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Women religious in the image of Sarah

Maureen Fiedler | Aug. 10, 2012 NCR Today

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> "Now God has given me laugher,
> tAnd all who hear of this will laugh with me!
> tWho would have said to Abraham
> tThat Sarah would suckle children?
> tYet I have given Abraham a child in his old age." (Genesis 21 6-7)

Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is a great image for women religious today -- both were/are aging and without progeny. Yet Sarah gave birth to Isaac in her old age and bequeathed a whole new people to the world.

Women religious can do that, too. They can be the Sarahs of today, bearing new offspring.

Editor's Note: LCWR is expected to issue a statement about its response to the Vatican ordered reform today at 2:45 p.m. central time. Watch the NCR website for details.

Just as ancient Israelites were wondering about Sarah, lots of church observers are wondering about the future of women religious. Like it or not, we (I am one of them) are "aging in place." Collectively, our median age is in the 70s, membership is declining, few are entering and numbers are dwindling.

But I believe that women religious can be the Sarahs of today: fruitful in the senior years, giving birth to a new reality in the church, new forms of religious life, new modes of dedication.

Young women are anxious to work with people who are poor, oppressed or struggling. I've seen their dedication firsthand among the Loretto volunteers sponsored by my community to do that work each year for a year. These are mostly young women just out of college, in their early 20s. They love what they do, embrace Loretto ideals of justice and peace, and live simply in a shared house.

But we can go beyond volunteer programs. We can give birth to new forms of religious life. This requires the freedom to think new thoughts and experiment with new forms of commitment. For example, some communities are already offering temporary memberships in which women would take vows for a certain number of years without any intention of staying for a lifetime. But that's just a start.

We can think about living dedicated lives by taking vows other than poverty, chastity and obedience. What about a vow to "build justice and peace in our world" or to "promote reverence for God's creation and work to save the planet"? What about asking young women themselves to formulate ideals that would be worth three to five years of their lives?

Women religious today need to step outside the box, think new thoughts, dream new dreams. Then, I am convinced, we will soon laugh like Sarah.

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