margins of society. Therefore their adaptations to contemporary need and their progressive leadership in the church are signs of their fidelity to the spirit of renewal mandated by the Second Vatican Council.

The apostolic visitation will conclude this December with a report only Rome will see, with an unspecified response to follow. Watch the www.apostolicvisitation.org [1] Web site for announcements. But do not expect the last word to be said anytime soon.

For the latest word, read *NCR*?s coverage of Schneiders? talk on "**The Future of Religious Life [2]**". It is good news. Religious life as we have known it will continue to do what it has always done: inspire, mentor, serve the poor, challenge power and, if needed, empty itself into the future now being shaped by God and by us.

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Links:
[1] http://www.apostolicvisitation.org
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/26798