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If they really mean it, it's about time

Joan Chittister | Feb. 16, 2009 From Where I Stand

A lot of things went through my mind last week when I read the first formal announcement of the Vatican visitation of U.S. communities of women religious. Some of it was surprise. Most of all, I could hardly bear the delight of it. We were finally going to get what we deserved.

For years, from grade school to the early '60's, one of the things I remember best about church is that every year we got sermons on what it meant to become a sister. Sisters were very close to God, they told us. They had a very exalted vocation. They gave their entire lives to God, unlike other people who just gave their lives in bits and pieces.

We heard those sermons on the valor of the sisterhood year after year, every year of our lives. We got them at the annual parish retreat, we got them on high school vocation days, we got them during the year in glowing terms from the parish pulpit. These women, the priests told us, were special. They were holy. They were different than the rank and file of women who simply got married. They were nuns.

So nuns became my idols, my heroes, my role models. And why not? With support like that, who could doubt the value and impact of the life. Every Catholic girl in the country at least thought of becoming a sister even if, in the end, she did not do it.

After all, women of this stock had founded 469 Catholic hospitals from 1866-1917. They had nursed both armies on the Civil War battlefield despite the dismay of church leaders. They had put over 50,000 sister-teachers in parochial schools during the same period and by 1920 had almost two million pupils in 6,550 Catholic schools. These women, had, for all practical purposes, built the Catholic church in the United States.

But, suddenly, sometime in the early '60's, things began to change. Girls still entered in great numbers but just as many left soon after, a social phenomenon totally unheard of before that time. This was a life that no longer attracted young girls much. They simply stopped coming. And just as abruptly, the sermons stopped, too.

Where had all the sisters gone? Out of the language of the pulpit, that's for sure.

But that didn't stop the Sisters. They got the message-both from the documents of Vatican II and from the

society around them-that the medieval life-style they were living needed updating. And, it was clear, so also did the ministries they had been involved in for over 100 years. Strong women that they truly were, they set out to do both-update the lifestyle and adapt to new needs, with little resources and less support. Even from the church that had mandated the changes.

No matter: They did it anyway.

With the same kind of zeal that fired their small groups of foundresses to give their lives to make life better and the faith deeper for poor Catholic immigrants in a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant country, this generation of the 1960's ventured out of the Catholic ghettoes of their own time to do the same.

This time the women who had built the largest private school system in the world turned it over to the Catholics who had been trained in it and began to build again. They sold hospitals and opened nursing homes for the elderly and began free clinics instead.

This time they built housing projects for the poor and disabled.

They opened centers to teach another generation of Catholics to make peace and seek justice in a period when the powerful had begun to use war as a foreign policy of choice and the long arm of Western capitalism was thriving on a new brand of economic colonialism.

They created spirituality centers to share the fruits of centuries of charism and prayer with a generation who were seeking more than ritual as a sign of religious commitment.

They devoted themselves to the creation of child-care centers in a world where women no longer had the luxury to stay at home and raise children -- even if they wanted to cloister themselves off from the world around them.

They began GED and retraining programs for single parents who lacked the high school diplomas or technical certification to get full-time jobs.

They designed programs in theology and psychology for women to repair the damage done to women's self-esteem as well as their spiritual lives by the distorted definitions of womanhood peddled by both church and state.

They opened courses designed to amend the effects of women's traditional exclusion from the kind of theological education that rendered them equal but "different," inferior to men and unworthy to be in either sanctuary or sacristy.

They began ecumenical prayer groups. They pressed for desegregation. They monitored the effects of national

legislation on the poor. They started ecology programs. They became hospital chaplains. They went into prison work.

There was hardly a place where there were the new poor, sick or suffering that sisters were not there with them.

And all the while they went on "giving their lives to God" in prayer and with communities of strangers while they ministered on the streets, opened rural spirituality centers, taught and lectured and developed spirituality programs and retreats, ran half-way houses for battered women and day-care centers for Alzheimer patients. They had no desire to be "a higher vocation." They simply set out to be an authentic one.

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doing those things years beyond the work life of the average person. They exhausted programs, pounding the pavement, providing hospitality, keeping priestless parishes tect the environment, and caring for the newly abandoned underclasses in order to take rch of this time needed to be. They began the outreach of a whole new church in the

Then, finally, over 50 years later, without warning or consultation on how the process ought to be conducted, let alone why -- the announcement came as a surprise even to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the official contact point between women religious and Rome, -- women religious of the United States got notice a few weeks ago that they are to be the subjects of an "Apostolic Visitation" from Rome. No small thing. Serious and countrywide. The purpose of this unusual intervention by the Vatican, the letter signed by Cardinal Prefect Francis Rode of the Congregation for Religious and Consecrated Life, hastens to say, is "to look into the quality of life of religious women in the United States." (Note well: The lives of women religious, not male religious.)

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Well, let's just put it this way: If the number of people served has anything to do with this phase of religious life as it did of the last one, the quality of the life is outstanding. The impact of the life is broad and deep. The nature of the life is spiritually beautiful and beautifully spiritual. Not easy, but worth it.

At the same time, 50 years without support or approval or understanding or encouragement in those efforts from the church has not been easy. Nor has it done anything to make this life both known and desirable, as it did in the past.

So, see why I'm delighted about the visitation?

From where I stand, if the church really wants to support women religious, it's about time for a statement that says again, "These are great women living a great spiritual life and doing great things." Let's hear it: loud and clear. After all, if religious life for women disappears -- or, conceivably, begins to function outside the boundaries of the institutional church -- it will not only affect religious women -- it will also definitely affect the church in the modern world.

Think about it. Maybe we could all use a few more sermons again. Religious life does deserve it.

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