Looking for Nuns, 
Finding Women Deacons

The twin events of the Apostolic Visitation of 
Women Religious in the United States and 
the doctrinal investigation of the Leadership 
Conference of Women Religious present an 
opportunity to revisit and reconsider the tra-
dition of women deacons.

While the Apostolic Visitation appears to be 
primarily involved with lifestyle and ministry, 
and the doctrinal investigation of LCWR is more 
inquisitorial in style, each in its own way points 
toward a reflexive institutional recognition of 
the place of women in diaconal ministry.

The Apostolic Visitation, which moved 
from initial and unscripted general inquiry, 
through a detailed three-part questionnaire, 
to on-site visitations of approximately 25% of 
U.S. institutes of women religious, is widely

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viewed as a corporate insult to the 59,000 or so U.S. women religious under scrutiny and to the local bishops responsible for overseeing them.

The doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious ballooned from a request for position statements on the matter of women priests, homosexuality, and the primacy of Christ in interreligious dialogue to a full review of publications and positions, directed by American Cardinal William J. Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Read positively, the subtext of the combined events can provide information about the re-evolution of women’s ministry, now through apostolic religious life for women, to the restored permanent diaconate, which is both historically and contemporaneously properly understood as a ministry of prayer and service.

**Understanding the Diaconate**

Deacons are ordained to a ministry of service, specifically to the word, the liturgy, and charity. They are not “mini-priests,” but clerics with a specific vocation to diaconal ministry. Their distinction from priests is clear in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 875:

> From [Christ], bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty (“the sacred power”) to act *in persona Christi Capitis*; deacons receive the strength to serve the people of God in the *diaconia* of the liturgy, word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate.

On 26 October 2009, Pope Benedict XVI issued a *Motu proprio* entitled *Omnium in mentem*, which codifies the distinction between priesthood and the diaconate as the distinction is articulated in the Catechism. As stipu-
lated in the *Motu proprio* and now entered into law, deacons serve the people of God through the *diaconia* of the liturgy, the word, and charity.

The clear distinction between the priest (who acts in the person of Christ, head of the church) and the deacon (who serves the people of God) both reflects arguments against the ordination of women to the priesthood and deflects arguments against the ordination of women to the diaconate. The essential points raised against women priests are (1) the argument from authority—Jesus chose male apostles and (2) the iconic argument—one must physically represent Jesus.

Of course, neither of these applies to the diaconate for several reasons. First, the Apostles, not Christ, are generally understood to have created the diaconate (Ac 6:1-6). Second, the only person in Scripture specifically called “deacon” is Phoebe (Rm 16:1). Third, the deacon is ordained “not to the priesthood, but to the ministry.”

**Apostolic Religious Life and the Diaconate**

It is important to recognize both that the diaconate is not the priesthood and that diaconal service is a legitimate vocation for women. Without entering into a determinative debate about the immediate possibility of restoring the female diaconate in the Western Church, we can review the twin investigations of women reli-
gious in light of the possibility of an increasingly evident vocation of women to apostolic ministry as deacons.

The evolution of what has come to be termed “ministerial religious life” in the United States has moved sufficient numbers of women away from monastery and cloister practices toward ministerial life inserted into the lives of the people, a way of life supported by common life and sometimes, but not always, lived in common ministry. This ministerial life has many similarities to the ministerial life of the ordained deacon.

The Apostolic Visitation’s questionnaire is divided into several sections: Identity, Governance, Membership, Spiritual Life, Common Life, Mission & Ministry, and Finances. If each section is considered in the light of apostolic women religious doing the diaconal work of the church—now as unordained lay ministers—we can easily intuit the divergent directions taken by the Visitation and a given institute guided by the Spirit to address the needs of the times. If there indeed is an emerging feminine vocation to the diaconate, then perhaps some apostolic women religious are demonstrating it.

Vatican documents provided by the Visitation team present an investigation into what has come to be understood as traditional apostolic religious life, and the overall attitude of the event itself seems to call for a return to common habit, horaria, mission, and ministry. Indeed, recent statistics gathered by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate demonstrate that the larger numbers of new vocations to religious life are to institutes that demonstrate such commonality. The common—if unstated—criticism of other institutes (those not living according to more traditional expectations) is that they would have more new vocations if they would return to a traditional religious life. But those new voca-
tions would then be looking for a religious life that is more monastic or cloistered. They would not fit among the evolving charisms of the institutes without common horaria or habit, whose members have moved toward independent and/or less traditional ministries while retaining the public identity of their membership in an institute of consecrated life. The choice appears to be between an institute adopting or retaining common habit, horaria, mission, and ministry, or dying out.

Such presents a classic either-or fallacy. The criticism ignores the possibility of new life and rebirth into something new. That is, the choice is not between traditional religious life and nothing but between traditional religious life and a new thing.

There is no dearth of young women who wish to dedicate their lives to ministry. Religious life is not identical to lay ecclesial ministry, and such criticism overlooks the fact of increasing numbers of lay ecclesial ministers (some statistics point to 35,000 in the United States today) and, especially, the large number of young women entering lay ecclesial ministry. Neither is religious life the diaconate, but such criticism also overlooks the large number of ordained deacons (approximately 36,000 worldwide, with more than 16,000 in the United States). Is it possible that the vocations to apostolic religious life are being overtaken by newer vocations, specifically, to lay ecclesial ministry (being lived out by those married, single, and in religious life) as well as by the vocation to the ordained
diaconate (now being lived out by those married, and by both secular and religious celibates)? Is it possible that the young women who once might have entered many of the now fading institutes of religious life are choosing lives more akin to those of secular—or religious—lay ecclesial ministers or deacons?

**Apostolic Religious and the Diaconal Ministry**

To assess the possible findings of Rome’s twin investigations, it is well to look at the severest critics of contemporary U.S. women’s religious life, including journalist Ann Carey, whose 1997 *Our Sunday Visitor* book, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women’s Religious Communities*, connects abandonment of the habit with what she terms “the deconstruction of ministry.” Carey presents at least one modern case study that pits a religious community of women against the local hierarchy. That case study, the story of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in California, is reminiscent of medieval tugs-of-war between bishops and abbesses over control, not only of the conventual living arrangements of the women, but of their properties and very status as well. The eleventh century saw the initiation of the Gregorian Reform, which eventuated in the elevation of the clergy and concurrent diminution of women, including and especially women religious. That thousand-year split between what can be viewed, at least in retrospect, as the “men’s church” and the “women’s church” echoes throughout Carey’s book, which at every turn criticizes the move of women religious away from common habit, horaria, mission, and ministry.

Carey’s book, however, speaks only to what she perceives as a movement away from, without any consideration of what the institutes of women religious moved
toward as they modernized habits and horaria. Neither she, nor others of the deepest critics of contemporary apostolic religious life for women in the United States, note that the changes were and are specifically in the service of mission and ministry. Granted, missions may have been redefined and broadened, along with ministries, but the overall response of the modernized institutes of women religious has been to the ministerial needs of the church. What more conservative onlookers view as a movement “away from” is indeed a movement toward service—in many cases the specific type of service the church once again defines as diaconal ministry.

But what if we look at the way in which the permanent order of deacon has been restored in the church? In the United States, on average, women religious live and minister in ways similar to the ways deacons live and minister. And individual women ministers are supported in ways similar to ways deacons are supported. That is, women religious live inserted in the communities they serve; ministering either full- or part-time, they are publicly identified as ministers in every setting (personal, professional, and ecclesial); those in part-time ministry typically support their ministry by full-time secular employment or by retirement income, while those in full-time ministry typically support their ministry in full-time paid church employment or through the corporate funding of their religious institutes (retirement funds or salaries).

While most deacons are married and live with their families—a scattered few celibate deacons live in rectories or with their religious communities—apostolic women religious are expected to live in the canonically erected houses of their institutes. Many in fact do not. Celibates all, some live with their families or with religious of other
institutes or alone. Their living arrangements often dictate their horaria, and their ability to participate in daily Eucharist. Like most secular deacons, women religious who live alone or with family members will not be participating in regularly scheduled public liturgies of their own (or possibly other) religious institutes. But they pray the Liturgy of Hours—at least the “hinges” of the day—as do the ordained deacons of the church, and they reserve time for personal prayer, retreat, and spiritual direction. In fact, prevailing practices in modernized institutes of women religious tend to emphasize these three, and women religious can fairly be said to be better formed spiritually than most deacons are, mainly because the typical woman religious in the United States has lived a lifelong celibate commitment and dedication to ministry, far longer than the typical deacon has. What is perhaps most interesting about the Apostolic Visitation’s questionnaire is that it asks very little about personal prayer. That is, the singular commitment of the woman religious as a consecrated person appears to be barely under discussion in the Visitation, and the most basic distinction between the woman religious and the secular deacon is least considered.

Without denying or denigrating the personal consecration of the woman religious whose life and work seems diaconal in nature, and recognizing that there are (very few) consecrated men who are deacons, we
can still evaluate the similarities between the new ways in which some institutes of apostolic women religious have interpreted and effected the required reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the ways in which the ordained diaconate is lived in today’s church.

**Renewed Religious Life or Renewed Diaconate?**

The question, then, is not how a given religious or an entire institute lives monastic or cloistered life but, rather, how apostolic religious moving toward a renewed female diaconate (either personally or institutionally) live a life of prayer sufficient to nourish their ministries and common life in whatever way it is understood and lived. This does not give ministry a preference over community life, but views community life as a support to prayer and ministry, which must be coordinated with community life.4 What is of uppermost importance is not the ability to live a common life and common horaria, but the ability to live a life of prayer and service as a productive member of the community.

Membership in a given religious institute, therefore, becomes a means to two ends: personal sanctity and service of God’s people, but in a way distinct from—and possibly detached from—convent life of old. Faithful governance supports these dual personal aims for the individual while coordinating and leading the community in its common life and goals.

Lack of common habits, horaria, and living arrangements may not signify corporate or personal commitment to prayer and service in the minds of the Apostolic Visitation—or even in the minds of the people of God ministered to. But the commonality of the dedication of disparate charisms and traditions among institutes of apostolic life is intuitively understood by the larger
community of Christians, for whom disparate charisms and histories are relatively insignificant. However, the public understanding of the generic category “the nuns” is widespread.

The increasing numbers of women religious ministering or living in non-traditional settings or manners present a new matrix by which to understand the spirituality of what is increasingly termed “ministerial” apostolic religious life. It is ministry to which these women are called. They are spiritual directors and hospital chaplains, they are campus ministers and pastoral associates, they are managers of day care centers and social service agencies, and they are catechists and preachers. In every instance they perform the traditional work of the diaconate. In some instances—by special rescript—they perform the liturgical work of the deacon (baptisms, marriages), but in no case can a woman legally preach at a public Sunday Eucharist (Can. 767).

Religious life is not the diaconate, but there has been no diaconate for women in the Western Church for as many as twelve centuries. Apostolic women religious are far removed from any linear development of the diaconal vocation for women, except that in that development, like stones skipped across the pond of history, we can see touches of the widows, the Beguines, the Third Order women (like Catherine of Siena), the canonesses, and those whose vocations are echoed in the work and words of Mary Ward and others who first stepped out on the rocky path of apostolic ministry by women.

The Apostolic Visitation and the doctrinal investigation of LCWR have touched upon the sciatica of women’s ministry. The one, focusing as it does on lifestyle and, specifically, on liturgy, will find that no matter the ways
or means women in the United States are living apostolic religious life, they do so in the service of mission and ministry, predominantly the ministries of charity. The other investigation, more narrowly attempting an assessment of doctrinal purity in apostolic women religious’ reception of the word, could theoretically function as a test of whether the church intuitively believes women can be granted the preaching faculties of deacons.

Each study provides its own internal recognitions regarding the developing vocation to the diaconate for women, a vocation which in some cases appears evidenced within institutes of women religious. If at the conclusions of the studies the church recognizes there are diverse ministries but one mission, perhaps it will open its arms to the past, present, and future of women deacons.

Notes


4 It is equally inappropriate for a deacon to disregard his family life as it is for a religious to disregard his or her community life.